

Law and Subjective Freedom in *The Merchant of Venice*

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All the major characters in the *Merchant of Venice* find their true well-being in those communities of economic life, family, and religion by which individuals share in the life of the Venetian Commonwealth.¹ By uniting law and subjective freedom, all these communities separately and the Commonwealth as a whole participate in the life of God as this is understood by the Christian religion.² When Shylock, Antonio, Portia, Bassanio, Jessica and Lorenzo find their appropriate places in the social order they also come to enjoy the freedom of that religion.³

None of the characters can participate in these communities directly or immediately. Rather, each must pass through a cycle, which has three essential elements. First, each character seeks to appropriate these communities in a way that tends to destroy their objectivity. Second, his attempt at thus creating a private world is

1. This has escaped the notice of the critics. One school thinks that none of the characters attains to any well-being. Those who hold this view maintain that either all the characters are equally corrupt, or that Shylock, by being a victim, is somewhat less vicious than his persecutors. For a discussion of this view, see Mr. L. Danson, *The Harmonies of the Merchant of Venice*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978, pp. 4-8. This view makes central to the play a corruption which, I show below, only leads to the characters' well-being in the Commonwealth.

Another school thinks that only those characters who come to live at Belmont, from whom Shylock is of course excluded, attain to happiness. A representative of this is Mr. A. Bloom in *Shakespeare's Politics* (written with H. Jaffa), New York and London: Basic Books, 1964, pp. 30-31. This paper seeks to show that the happiness of Belmont is only one aspect of a more general well-being, in which Shylock has his share.

2. In this, the *Merchant of Venice* is like an Hellenic drama of the 5th century. In *Eumenides*, Athens possesses in the union of Athena and the Furies that same relation of Upper and Lower gods which defines the Olympian religion. In *Birds*, the city founded by Peisthetairos reconciles Olympians, Titans and human nature even more completely than did the Olympian religion.

3. That Shylock becomes a Christian and a member of the Commonwealth reveals how groundless are the accusations of anti-Semitism against Shakespeare. The poet does not view Shylock as one eternally segregated by his race from "Aryans" but as a moral agent who can will his place in the religious and political orders.

destroyed. Third, he comes to enjoy those institutions he had earlier sought to make subordinate to his private desire; he comes thereby to participate in the Christian religion.

The several characters participate in this cycle differently. Shylock aims most completely at subordinating the spheres of economic life, family, and religion to his own individuality; he also comes to affirm their objectivity most thoroughly. The other characters try to appropriate these spheres of life to themselves more obliquely; they assert themselves primarily in their perversion of the various relations that belong to family life, and secondarily in their appropriation of economic life and religion. They find the purgation of their vulgarity primarily in family life and secondarily in these other spheres.

Shylock seeks to subordinate these spheres of life to his amassing of endless wealth. In his pursuit of this end, he enters into a monstrous contract with Antonio and perverts the Judaism of his birth, the family life he has begun within it, and the law of the Venetian Commonwealth. Eventually, however, he surrenders his desire for limitless wealth, to find through the Venetian Commonwealth, the true foundations of his individuality in the objective communities of economic life, family, and religion.⁴

The other characters assert their individuality less independently than does Shylock. Their careers begin with their reaction to the wills of others, and they aim primarily at romantic friendships. They find the purgation of their vulgarity through those family ties which alone can give stability to romantic love.

Portia indulges her romantic love for Bassanio through a partial submission to that lottery for her hand which her dead father had ordained. She thereby allows the idolatrous adulation of her suitors and permits herself to be the prey of the partially mercenary Bassanio. Her romantic affections then cause her to care as much for her husband's friend Antonio as for him; because of this she perverts the workings of justice by masquerading in court as a lawyer to save him. She finds the purgation of her vulgarity by being joined to Bassanio in an objective bond that transcends affection.

Bassanio is loved by Antonio and Portia, both of whom he also loves. He seeks to marry Portia not only for her excellences but also

4. In his capacity for both the completest vulgarity and the completest purgation of it, Shylock is similar to the comic heroes of the old Greek comedy. Like Strepsiades in *Clouds*, he seeks to subvert the state and religion for private ends, and like him he comes to be their most thorough-going supporter.

as a means to repay his debts to Antonio. His decision to marry Portia leads him to participate in that adulation of her which the lottery for her hand demands. He will learn to subordinate his friendship with Antonio to his marriage to Portia.

Antonio makes his love for Bassanio the centre of his life. As a result, he becomes willing to violate his Christian scruples about borrowing money at interest, and then enters into a monstrous contract with Shylock. Antonio eventually finds a certain stability in his friendship with Bassanio by recognizing the greater importance of the latter's marriage to Portia.

Jessica's love for Lorenzo and hatred of her father cause her to rob her father, marry Lorenzo and become a Christian. Her restoration to the objectivity of institutions occurs rather passively. She experiences the limits of romantic attachment, receives money from her father, and a certain correction of her religious views from her husband.

Lorenzo acquiesces in Jessica's theft of Shylock's goods and her conversion to Christianity because of his passionate love for her. Like her, he will learn the limits of passion. He will receive his material well-being from Shylock and educate his wife somewhat in religious matters.⁵

Three major plots develop the movement of the characters toward their participation in the objective forms of the Commonwealth and its religion. The bizarre contract which Shylock concludes with Antonio, the intervention of Portia, and the consequences which result from this for Shylock, dominate the drama. The wooing of Portia by Bassanio, their alienation, and their reconciliation form the main subplot. The flight of Jessica from Shylock's house to marry Lorenzo, and their discovery of a certain stability in their marriage define a secondary subplot.

The exposition of these plots occupies the first three acts of the play, and the denouement the last two. I will treat first the exposition of each plot separately. Then I will examine the denouement, which falls into two main divisions; the fourth act sees the overthrow of Shylock's scheme and his rehabilitation; the fifth shows all the other characters finding their place in the life of the City.

