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SHYLOCK'S DRAMATIC FUNCTION

Two recent studies have added greatly to our understanding of *The Merchant of Venice*. Both make much of the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. Robert Hapgood writes of an Antonio who although "resigned to the proposed marriage of his friend, . . . clings to first place in his affection".¹ Taking the point even further, Lawrence W. Hyman comments: "The main action of the play is centered on the struggle between Portia and Antonio for Bassanio's love".² Both critics have performed a necessary service; they have diminished the power of Shylock over the play, restoring the figurative cuts made by the modern critical imagination. It is good to be reminded "that *in terms of the structure of the play* Shylock is a minor character".³

Yet, it may not be enough, once Shylock's grip upon the play is loosened, to demonstrate structural unity through the struggle between Portia and Antonio. Rather, once Shylock is de-emphasized, a larger comic world concerned with varieties of love holds the stage. Within this world, Shylock, the most impressive of minor characters, has his distinct dramatic function. He operates in powerful opposition to the four major movements of the play towards fulfillment of love. In the context of the comedy, Shylock blocks charity, friendship, marriage, and even playful lust.

Before turning to this function of Shylock, then, we must examine his environment. As Shakespeare creates it, it consists not merely of Venice, or Belmont, if environment suggests the total scope of the play, but of love itself, and love as it forms a hierarchy roughly based on the physical-spiritual distinction. Thus love at its lowest is hardly love at all, but physical lust. Such is the briefly noted relationship between Launcelot and a Moor. As Lorenzo defends his marriage to Jessica, he comments:

I shall answer that better to the commonwealth than you can the getting up of the Negro's belly: the Moor is with child by you, Launcelot.

(III, v, 40-42)⁴

What else would one expect from a man who predicted "fifteen wives" for himself? On a higher plane is the relationship between the "wild", "rude", and "bold" Gratiano and Nerissa. Yet, through Gratiano, Shakespeare reminds the audience of the sexual impulse upon which romantic love is based. Nerissa will never conceive if Gratiano keeps his "stake down". It is Gratiano who grows angry on stage near the end of the play when Nerissa teases him with having the "clerk" for her bedfellow. He threatens to "mar the young clerk's pen" and complains that he is a cuckold before he deserves it. When he learns the truth, he does not care to question Portia about the strange events, but rather asks Nerissa, "Whether till the next night she had rather stay/Or go to bed now, being two hours to day" (V, i, 302-3). Finally he leaves us with a bawdy pun, promising to try as hard as possible to keep safe "Nerissa's ring". Gratiano plays Mercutio to Bassanio's Romeo.

Higher up in the hierarchy are Lorenzo and Jessica. Shakespeare treats their love in romantic terms at the same time that he withholds full sympathy from them. While it is true that to treat Jessica as "bad and disloyal, unfilial, a thief" is "to break a butterfly upon a wheel",⁵ still an audience is probably uneasy with a Jessica who robs her father and flees without even the conflict of conscience that disturbed Launcelot before he decided to leave Shylock's service. And almost certainly her appeal is diminished by her thoughtless trade of her father's turquoise for a monkey. It is hard to imagine any audience laughing at Shylock's response to this loss: "I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor: I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys" (III, i, 126-8). In dramatic terms, robbery may not appear any more attractive than usury.

Then there is Bassanio. While Bassanio has been criticized as a mere fortune hunter,⁶ his activities may be less obviously—on stage—mercenary than those of Lorenzo. Certainly, he tells Antonio the major reason for sailing to Belmont: "My chief care/Is to come fairly off from the great debts . . ." (I, i, 127-8). But Bassanio realizes that the value of Portia is in herself great; in terms of virtue she is the equal of "Brutus' Portia". Still, Bassanio never mentions at this point (I, i) any love for the woman. What he speaks of are the "fair speechless messages" her eyes send to him. Because of these, he believes he may win her and her riches. At this point our attitude is shaped by whether we sense the fairy-tale quality of the work, or insist on realistic

notions of life. We are undecided about this man.

