

“The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind”: Reimagining Community in Shakespeare’s

The Merchant of Venice

By

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In sooth, I know not why I am so sad,
It wearies me, you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn;
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me
That I have much ado to know myself. (1.1.1-7)

With these lines, *The Merchant of Venice* begins, but doesn't quite open. We are immediately greeted with Antonio's foreclosure of knowledge of himself from himself, from the other characters, and from us. His sadness becomes quickly identifiable as melancholy—an inexplicable, impenetrable disease barring elucidation and understanding. The knowledge of melancholy's transmission ("how I caught it, found it, or came by it"), its substance ("what stuff 'tis made of), and its origin ("whereof it is born") are all precluded and become a barrier that prevents communion between himself and his surrounding male Christian homosocial community.¹ The responses of the people with whom he ostensibly shares a communion do not speak in a vocabulary that can reach him: Salerio and Solanio project their own mercantilist anxieties on Antonio, Gratiano accuses him of putting on a calculated pose, and Bassanio merely asks him for another loan. However, it is unexpectedly through the disquieting, disorienting terms of the bond that Shylock and Antonio enter into, with Shylock's insistence on a pound of Antonio's flesh as remittance for an unpaid debt, that Shylock speaks a kind of language Antonio

¹ I am using "homosocial" in the way Eve Sedgwick has conceptualized this term as "the whole spectrum of bonds between men, including friendship, mentorship, rivalry, institutional subordination, homosexual genality, and economic exchange—within which various forms of the traffic in women take place" (227). See Eve Sedgwick, "Sexualism and the Citizen of the World: Wycherley, Sterne and Male Homosocial Desire," *Critical Inquiry*, 11 (1984). For a more extended discussion, see her *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

understands—these fierce adversaries form a contract of reciprocal understanding and genuine communion that those other bonds cannot.

In this essay, I argue that the bond between Shylock and Antonio, one easily dismissible as destructive, violent, and hostile, is unexpectedly intimate, vulnerable, and desirable. Through the terms of the bond, *The Merchant of Venice* mobilizes an imaginative possibility that cannot be naturalized as an idyllic reparative transaction, but rather suggests that there is something about the mutually-willed spillage of blood and infliction of wounds that precipitates a genuine fellowship between individuals. Antonio's impenetrable melancholia both desires and incites violence against his integral being, while the correlative consumptive desire on Shylock's end can be read as a fierce hunger to enter into a true interpersonal union, an intrusion on the comic surface of the play's discourse which intimates a radical reimagining of the communal undergirding the inadequate social orthodoxy of the play. Drawing from Bataille's self-proposed law that human beings are only united to each other through rents and wounds and that a rip, a loss of integrity to the isolated, whole individual, is necessary to contribute something to the notion of communion, I argue that Antonio and Shylock forge a communion that refuses idealization—one founded on shared risk with the always-looming potential of both self- and other-directed destruction. The terms of the bond bring to the fore of the supposedly seamless intra-social Venetian community a vocabulary of intimacy predicated on violence that can no longer remain suppressed.

Cleft Community

The Merchant of Venice reveals a fractious paradox within the idea of “community” itself by simultaneously setting in motion a community we might understand as “sociality” and one that we might understand as “communion”. The orthodox sociality of this Venetian community

is well-articulated by the Elizabethan social theorist Thomas Smith who defines a commonwealth as “a societie of common doing of a multitude of free men, collected together, and united by common accord and covenantes among themselves, for the conservation of themselves aswell in peace as in warre” (10). This narrow conception of community posits a group of peoples viewed collectively due to a shared belief system in which “*common* accord and covenantes” forged between similarly-minded men forms its basis, or how I envision the Venetian community at the beginning of the play. What knits the commonwealth together is a shared prioritization of “conservation”, not only of the status quo, but also of the individual’s recognizable subjectivity, and a shared understanding to invariably act in accordance with the will of the community which is ostensibly codified in its laws. Similarly, the Venetian community creates this kind of artificial, reductive, and violently homogenizing social order where its members are expected to act in accord with culturally inscribed affective ideals of “Christian mercy and love” (Garrett 36). As presented in the trial scene, the law is presupposed by an assumption that all members will conform to the principles of mercy. Both Portia and the Duke insist upon Shylock’s participation in this mode of community, even as they express his position outside of it: “Then must the Jew be merciful” (4.1.182) and “We all expect a gentle answer, Jew” (4.1.34). To borrow Janet Adelman’s formulation, Shylock functions here not as “the stranger outside Christianity but the original stranger within it” (7). He is “expect[ed]” and “must” be forced into the cognitive and experiential space of homogeneity in order to maintain the integrity of this conservative, safe, and contained sociality.