The central complication of the play arises from Bassanio's desire to marry Portia, and Antonio's willingness to lend him the sum

5. *Merchant of Venice* differs from Hellenic comedy in having a number of secondary characters who nevertheless follow in their way the same pattern as the hero. In Aristophanes, the plot occurs essentially in the hero.

necessary to court her. Bassanio wishes to marry Portia, who is rich, beautiful, and virtuous, both so that he might repay his debts to Antonio and in order to enjoy her charms. Antonio agrees to the loan ostensibly out of love for his friend but also because his own interest is involved in Bassanio's making a prosperous marriage; the latter has borrowed heavily from him, and his marriage with Portia would guarantee repayment.

Antonio does not have ready money; he proposes that a loan on his credit be arranged. Bassanio undertakes the preliminary negotiations for the necessary sum with the rich Jewish money-lender Shylock. When Shylock asks in the course of these, if he can speak with Antonio before coming to a definite agreement, Bassanio suggests that the two meet at dinner. Shylock replies contemptuously to this idea, "Yes, to smell pork; to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into. I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you."⁶

The Jewish law regulates not only Shylock's religion but his domestic life as well. Thus he can neither pray nor eat with Gentiles, although he will gladly do business with them. He thereby consciously divides his life into two separate spheres.

By living in both his Jewish world and the business community, Shylock lives in two realms of radically different origin. The realm of business arises from the particular will of individuals, who buy, trade, and deal according to their own self-interest; through it he shares in the life of Venice. His religious community depends on divine law as it forms an exclusive ecclesiastical nation. Shylock seeks here dividedly what the original Judaism had united. There, prosperity was a gift given for obedience to the Divine Law.⁷ Here Shylock seeks to make the gift the assured result of his own activity in business. This division results from the social conditions of the Jews, who having no Commonwealth of their own, had to live amongst Gentiles. Religion and economics were thus divided from each other.

Shylock seeks to live with equal intensity in both these worlds, of whose opposite tendencies he has no consciousness. At present, only his own devotion to both unites them. The argument of the play will see him discover the unity of this opposition in the Venetian Commonwealth.

6. *Merchant of Venice*, I, iii, 29-33.

7. As in the divine promise to Abraham of *Genesis* 12.

Antonio comes upon Shylock and Bassanio in the midst of their negotiations about the loan. Seeing him, Shylock meditates revenge in a soliloquy,

I hate him for he is a Christian;
 But more for that in low simplicity
 He lends out money gratis and brings down
 The rate of usance here with us in Venice.
 If I can catch him once upon the hip
 I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
 He hates our sacred nation; and he rails,
 Even there where merchants most do congregate,
 On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift
 Which he calls interest. Cursed by my tribe
 If I forgive him!⁸

Shylock's hatred for Antonio arises from both economic and religious motives. As a Jew, he hates him both for his being a Christian and for despising the Jewish nation. As a money-lender, Shylock hates him for his efforts to reduce the rate of interest at Venice. Shylock, moreover, regards his acting on his hatred for Antonio as almost a sacred duty: he calls down a curse upon the Jewish people if he does not seek revenge upon Antonio for interfering with his amassing of wealth and for despising his people.

From the very beginning, then, Shylock confuses the good of his religious nation with his own economic and individual good.⁹ His adversary Antonio suffers a similar, although less extreme confusion of religion and his private good.¹⁰ Previously he regarded the taking or giving of interest as contrary to the Christian religion. Now, to secure a loan from Shylock which will help both his friend Bassanio and himself, he becomes willing to pay interest. "To supply the ripe wants of my friend, I'll break a custom."¹¹ His friend's faring well in marriage and his own economic well-being have become for Antonio more important than obedience to a religious law.

Shylock experiences the deeper evil because he makes religion the servant of his economic well-being, while still imagining himself pious. Antonio knows that he will violate a precept of

8. *MV*, I, iii, 36-47.

9. This perversion of religion shows that Bloom (*op. cit.*, pp. 17-18) is wrong in speaking of Shylock as a representative of Judaism.

10. Bloom errs similarly (*ibid.*) in making Antonio a representative of Christianity.

11. *MV*, I, iii, 58-59.

religion if he borrows money at interest. This consciousness of Antonio provides Shylock with the occasion to pursue his revenge.

Shylock offers Antonio an interest-free loan, provided that if he not repay the money by a certain date, he will forfeit a pound of his flesh. Antonio is deceived by Shylock's seeming kindness. Confident that he can meet the day proposed, he imagines that Shylock's not demanding interest presages his conversion to Christianity. Antonio seems to regard the lending of money *gratis* as an essential mark of a Christian.

Antonio agrees to the bond proposed by Shylock; he will meet him at a notary to have it properly drawn up. By giving their contract this official and legal form, they both ask the State to enforce the monstrous community which it creates. This community can satisfy the desires of one party only at the expense of the other. If Antonio should repay the money by the stated date, Shylock receives nothing, and Antonio shall have had the full use of the money. Otherwise, in killing the man who lends money free, Shylock shall have removed an obstacle to his amassing of unlimited wealth. Although both are parties to this monstrosity, Antonio plays a less perverse role. He aims through the contract at an actual good, and that for the benefit of his friend and himself. Shylock seeks to fulfill two unlimited and unattainable ends through the contract, endless wealth and revenge.

When Antonio cannot meet the deadline for the repayment of his loan, Shylock insists on the forfeiture of his bond and has Antonio jailed pending a trial. He refuses all personal appeals from Antonio, who has himself nothing to offer against the justice of Shylock's claim. When a friend of his suggests that the Duke will not allow the contract to stand, Antonio replies,

The Duke cannot deny the course of law:
 For the commodity that strangers have
 With us in Venice, if it be denied,
 'Twill much impeach the justice of the state;
 Since that the trade and profit of the city
 Consisteth of all nations.¹²

Antonio thinks that the State of Venice participates in and depends on the justice of the international business community. This latter depends on the inviolability of contract, which Venice must respect if it is to prosper. Justice in the State has for Antonio no independence of the will of individuals; it consists rather in the enforcement of the agreements which private individuals have arrived at.