Once in Belmont, however, Bassanio becomes more attractive to the audience. Shakespeare carefully shapes our reaction by presenting us with lists of alternative suitors (I, ii) which Portia rejects, and with characters who make the wrong casket choices. "All that glitters is not gold" (II, vi, 65) is a fair warning to Morocco as well as to the commercial world of Venice. Arragon is suitably presented with a "fool's head" for choosing the silver casket with the inscription: "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves" (II, vi, 7). As the play makes abundantly clear, to ask for what you deserve is to ask for nothing or worse. In this context, Bassanio is the romantic hero. His choice is the casket of lead which is inscribed: "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath" (II, vi, 9). The demand is the demand of love. The audience has seen Antonio hazard all for Bassanio; it hears Portia tell him: "This house, these servants and this same myself/ Are yours, my lord" (III, ii, 172-3). By choosing the lead casket, by hazarding all, Bassanio has entered the realms of love and becomes worthy of both Antonio's affection and Portia's love. He ceases to be, if he ever was, a fortune hunter in the eyes of the audience.

Yet, there are still some reservations about this love relationship. Consider the following song, sung as Bassanio muses over the caskets—some critics hear in the rhyme scheme a hint to Bassanio to choose lead, but such a hint would destroy our sense of him as a worthy lover risking all:

Tell me where is fancy bred,
Or in the heart or in the head?
How begot, how nourished?
Reply, reply.
It is engender'd in the eyes,
With gazing fed; and fancy dies
In the cradle where it lies.

(III, ii, 62-69)

The song is a warning that "fancy" or love is closely tied to external physical attraction. Indeed, Bassanio first received encouragement from Portia's eyes as noted above. But the problem is, as the song explains, that when the eyes no longer admire the physical exterior, then fancy dies. As romantic and idealized as the love between Portia and Bassanio becomes, as much as it participates in the spiritual, it is ultimately bound to the physical, and therefore as the play will suggest, limited. Such is the import of the references at the beginning of Act V to loves destroyed by broken faiths: Troilus and

Cressida, Dido and Aeneas, Jason and Medea; or by accident: Pyramus and Thisbe. To these pairs, Jessica adds Lorenzo and herself:

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.

(V, i, 17-20)

By extension and dramatic parallel these references modify the ideal love of Portia and Bassanio—indeed, Gratiano declared of their double success: "We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece" (III, ii, 244).

Perhaps less limited is the spiritual bond of friendship that exists between Antonio and Bassanio. Their story is a variation upon the Damon and Pythias theme—one man held in bondage for his friend. Antonio's depression at the beginning of the play has been a problem for critics as well as for his companions who try to determine what is bothering him.⁷ They offer various reasons, but Antonio reacts most violently to the suggestion that he is in love. With a "Fie, fie" he denies it. Yet when everyone else is off the stage but Bassanio and Antonio, Antonio immediately asks:

Well, tell me now what lady is the same
To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage,
That you to-day promised to tell me of?

(I, i, 119-121)

The stage impression is that he is directly turning to what is bothering him: the loss of his friend to a woman.

Because of his friendship, Antonio is willing to offer Bassanio anything: "My purse, my person, my extremest means,/Lie all unlock'd to your occasions" (I, i, 138-9). When Antonio learns what Bassanio needs he states:

Try what my credit can in Venice do:
That shall be rack'd, even to the uttermost,
To furnish thee to Belmont, to fair Portia.

(I, i, 180-182)

When he turns to Shylock for the money, Antonio is willing to enter into the "merry bond" for his friend. No matter how confident he is that he will be able to pay the debt, Antonio is hazarding his life. The scene should be played to emphasize the villainy of Shylock and the awareness of Antonio to the threat. That is, lines like the following are clearly ironic: "I'll seal to such a bond/And say there is much kindness in the Jew" (I, iii, 153-4).⁸

Over Bassanio's protests—which may be feeble—Antonio agrees to the bond. With the money in hand, Bassanio is ready to depart. In a touching description—which does emphasize Bassanio's debt to Antonio—Salarino re-creates the farewell scene:

I saw Bassanio and Antonio part:
 Bassanio told him he would make some speed
 Of his return: he answer'd, 'Do not so;
 Slubber not business for my sake, Bassanio,
 But stay the very riping of the time;
 And for the Jew's bond which he hath of me,
 Let it not enter in your mind of love . . .'
 And with affection wondrous sensible
 He wrung Bassanio's hand; and so they parted.