The bond forged between Shylock and Antonio emerges as an alternative possibility of community as radical communion that refuses assimilation into Venice’s orthodox sociality. Bataille’s proposed “law” gives us a vocabulary to describe Antonio and Shylock’s bond of flesh

where their radical communion comprises a mutual desire to risk their individual subjectivities² and participate in an intimate, real engagement which “corresponds to excess, to an exuberance of forces...*independent of consequences*” (*On Nietzsche* 17, emphasis in original). Communion has radical transformation and total vulnerability as its main objective; its members are not concerned with the preservation of themselves or of others, but rather what potentialities may emerge from an excessive fusion of individual forces. Those in communion sacrifice their autonomous subjectivities as viable members of society to create a new, agglutinated being. While Smith argues that “if one man had as some of the old Romanes had v. thousande or x. thousande bondmen whom he ruled well, though they dwelled all in one citie...yet that were no common wealth: for the bondman hath no communion with his master,” this is precisely the kind of communion that Shylock and Antonio’s bond precipitates and reveals as possible (10). These two antagonists willingly establish a contract of debt, risk, and unbalanced power dynamics—a debtor unreservedly bound to his lender with the potentialities for perilous consequences. Antonio and Shylock’s bond of flesh is thus incomprehensible to the Venetian community for the Venetians can only understand community in terms of sociality and refuse to engage other possibilities that unequivocally violate what is ideally thought of as community. They speak in a language of commonness, homogeneity, and preservation, refusing to legitimate, much less engage, in a language of risk, wounds, and expenditure of one’s autonomous, individual subjectivity. The disjuncture between community as sociality and community as communion is exacerbated when both are simultaneously operative. This fractious, fundamentally irreconcilable paradox of community is mobilized most evidently by Antonio’s melancholy. The

² I am using the term “subjectivity” based on the assumption that to occupy a legible place within the social is to remain answerable to the forms of authority which ground it: “to be subject” and “to be subject (to authority)” are more than kin and less than kind. This constitutive sense of subjection is grounded in the fact that the self is always a self-in-society.

divergent responses to Antonio's melancholy that the two models of community elicit constitute a crux in the play where two antithetical discursive modes collide and ultimately converge.

Suppressive Sociality

Antonio's male Christian friends are bound by the language and terms of Venice's orthodox sociality and are only able to understand his sadness through these narrowly circumscribed conditions. Salerio and Solanio suggest that Antonio's sadness is not a mystery at all but a predictable result of the financial insecurity of his risky business ventures.³ Solanio proffers, "Believe me, [Antonio], had I such venture forth/ The better part of my affections would/ Be with my hopes abroad" (1.1.15-7) which Salerio buttresses with "My wind cooling my broth/ Would blow me to an ague when I thought/ What harm a wind too great might do at sea" (1.1.22-4). Henry Turner reads this as a desultory projection of Salerio and Solanio's own mercantilist anxieties on Antonio,⁴ and I agree with the tenet of his argument that expounds the superficiality of their diagnostic response.⁵ Their ability to understand Antonio is delimited by these exteriorized codes of sociality and hence holds stubbornly at the surface. The frippery of

³ The *Merchant of Venice* displays the stereotypical mercantilist anxieties arising from England's economic climate more generally—its developing, capitalist economy characterized by the growth and expansion of urban centers, particularly London, the rise of banking and overseas trade, and industrial growth with its concomitant need for credit and large amounts of capital. See R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1947) and Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution 1603-1714* (New York: Norton, 1982).

⁴ To Norman Rabkin, Salerio and Solanio are "negligible," (90) a judgment that begins to sound like a compliment when compared to Harley Granville-Baker's earlier assessment of them as "the two worst bores in the whole Shakespearean canon; not excepting, even, those other twin brethren in nonentity, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern" (345). Leslie Fiedler echoes Granville-Baker, dismissing the two as an "indistinguishable pair of bores" (90). See Norman Rabkin, "Meaning and Shakespeare," *Shakespeare 1971: Proceedings of the World Shakespeare Congress*, ed. Clifford Leech and J. M. R. Morgan (Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1972); Harley Granville-Baker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947); Leslie Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (New York: Stein, 1972).

⁵ Salerio and Solanio's diagnostic procedure also tellingly resembles Walter Raleigh's in *Skeptic, or Speculation* where he claims that an animal's mind is unknowable from our perspective, yet he simultaneously attempts to reproduce its "inward discourse" by rubbing his own eye to make his perceptions more closely resemble the goat's or the fox's. Maus discusses this procedure to underscore the potential dangers of jurors who "resort to their own inwardness, as they look within their hearts and find a verdict there" (40). While Salerio and Solanio are aware that Antonio's inwardness is proscribed from them, they nevertheless attempt to approximate his subject position in order to discover the cause of his melancholy, just as Raleigh rubs his eyes to see as the goat or fox sees.