12. *MV*, III, iii, 26-31.

The Duke, for his part, has gone with some of the grandees of Venice to Shylock, asking him to give up his suit against Antonio.¹³ Thus the Sovereign of the State shows that in his view, too, strict justice lies with Shylock. Only the latter can annul his right against Antonio.

At this point, therefore, Shylock seems triumphant in the assertion of his private world. He lives in a society that assumes an extreme economic individualism, and in pursuit of his own private interest, he has lived its assumptions to the fullest. He has the law on his side; while his victim Antonio and the Sovereign of the State might oppose him in point of feeling, they cannot as a matter of principle deny his claims. Shylock has given its completest form to the rottenness which pervades all Venice.

The two major subplots show the indulgence of a similar though not so extreme individualism. The more important shows how Portia and Bassanio are drawn together in marriage, and their decision to help Antonio in his necessity. What defines Bassanio's love for Portia first shows itself when he speaks with Antonio about borrowing money to court her at Belmont. Bassanio's love for Portia originates in his debts to Antonio of money and friendship. He tells Antonio,

To you, Antonio
I owe the most, in money and in love;
And from your love I have a warranty
To unburthen all my plots and purposes
How to get clear of all the debts I owe.¹⁴

Bassanio then outlines to his chief creditor his plan to marry the rich heiress Portia. But he loves her not only because she can enable him to pay his debts but also for her beauty, her virtues and because "sometimes from her eyes I did receive fair speechless messages. . ."¹⁵ He thus loves her for her money, the beauty of both her body and soul, and for loving him.

Bassanio is caught in the ambiguities of his confused affections. On the one side, he loves Antonio primarily and hopes to marry Portia to serve that friendship. On the other, he seeks to use his friendship with Antonio as a means to secure Portia's hand. Bassanio's confusion arises from his extreme passivity of soul; his friendship with both Antonio and Portia originates with his returning the affection which each feels for him, rather than with his spontaneous love.

13. *MV*, III, ii, 278-280.

14. *MV*, I, i, 131-134.

15. *MV*, I, i, 163-164.

Although Portia loves Bassanio, she cannot simply marry him because of her affection. Her dead father has decided on a lottery as the means by which Portia will find a husband, and Portia has acquiesced in this arrangement. Before he can take part in the lottery, any would-be suitor must swear that if he loses, he can never marry. After taking his oath he must make his choice from three caskets, each with an inscription upon it. "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire,"¹⁶ says the gold casket. The silver one says "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves."¹⁷ The lead one says, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath."¹⁸ This last contains also the picture of Portia, and whoever chooses it shall gain Portia as his wife.

The conditions under which a suitor can participate in and win the lottery show what kind of husband Portia's father intends for her. He must first have made her the exclusive centre of his desires in marriage. Further, he must undertake to consecrate his entire being to their union.

All the parties to the lottery, Portia, her father and the suitors, undermine the proper order of the family and of marriage. Portia's father exercises a tyrannical authority over his daughter; he would bind her to a marriage which has as its basis the husband's romantic passion and the wife's unthinking obedience. He demands, moreover, even of her potential suitors an idolatrous and excessive love.

Portia and her suitors did not initiate these absurdities but do help to perpetuate them. Portia allows herself to be treated both as a witless automaton and as an object of almost religious awe. Some of the suitors are willing in exchange for the chance to marry Portia, to barter away their right to marry.

Portia, however, has a divided relation to the lottery that will decide her future husband. Although she accepts it as binding, her inclinations run another way. If she were left to marry where she would, she would choose the soldier and scholar Bassanio.

That Portia does eventually gain Bassanio as her husband represents the triumph of her womanly inclinations over her formal attachment to her filial obedience. This occurs in several stages. First, her love for Bassanio persuades him to undertake the journey to Belmont. Second, several suitors for whom she has no love fail in their attempt to win her in the lottery. Third, when Bassanio hazards for her hand, she cheats and helps him win.

16. *MV*, II, vii, 5.

17. *MV*, II, vii, 7.

18. *MV*, II, vii, 9.

The triumph of her love over and through the lottery begins when Bassanio decides to participate in it. Portia's father had intended that their great love for her would draw suitors to Belmont. In the case of Bassanio, rather her love for him will bring him there. Unlike the other suitors, he had visited Belmont before, and there, as he earlier told Antonio, received "fair speechless messages." Moved by these, he decides to take his chances in the lottery for Portia's hand.

A certain opposition to Portia's inclinations arises in the arrival of a multitude of suitors. Good fortune allows her to rejoice in the departure of the greater part; they have refused to take the prescribed preliminary oath. Two Princes, the first of Morocco, the other of Aragon, remain to vex her. Fortunately for Portia, the character of both these princes ensures that the lottery will not compel her to marry contrary to her inclination. Neither lives sufficiently in the world of romance "to give and hazard all he hath," as the lead casket, which contains her portrait, directs. As princes, both have a rather high estimation of their own worth, and thus think of marrying in accord with it. Morocco chooses the gold casket in part because it accords well with his "golden mind." Aragon chooses the silver casket because it promises him what he deserves, and he thinks that he deserves much.

The failure of Aragon and Morocco, together with the arrival of Bassanio, makes it possible for her to marry in accord with both the lottery and her inclination. Thus his coming to try his luck at the lottery fills Portia with delight. Before he actually hazards for her hand, the two exchange rapturous expressions of love. They thus violate the intent of Portia's father when he established the lottery. They have formed a relation based on mutual affection, which they have discussed independently of the lottery. Her father had wished Portia's affections to be entirely determined by the results of the lottery.