(II, viii, 36-49)

Perhaps in his self-sacrifice, Antonio presents the ideal of friendship and spiritual love. Yet, he certainly maintains a hold upon his friend by these reminders to forget, as well as by the suggestion that it is business in Belmont in contrast to affection here. Friendship is a restrictive as well as a useful bond. Continuing this conversation, Salarino states of Antonio:

I think he only loves the world for him.
 I pray thee, let us go and find him out
 And quicken his embraced heaviness
 With some delight or other.

The audience recalls Antonio's depression in the opening act. The cause of his heaviness, only suggested then, is now made explicit.

Yet these sacrifices, however taken by the audience, are not only on Antonio's side. Bassanio is successful in Belmont. But when he learns that his "dearest friend" has forfeited the bond, he leaves, with noble Portia's full sympathy, on their wedding day for Venice. He leaves aside business for affection. But how could he resist Antonio's subtle plea: "Use your pleasure: if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter" (III, ii, 323-324). Of course Antonio's true feelings are: "Pray God, Bassanio come/To see me pay his debt, and then I care not" (III, iii, 35-36). And Bassanio is indeed speeding to the side of his friend. When he arrives, Antonio stands before the court in Venice, and Bassanio can do nothing to prevent Shylock's demand. When it seems death is inevitable, Antonio states his last wishes to Bassanio:

Commend me to your honourable wife:
 Tell her the process of Antonio's end;

Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death;
 And, when the tale is told, bid her be judge
 Whether Bassanio had not once a love.
 Repent but you that you shall lose your friend,
 And he repents not that he pays your debt . . .
 (IV, i, 273-279)

Responding through love or guilt, Bassanio asserts that he is willing to sacrifice everything if only to save his friend:

But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
 Are not with me esteem'd above thy life:
 I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
 Here to this devil, to deliver you.
 (IV, i, 284-287)

Under this intense pressure the apparently spiritual bond of friendship has more strength than the marriage bond of flesh and spirit.

This idea is carried out through the introduction of the ring plot. When Bassanio accepted the ring from Portia he promised:

But when this ring
 Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence:
 O, then be bold to say Bassanio's dead!
 (III, ii, 185-187)

But having saved Antonio, the "doctor" asks for this sworn upon ring and Bassanio is unwilling to part with it. Then Antonio urges him:

My Lord Bassanio, let him have the ring:
 Let his deservings and my love withal
 Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment.
 (IV, i, 449-451)

Again Antonio's love is measured against Portia's, and Bassanio finds friendship greater. He sends the ring after the doctor.

Above these varieties of love is divine love as expressed through charity or mercy. Its operation is most fully presented to Portia's plea to Shylock:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
 Upon the place beneath . . .
 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;
 And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
 The deeds of mercy.

(IV, i, 184-202)

Her argument is couched in the language of the gospels and St. Paul, and presents the highest expression of love in the play.⁹ The hierarchy is complete: from lust, to marriage, to friendship, to mercy.

In this context, Shylock's dramatic function is to impede every expression of love. His attitude towards masques and music, agents of holiday release—and thus closest to the sexuality Launcelot suggests—is puritanical. He warns Jessica:

But stop my house's ears, I mean my casements:
 Let not the sound of shallow foppery enter
 My sober house. . . .

(II, v, 34-36)

In reference to marriage, he is the obstacle to be overcome by Lorenzo and his daughter, the conventional heavy father. But he also is a threat to the love relationship between Portia and Bassanio. For though they are married, Antonio's death would be "Bassanio's fault" as Portia notes, and Bassanio for the rest of his life would have "an unquiet soul". He could not survive in the world of Belmont with such guilt.

More importantly, Shylock functions to impede friendship. On a literal level he is out to destroy Antonio, thereby destroying the spiritual love relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. But Shylock's challenge to love and friendship runs deeper. Shylock's usury is the antithesis to the dealings that shape friendship.¹⁰ Antonio asks him: "When did friendship take/A breed for barren metal of his friend" (I, iii, 134-5). Shylock creates bonds between men that are inversions of true bonds—those formed by love. His offering of the "merry bond" out of "friendship" is a parody of all that true friendship involves, the willingness to give to the "utmost", even to the point of death, expecting nothing in return.