This first violation of her father's intent soon leads to another. Portia had agreed not to reveal which casket contained her portrait to any of her suitors. Moved, however, by her passion for Bassanio, she gives him two rather broad hints. She compares herself to the Trojan Hesion who had offered herself in order to save Troy, and announces "I stand for sacrifice."¹⁹ Moreover, while Bassanio meditates on which casket to choose, she has a song sung that warns against judging by outward show; this indicates that he should choose the lead casket.

19. *MV*, III, ii, 57.

Bassanio has a need of these hints. His soul is poised between his romantic love for Portia and his romantic friendship with Antonio. The instability of his *eros* is shown later, when he declares his willingness to sacrifice Portia in order to save Antonio. He loves with all his being whichever of his two loves happens to be immediately present to arouse his affection. This Portia does now with her hints, just as Antonio will do later with the letter to him which announces what designs Shylock has upon him.

Bassanio is predisposed to receive the hints of Portia, and therefore chooses rightly in the lottery. Although he is in raptures, Bassanio wants Portia to ratify the results of the lottery. He wants her explicit consent to that marriage which her obedience to her father has bound her to.

Portia does this, by surrendering to Bassanio, as to her lord, both her person and her passions. At the same time she gives Bassanio a ring, which he must wear as the sign of his love for her. If, she says, he loses it or gives it away, this will signal the death of his love. He accepts the ring on the conditions declared.

This latest exchange completes the combination of obedience to, and rejection of, the lottery, which both Portia and Bassanio have engaged in. On the one side, in the giving and accepting of the ring, there appear the same elements which defined the relation of Portia and Bassanio in the lottery. His love and her obedience to that love define their marriage. On the other, whereas the will of Portia's dead father had earlier set the conditions of their marriage, now Portia herself does so.

The rejoicing of Bassanio and Portia in their happiness is interrupted by the news that Antonio's willingness to promote their marriage has involved him in the extremest misery. A letter from him to Bassanio announces his misfortune. He has not repaid Shylock by the stated day, and the latter demands the forfeiture of his bond. When she sees his distress upon reading the letter, Portia enters sympathetically into Bassanio's feelings and asks "Is it your dear friend that is thus in trouble?"²⁰ That he is, is sufficient for Portia: she offers to pay whatever sum is necessary to save Antonio. She urges Bassanio to set off for Venice immediately, asking him to pause only for the solemnizing of their marriage.

Portia's enthusiasm for the welfare of her husband's friend becomes clearer after her husband has left, and she explains the alacrity with which she has acted; speaking of her husband and Antonio, she says,

20. *MV*, III, ii, 290.

for in companions
That do converse and waste the time together,
Where souls do bear an equal yoke of love,
There must be needs a like proportion
Of lineaments, of manners and of spirit;
Which makes me think that this Antonio
Being the bosom lover of my lord,
Must needs be like my lord. If it be so,
How little is the cost I have bestow'd
In purchasing the semblance of my soul
From out the state of hellish cruelty.²¹

Portia here assumes an immediate oneness of interests and identity between those whom romantic love and friendship unite. She feels herself directly at one with her husband, and him she imagines to be directly at one with his friend. From this she concludes that a similar unity between Antonio and herself exists; she therefore calls him "the semblance of my soul."

Portia does not then distinguish between the marriage which will soon unite her with Bassanio and the friendship which unites both of them with Antonio. She regards both relationships as equally the union of two souls. Her experience has led her to think of inner feeling and affection as equally the basis of both. What belongs to marriage as it is grounded in the family and distinguishes it from romantic friendship, has played no part in her thinking nor has she yet lived a married life.

This tendency of Portia's to make romantic friendship the centre of her life, reaches its completion when she decides to intervene in the trial of Antonio and to defend him from Shylock; she takes the decision directly after the arrival of Antonio's letter, although the audience knows at this point only that she has made an important decision, not what it involves. She will masquerade as a learned judge and thereby secure the release of Antonio. Even if she will make a right decision, she will still subordinate the due and proper administration of justice to the romantic love that subsists between her and Bassanio, and between Bassanio and Antonio. In this she is like Shylock, in having a regard not to the objectivity of the State, but only to its defence of her personal interests. Portia differs from Shylock only by being less extreme in her vulgarity. He pursues purely private ends through his intended use of the State, while she wishes to use it to defend communities founded on the very narrow basis of private and romantic friendship.

21. *MV*, III, iv, 11-21.

The second subplot also involves the conflict between romantic love and paternal authority; it shows the marriage of Jessica to Lorenzo, and how it destroys the relation which subsists between Jessica and Shylock. Jessica's desire for marriage has its origin in the tyranny of her father, the tediousness of his household, and her desire to escape from it. Thinking of the marriage with Lorenzo she has determined on, she says,

Alack what heinous sin is it in me
 To be ashamed to be my father's child!
 But though I am a daughter to his blood,
 I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo!
 If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,
 Become a Christian, and thy loving wife.²²

Jessica's determination to marry Lorenzo and become a Christian arises not directly from her choice of these but rather insofar as she rejects her father. She is not therefore so free in relation to him as she imagines. Because her father is tyrannical, she will marry to escape his authority; because he is a Jew, she will marry a Christian and become one herself. Her passivity in this makes itself even clearer when she says that her husband has made her a Christian.²³ What belongs to the soul's own relation to God, she finds in the community between husband and wife. Because she thinks that freedom from her father lies in establishing her own household, she overvalues that relation generally, and ascribes to it what it cannot afford her.

Only the hypocrisy of her father gives her the occasion to elope with Lorenzo. He has been invited to dine with Bassanio, and contrary to his principles as he had earlier announced them, he has accepted. Before he had sharply separated his commercial dealings with Gentiles from any intercourse on a profounder level. Now he says he will dine with them in order to help ruin the spendthrift Bassanio. Shylock's private interest tends to draw him away from participation in his religious and national community, and into the general community of Venice.

While Shylock is away, Lorenzo appears, in order to elope with Jessica. His attachment to her shows the power of romantic attachment. Jessica's being a Jew and thus to a certain extent of a different nation does not prevent his loving her. He loves her entirely as she is in her particular individuality.

While Lorenzo waits for her under her father's window, he

22. *MV*, II, iii, 16-21.

23. *MV*, III, v, 17-18.

appeals to her that she come to him directly. She delays, so that as she says, she might "gild myself with some mo ducats, and be with you straight."²⁴ Her father has been a miser to her, and she will rob him of a dowry in return. Lorenzo makes no objection to this theft. Both are sufficiently besotted by their love to care only for their own interests and to have grown oblivious of their other obligations.

As with all the other characters, their devotion to their particular end has caused them to violate the bonds of other communities of which they are also members. Jessica's obligation to respect her father's property does not end because he has been niggardly with her. Lorenzo has the duty of honouring that distinction between *meum* and *tuum* which prevails amongst those who live under a common government.

Shylock's self-absorption shows itself in his reaction to his daughter's eloping. He thinks only of what he has lost and feels the loss of his jewels and money more strongly than the loss of his daughter. His concentration on himself goes so far that he regards what he has lost as epoch-making for Israel: "the curse never fell upon our nation till now,"²⁵ he says. He wishes the death of his daughter, and the return of his money. Thus his mad obsession with money makes both family ties and religion secondary and ancillary concerns for him.

Thus the exposition of the plot, which occupies the first three acts, reveals the peculiar vulgarity of each major character. The actions of all tend, through the indulgence of a private passion, to the destruction of the various communities of economic life, family, and religion. Shylock's course undermines these more directly than the other characters, since he aims at an end which will benefit himself alone; the others look for their well-being in the romantic friendship which binds them to another individual.

Shylock seeks to subordinate all the major forms of community and the Commonwealth itself to his pursuit of endless wealth. Under cover of friendship, he has entered into a monstrous contract and asked the State to enforce it; he has imagined that he serves the religious nation of Israel in the pursuit of his end. Portia comes next in vulgarity. She makes romantic love the basis of her marriage to Bassanio, and this, her primary vulgarity, leads to others. She does not fully accept her father's will; she accepts the absurd adulation, amounting almost to worship, which the lottery entails. Her love for Antonio as her husband's friend, moreover, will see her interrupt the proper working of justice.

24. MV, II, vi, 49-50.

25. MV, III, i, 77-78.

Lorenzo and Jessica are so moved by their passion that they are willing to rob Shylock; Jessica imagines that her husband has made her a Christian. Bassanio is willing to use his marriage as a means to satisfy his obligations to Antonio, and to use that friendship as a means to secure Portia's hand.

Antonio knows that Bassanio intends to pursue a marriage at least in part mercenary. Moved, however, by his love for Bassanio, the latter's love for him, and his unspoken hope of recovering the money he has loaned, Antonio agrees to an unjust contract; he has violated his religious belief, moreover, to do so. He imagines as well that the Duke must enforce his contract with Shylock to maintain the justice of the State.

The fourth and fifth acts show the vulgarity of Portia, Shylock, Bassanio and Antonio reaching its completest point; in these two acts, not only the aforementioned, but also Lorenzo and Jessica, experience a certain education and purgation of their vulgarity. As the most vulgar character, who has aimed at subordinating economic life, family and religion altogether to private ends, Shylock will undergo the profoundest education and find in affirming the objective reality of these the only ground of his individuality.

The less extreme vulgarity of Antonio, Portia and Bassanio, has lain primarily in their confusions concerning marriage and romantic love. Thus their education will consist primarily in learning to subordinate the latter to the former. Portia and Antonio will also experience a certain correction of their other vulgarities. Jessica and Lorenzo have sought to live entirely in their passion; they will learn its limits.

In Act IV Shylock, Portia, Antonio, and Bassanio reach the depths of their vulgarity, and Shylock alone experiences a purgation of this. The act begins in a court of justice, summoned by the Duke to consider Shylock's case against Antonio, and his demand for a pound of flesh. The Duke begins the trial by appealing to Shylock that he not only forego the forfeiture of his bond, but having mercy on Antonio's losses, forgive part of the principal. To this Shylock responds,

I have possess'd your Grace of what I purpose;
 And by our holy Sabbath have I sworn
 To have the due and forfeit of my bond:
 If you deny it, let the danger light
 Upon your charter and your city's freedom.²⁶

26. *MV*, IV, i, 35-39.

He goes on to say that he will give no account of why he insists on his suit against Antonio.

Shylock here perversely associates his private good with the general good of the Venetian State and of the Jewish religion. He imagines that the well-being of the Venetian State lies in its maintaining the inviolability of contract, regardless of content. He has made his pursuit of Antonio moreover a religious matter: he has sworn by a holy day to attain his end.

Shylock's response shows, however, the failure of the Duke's appeal. He has not been able to discover any legal or political ground which can overthrow Shylock's claim. His actions show, actually, that he has essentially the same views about the State as does Shylock. He can oppose Shylock's plan, therefore, only by appealing to Shylock's private volition, which law cannot compel. Shylock, however, has refused to give any account of that volition.

The Duke does not wish Shylock to win that case which as a matter of law he must help him to win. He has summoned the lawyer Bellario to decide the case for him, hoping perhaps that he can discover some loophole by which Antonio can be freed. Portia enters as Bellario's alleged representative. Like the Duke, she knows that the law cannot stop him in his proceedings and tells him so. She concludes that he must therefore be merciful. 'On what compulsion,'²⁷ Shylock then asks. To this Portia replies,

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy,

27. *MV*, IV, i, 179.