Finally, Shakespeare places Shylock as an obstacle to divine love, mercy. He refuses Portia's plea, declaring: "My deeds upon my head! I crave the law" (IV, i, 206). Having appealed to justice, Shylock is indeed given justice. If it is not nominated in the bond that there be a surgeon at hand, it is not

nominated in the bond that blood may be shed. Shylock, refusing the spirit of mercy, demanding the letter of the law, is trapped by the literal letter. He, and the audience, are shown that Portia is right; none of us would see salvation in the course of justice. Mercy is then allowed to operate, and it does through the duke and Antonio.

With his defeat in Act IV, Shylock is properly dismissed from the play. The obstacles he posed to all sorts of love have been overcome. What remains is the need to resolve the tensions that still exist among these varieties of love. Shakespeare manages to do this through his handling of the ring plot.

In Act V, as soon as the problem of the missing rings comes up there is trouble in the domestic world of Belmont. At the lowest sexual level, if the men have lost their rings, the women declare that they have lost theirs (their virginity) to other men. In the midst of the quarrel, Antonio noting his responsibility, states to Portia:

I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly.

(V, i, 251-253)

Antonio is willing to enter into another bond, this time pledging his soul rather than his life. Again friendship is presented as giving to the uttermost. In quick response, Portia accepts his bond, re-establishes the marriage, and apparently offers her husband mercy: "Then you shall be his surety. Give him this/And bid him keep it better than the other" (V, i, 254-255). Antonio then passes the ring to Bassanio who recognizes it immediately and the plot is soon resolved.

Yet the ring is first given to Antonio by Portia and then given by him to Bassanio. It is as if all three characters are bound by it to the varieties of love presented in the play. Indeed, the ring seems to represent all aspects of love. It is clearly a sexual symbol; it was given in marriage; it was given up out of friendship; and it is returned in mercy to a husband who did break a bond. The ring has become a token of every facet of love that Shylock would obstruct. What is created at the end of the play is the true "merry bond" of love that contains all the characters, and all the aspects of love, within its symbolic ring. Bound in a proper triangle, the love of Bassanio and Antonio thrives as well as the love of Portia and Bassanio. And Gratiano will have his night in bed. Ultimately, Nerissa's ring of love is far stronger than Shylock's bond of hate.

NOTES

1. "Portia and *The Merchant of Venice*, the Gentle Bond", *MLQ*, XXVIII (March, 1967), 261.
2. "The Rival Lovers in *The Merchant of Venice*", *SQ*, XXI (Spring, 1970), 109.
3. Hyman, p. 109.
4. All citations in my text are to Hardin Craig, ed., *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1961).
5. J. Middleton Murry, *Shakespeare* (London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd., 1936), p. 192. Murry is commenting upon the New Cambridge editors' description of Jessica in their introduction to the play.
6. Such is the attitude of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch. In an effective essay H. Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), II, denies the charge.
7. For a discussion of homosexuality as the cause see John D. Hurrell, "Love and Friendship in *The Merchant of Venice*", *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, IV (1961), 328-341.
8. Bertrand Evans comments: "Shylock leaves the scene knowing he has deceived no one . . . the Christians know that the Jew would destroy the merchant if he could, and Shylock knows that they know". *Shakespeare's Comedies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 49.
9. John R. Cooper, "Shylock's Humanity", *SQ*, XXI (Spring, 1970), 121, describes Shylock's rejection in the following terms: "His is the ironical situation in which St. Paul, in the epistle to the Romans, sees the Jews who have made the great rejection. They are condemned by the very Law in which they place their trust."
10. Herbert Bronstein has noted: "There is abundant evidence that Shakespeare feared the motive of material gain . . . lest it subvert the values of loyalty for its own sake, friendship, and custom-forged and time--honored allegiances . . ." "Shakespeare, the Jews, and *The Merchant of Venice*", *SQ*, XX (Winter, 1969), 7.