And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
 The deeds of mercy. I have spoken thus much
 To mitigate the justice of thy plea²⁸

Portia argues here that because mercy is superior to justice in both God and human kings, Shylock ought to have mercy on Antonio. God has founded the community of salvation through mercy, she argues; had he attempted to found it on strict justice, she adds, no member of it could be found. Kings, moreover, reveal their excellence most clearly when they exercise mercy, since it transcends their temporal power. Shylock will be both God-like and kingly if he not insist on the strict execution of his bond with Antonio.

The vulgarity of Portia that has shown itself in her sentimental devotion to love here reaches its extremest point. First, that mercy whose paean she has sung has no positive content in itself, but is simply the annulment of all law and justice, both heavenly and earthly. It appears in her speech as being only inner feeling and emotion; she describes something akin to her passion for Bassanio. Second, she sees no essential distinctions between the several forms of mercy. She speaks as if God's salvation of man and Shylock's renunciation of his contract univocally deserve to be called acts of mercy. Her unthinking and ill-regulated regard for Antonio has caused her to confuse small things with great so unreasonably.

Portia has, moreover, revealed herself as a thorough hypocrite in this speech. Her principle of mercy has not governed her own behaviour but has arisen only so she might rescue her husband's friend. When various suitors took part in a lottery for her hand, Portia showed little interest in mercy. Her personal interests made her quite willing to leave Morocco and Aragon to the "justice" of their contracts. She exhorts Shylock to practice what she had earlier assiduously avoided.

Shylock's response to Portia's speech is equally self-serving; "I crave the law, the penalty and forfeit of my bond,"²⁹ he responds to Portia's speech. Shylock has deceived himself into thinking of himself as an upholder of the law; he upholds it only insofar as it contributes to his purely private advantage. When breaking the law has suited him, he has done so without the slightest scruple; he violated a commandment of his religion when he agreed to dine with Bassanio.

28. *MV*, IV, i, 180-199.

29. *MV*, IV, i, 206-207.

Portia imagines that she has spoken on behalf of Christianity, and Shylock thinks himself a defender of Judaism. Her mercy, however, shows her to be a corrupt Christian,³⁰ and his law marks him as a corrupt Jew. Mercy for Portia merely annuls justice; according to the Christian religion, it is rather the fulfillment of law and justice. Shylock has made law an instrument of his will; in Judaism, law as divinely revealed defines the community and its life; it does not serve primarily private ends.

The above exchange represents the turning point of the play. The positions of Portia and Shylock represent the two opposed tendencies of the play. In speaking of mercy, Portia has described also that empty and romantic love which serves not only herself, but also Antonio, Bassanio, Jessica and Lorenzo. In speaking of himself as an upholder of law, Shylock reveals the same attitude which allows him to identify himself with the objective order of religion and society. Shylock's and Portia's vulgar appropriation of justice and mercy, respectively, will compel them to discover the unity of these seeming opposites.

Portia's appeal to mercy has been unable to persuade Shylock that he should give up what the bond allows him according to law. She will compel him to do so only by the objectivity of law, which Shylock can offer no opposition to. She proceeds in the following way. She declares that he is indeed entitled to the forfeiture of his bond. This Shylock greets with jubilation. Then, as Shylock is about to cut off the pound of flesh that he is entitled to, she reminds him that while the law allows him a pound of flesh, it gives him nothing more. She cautions him, therefore, that if in taking his pound of flesh he shed blood, he will forfeit his life. When he concludes that he must forego the forfeiture of his bond, and wishes to receive his principal instead, Portia insists that having made his choice he cannot now revert to what he had earlier refused. Then Portia declares that Shylock has broken the law by seeking to take the life of a Venetian citizen while being himself an alien.

Portia has been able to refuse Shylock's demand for the enforcement of the law, not by an appeal to some allegedly higher principle such as mercy, but by a closer look at the meaning and reality of the law. Shylock has insisted on the law only as it enforces contractual obligations. He has seen the State as performing a similar role; he has no idea that either the law or the State governs his relation to Antonio in any other way.

30. Sir Israel Gollancz, *Allegory and Mysticism in Shakespeare*, Haskell House, New York, 1973, says "that Portia is actually Mercy personified" (p. 27). Her corruption here shows this to be an impossibility.

If, however, the contract between Antonio and Shylock, and the enforcement of it by the State, define the relation of these two, then Shylock is entitled to do only what the *ipsissima verba* of the contract allow him. It so happens that the exact fulfillment of the contract necessarily involves exceeding the contract; and this would cause Shylock to violate another law, that which protects persons against injury.

At this point, it might seem that Portia has blocked Shylock's designs only by discovering this accidental omission in the contract, that it does not award Shylock blood as well as a pound of flesh. On such a view, Shylock would legally exact his pound of flesh and only then fall foul of the law which prohibited the shedding of blood. Portia, however, has gone on to show, that because of the intent with which he has entered upon the contract, that of killing Antonio, he has *eo ipso* broken the law.

The validity of a contract does not depend solely on its being an agreement between the contracting parties. It must conform to the State's general supervision of public life. When a contract violates a law which expresses this common good, it has no force. The contract between Antonio and Shylock is not a strictly private matter to be enforced as such, but subordinate to the general life of the community.

The discovery overthrows the earlier positions of both Portia and Shylock. He had hoped to make the law and the State the instruments of his revenge. She had urged him to have mercy upon Antonio. They had agreed, however, in seeing the will of Shylock as the arbiter of Antonio's fate, and neither had imagined that there existed an objective measure of the contract between Shylock and Antonio.

Earlier it had seemed, not only to Shylock, but also to Antonio, that justice at Venice was a participation in a universal commercial justice. Now, however, the political life of Venice more primarily defines the Justice of the State. This latter does not necessarily overthrow the law of contractual obligation; when the two conflict, however, the law which protects citizens as citizens must triumph.

Shylock faces a strong penalty for his crime. Half of his goods go to Antonio, half to the State, and his life is at the sole mercy of the Duke.³¹ The latter pardons his life, but Shylock, rejecting a pardon that leaves him penniless, says that he would rather die.³²

Antonio proposes the following arrangement. The State will forego its claim for half of Shylock's goods, while Antonio will

31. *MV*, IV, i, 348-364.

32. *MV*, IV, i, 375-378.

have the other half in use; at Shylock's death, this will pass to Lorenzo. Shylock will bequeath all his goods to his daughter and Lorenzo and become a Christian. The Duke then makes his pardon contingent upon Shylock's acceptance of these conditions.³³

The conditions which the Duke attaches to the pardon of Shylock all involve the latter's acceptance of a stable relation to the essential elements of the Venetian Commonwealth. That individuality which he had sought to realize in the pursuit of money and revenge, he will now discover in his due relation to economic life, family, and religion. By receiving half his fortune from the State, to which he had forfeited the whole, he will experience the general dependence of his economic well-being on the Commonwealth. By losing half of his wealth to Antonio, he establishes the community which contract aims at, the material well-being of the contracting parties. By agreeing to will his estate to his daughter, he will fulfill his role as *paterfamilias* by serving the community of the family.

By becoming a Christian, he will embrace the religion of the Commonwealth. He had tried to use the Commonwealth as a means whereby he might subordinate the Jewish religion to himself. Now he will affirm the objectivity and givenness of the Commonwealth and its religion.

When Shylock accepts the conditions of the Duke, he enjoys in their unity that justice and mercy he had just experienced separately. When he had to satisfy the demands of justice, his individuality had suffered destruction. Faced with the awful majesty of law, it lost its force and power. The Duke's first act of mercy then restores Shylock to a purely formal individuality. His life has been spared, but he has no place in the Commonwealth. When the Duke then sets the conditions of his pardon, he enables Shylock to enjoy both the objectivity of law and the individuality given by mercy.

Economic life, family, and religion all enable him to enjoy this unity, each in its own way. Through each Shylock comes to participate in a community which an objective bond unites. The religious community allows him to enjoy this in its completeness. Economic life and family afford him the same relation in a more limited form.

Through economic life Shylock enjoys the least complete community. Through it, he attains to material well-being and contributes to that of Antonio. He thereby affirms a community with a weak common bond, the private and independent enjoyment of material goods.

33. *MV*, IV, i, 381-393.

By bequeathing his money to his daughter, Shylock wills his place in a community with a stronger bond than that of the economic community. As paterfamilias, Shylock has founded his family, both physically and as a community. Now he subordinates his private and individual activity as an economic man to the well-being of that community. He rules the family by serving them.

Finally, in agreeing to become a Christian, Shylock joins that community whose head is God. Through this community he will know God both as Creator and as Him who has joined man to Himself, "not by conversion of the Godhead into man, but by taking of the Manhood into God."³⁴ In this community, God unites in his being the objective bond of community with the believer's incorporation into it.

Through the religious community Shylock will therefore experience most completely the unity of law and subjective freedom. Through the economic life and family, he will enjoy analogous communities. Although these are incomplete in comparison with the religious community, they participate in it by imitating its structure.

By entering, then, into the life of the Commonwealth, Shylock has both a religious and secular experience of the Incarnation. In the religious community, he will know by dogma and sacrament, the inclusion of his life in the divine life. In the spheres of economic and family life, he will experience the secular analogues of that relation.³⁵

By his successive experience of law, subjective freedom, and their unity in the institutions of the Commonwealth, Shylock experiences analogically the persons of the Trinity. When he learns that he has broken the law, and thereby knows the Commonwealth as the basis of community, he experiences God the Father as the Creator of the world and its order. When the Duke as Sovereign frees him from the penalty attached to breaking the law, and gives him a certain inner freedom, he experiences God the Son who as Redeemer frees men from sin. Finally, when the Commonwealth enables Shylock to enjoy the unity of law and freedom, he experiences the Holy Ghost who as sanctifier communicates to men the work of Father and Son.³⁶

34. Creed of Athanasius.

35. I am grateful to Mr. A. H. Bassett for help on this point.

36. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost appear respectively as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier in the first three books of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

By coming to live within the Venetian Commonwealth, Shylock finds the appropriate conclusion to his entire career. He had at first lived in two worlds of opposite origin. On the one side, he lived in the realm of the Jewish nation, within which he observed the cult and founded a family. On the other, he lived in a commercial and secular activity altogether independent of this. The uneasy balance between these two could not long obtain; his desire for revenge upon Antonio led Shylock to live wholly in a secular independence and to seek in himself the unity of his interests. He ruled his household without regard to the well-being of his daughter; he broke religious law when this suited him; and he thought that through his activity in the Venetian State he realized the divine law.

The Venetian Commonwealth, finally, taught him to find through its life the true unity of his interests. It gives him that unity of religion and secular life he has been seeking through the presence in one Commonwealth of not only the communities of economic life and family but of religion as well; because the Commonwealth also keeps these communities distinct, Shylock's earlier tendency to confound the religious and the secular is corrected. Through his participation in these institutions, and in the process by which he comes to enjoy them, Shylock also experiences that unity of law and subjective freedom which he has sought to locate in himself. Finally, by educating him for participation in the divine life, the Commonwealth affirms most completely his individuality, while correcting his hubristic attempt earlier to make God conformable to himself.

The education of Shylock provides the occasion for all the other characters also to participate in the realms of economics, family, and religion. When they find their place within the community of the family, they also discover their due relation to these other realms. This discovery does not follow directly upon the education of Shylock. For Portia, Bassanio, and Antonio, Portia's role in Shylock's rehabilitation leads first to a deepening of the vulgarities in all three, and only then to the right ordering of their relations. Jessica and Lorenzo find a certain stability by themselves in their marriage and then enjoy Portia's announcement of Shylock's gift to them.

During the trial of Shylock, a remark of Bassanio's had shown the difficulties which obtained amongst him, Portia, and Antonio. When Shylock seemed still triumphant, Bassanio declared that he would gladly sacrifice his wife for the sake of Antonio.³⁷ He thus

37. *MV*, IV, i, 283-288.

subordinated a legal and official relationship to one based entirely on sentiment. Then, after the departure of Shylock, Portia's role in his overthrow allows Bassanio to show this preference for Antonio over Portia in action. The Duke tells Antonio to reward Portia for her trouble. Portia has acted as the agent of the State's justice; the Duke thinks, however, of her being paid by the direct beneficiary of her action. Portia refuses the money Bassanio offers on behalf of Antonio, but when pressed, she uses her present public role as a lawyer to test the fidelity of her husband; she asks him for the ring which she had given him. Although he at first demurs, he yields to Antonio's request that he do so. He thus subordinates his love for his wife to the united request of his friend and that seeming agent of the State who has saved him.

The fifth act then shows the re-ordering of the relations amongst Portia, Bassanio, and Antonio. The marriage of Portia and Bassanio is seen to have precedence of the romantic friendship between the latter and Antonio. When all have returned to Belmont, Portia taxes Bassanio with having given away the ring which represented his love for her; she threatens not to live with him as his wife. Bassanio asks for forgiveness and swears by his soul never hereafter to break an oath with Portia.³⁸ Antonio undertakes to be surety of Bassanio's pledge, also swearing by his soul.³⁹

Romantic love is thus no longer the tie which unites Portia and Bassanio in marriage. Both, by participating in the lottery and the giving of the ring which had followed it, had assumed that the strength of Bassanio's love for Portia defined their marriage. Both the lottery and the giving of the ring were tests of that love, and Bassanio had accepted these tests. He has, however, failed this latest test and shown that he loves Antonio more than he does Portia. Faced with losing her as his wife, he wills an indissoluble union with her. The objective institution of marriage appears as primary, and his participation in it as secondary. His friend Antonio, whose affection had before distracted him from his proper devotion to Portia, now subordinates their friendship to the marriage of Bassanio and Portia. Romantic friendship must yield to marriage.

Through this, Antonio, Portia, and Bassanio also discover their right relation to the economic and religious spheres. They do not affirm so completely as Shylock did, the objectivity of these communities. These communities do appear, however, as independent of their private volition.

38. *MV*, V, i, 246-248.

39. *MV*, V, i, 249-253.

They affirm the economic community indirectly. When Portia, Bassanio, and Antonio discover the bond which unites them, they surrender their earlier mercenary involvements. Portia is no longer sought, nor does Bassanio seek her, for his private amassing of wealth. Similarly, Antonio no longer encourages Bassanio's marriage for his private gain. Thus they acknowledge the existence of a separate economic community.

They also affirm the religious community indirectly. Portia now neither asks for nor receives, the idolatrous adulation of a romantic lover, but the willed love of a husband. Both he and his friend acknowledge through their oaths the sanction of heaven as the necessary ground of human will. Portia through her renunciation, and the others by their affirmations, acknowledge an objective religious community.

The fifth act also sees Jessica and Lorenzo, who have come to live at Belmont, attain a better relation to the three realms of economics, family, and religion. They have the least complete relation to the objectivity of these communities. First, by seeing something of the limits of their romantic attachment, they discover the objectivity of family ties in the bond of marriage. While discussing the difficulties of mythical lovers, Jessica says,

In such a night
Did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well,
Stealing her soul with many vows of faith
And ne'er a true one.⁴⁰

Lorenzo responds,

In such a night
Did pretty Jessica like a little shrew,
Slander her love, and he forgave it her.⁴¹

Implied in this exchange is their recognition that their relation is not founded merely on affection, but on an objective bond.

Second, they participate in the objectivity of the religious community when Lorenzo indicates to his wife that her religious well-being does not lie in him; she had earlier imagined that her husband had made her a Christian. While both look at the stars, Lorenzo speaks of the music which each angelic mover makes, and which, he says, we cannot hear because of our being in the flesh.⁴² By speaking of the angelic intelligences as enjoying a life superior

40. *MV*, V, i, 17-20.

41. *MV*, V, i, 20-22.

42. *MV*, V, i, 58-65.

to man's, Lorenzo acknowledges, if in a rudimentary way, the objectivity of religion and encourages his wife to do the same.

Finally, when they learn that Shylock will give them money, Lorenzo and Jessica passively and confusedly experience the objectivity of economic life. Its objectivity appears in their being given material well-being without any activity of their own. Because, however, Shylock is their benefactor, they do not experience the economic community as properly independent.

Therefore, like Shylock, the inhabitants of Belmont have come to participate in the objective communities of economic life, family and religion. They have done this through an experience of law and subjective freedom similar to Shylock's. Their various romantic attachments first proved an unstable basis of community. Then the bond of marriage appeared as that which could provide an objective community. Through their affirmations of this they found the unity of law and subjective freedom.

Through their similar experience of institutions, the inhabitants of Belmont come also to enjoy the same relation to religion as does Shylock. By participating in the three communities, they have a certain experience of the Incarnation. Through their experience of the unity of law and subjective freedom, they experience the Trinity.

The play ends therefore with all the characters participating in the several communities of the Venetian Commonwealth and thereby in the Christian religion. Shylock has his experience through the total life of the Commonwealth, while the inhabitants of Belmont have theirs through the life of the family. His experience makes explicit what they enjoy less consciously.

The individuality of Shylock has no other content than his affirmation of the Commonwealth and its essential communities. The inhabitants of Belmont have begun that education which has been accomplished in Shylock. They find their individuality not through these essential spheres themselves but insofar as they are present through another particular individual.

The Commonwealth unites the elements of this division. Shylock has attained that complete individuality for the sake of which the Commonwealth exists. The inhabitants of Belmont, by living more immediately in the institutions of the Commonwealth, help to maintain that through which the education of individuals can occur.