their diagnostic procedure can be understood through Burton's explication of the sympathetic response: "To laugh is the proper passion of a man, an ordinary thing to smile; but those counterfeit, composed, affected, artificiall and reciprocall, those counter-smiles, are the dumbe shewes and prognostickes of greater matters, which they most part use, to inveagle and deceive...for they apply it all to themselves" (93). This reliance on the individual's own experience and understanding of the world, especially when that understanding is conscripted by orthodox sociality, regardless of whether or not it stems from empathy, has one's own imaginative capacities as its constitutional limitation. To Salerio and Solanio, bonding with Antonio consists of "counter-smiles"—"counterfeit, composed, affected, artificiall, and reciprocall" responses that participate in a kind of contrived and limited communication where neither party risks its individual integrity and merely superficially projects its own ego on each other. Salerio ends his speech, "Shall I have the thought/ To think on this, and shall I lack the thought/ That such a thing bechanced would make me sad?/ But tell not me. I know Antonio/ Is sad to think about his merchandise" (1.1.36-40). The repetition of "I" and anaphoric use of "Shall I" to introduce rhetorical questions underscores Salerio's dependence on invoking the first-person subject position to communicate with and understand Antonio. His understanding of Antonio's melancholy is conditioned and constrained by his own subjectivity in Venetian society—his sympathetic yet undeniably narcissistic response is the only mode of communication available to him within this prescribed vocabulary of sociality. Salerio's final proclamation, "I know Antonio," is a curious way to address someone whom he ostensibly shares a communion with—rather than speaking to Antonio, he is speaking about Antonio and claims to know Antonio better than Antonio knows his own self. Thus, Salerio and Solanio's empathetic projections operate on a discursive register inadequate to probe beyond Antonio's

melancholic surface and communicate with him on intermutual terms. Accordingly, Antonio responds to their diagnosis with a curt “Believe me, no” (1.1.41).

However, what lies just beneath the surface of Salerio and Solanio’s superficial projections is a repressed vocabulary of violence and wounding that begs to be literalized but remains forcibly obstructed by exteriorized codes of sociality. I am particularly interested in the metaphor Salerio uses, not only to explain the reason behind, but to describe the state of Antonio’s melancholic body. The constitutive blankness and impenetrability of Antonio’s melancholy forecloses all possibility of communication as long as he remains untouched and unbreached. In his speech explaining the cause of Antonio’s sadness, Salerio states:

Should I go to church
And see the holy edifice of stone
And not bethink me straight of dangerous rocks
Which, touching but my gentle vessel’s side,
Would scatter all her spices on the stream,
Enrobe the roaring waters with my silks
And, in a word, but even now worth this,
And now worth nothing? (1.1.29-36)

Salerio’s image of a loaded merchant vessel bursting open and revealing, while simultaneously losing, its contents appropriately figures the task of meaningful communication itself: the rock pierces the sturdy side of the ship, penetrating to the treasured content within, making it readily accessible yet also emptying it of value. As Janet Adelman argues, Salerio’s speech “images Antonio’s body as a container of riches—its own variant of infinite riches in a little room—made visible only by the touch that would annihilate him (118). Because the body of the melancholic

was understood at the time as a somatic state of humoral excess whose interiority could literally be fleshed out, Antonio's body is imagined as a physical inner space that can actually be opened up and formally anatomized to see where the imbalance of fluids is concentrated. Antonio's body then is proleptically imagined and marked as a site for corporeal annihilation in order to be known, yet this kind of interpersonal intimacy dependent on an interrelational violence is only obliquely hinted at at the level of metaphor. Antonio's Christian friends unerringly insist on a vocabulary of sociality even when a vocabulary of violence and wounding subtends all their social transactions within the play.

Gratiano, too, proposes his own explanation for Antonio's melancholy, exhorting him not to use the stagnant, impenetrable face of melancholy as some do to appear venerable and wise whilst containing nothing within:

There are a sort of men whose visages
Do cream and mantle like a standing pond,
And do a willful stillness entertain
With purpose to be dressed in an opinion
Of wisdom, gravity, profound conceit...
I do know of these
That should therefore only are reputed wise
For saying nothing, when I am very sure,
If they should speak, would almost damn those ears
Which, hearing them, would call their brothers fools. (1.1.88-91, 95-9).

Under Gratiano's superficial, comic register lurks this same sinister vocabulary of violence that undergirded Salerio's previous speech. Gratiano accuses Antonio of exploiting the melancholic

trope, creating the illusion of interior depth and profound knowledge beneath an impenetrable, stagnant surface intended to entice. In his view, the “standing pond” exterior of melancholy is not only inaccessible but is deliberately deceitful.⁶ The treachery of his stoic, melancholic exterior is figured as a premeditated affront that not only justifies but actually *incites* violence against it in a desire to find the supposed truths beneath this deliberate deception.⁷ Drew Daniel astutely observes that “being known, being open, and being destroyed” are all brought into a charged proximity at the very beginning of the play, and I argue that Antonio’s melancholy is an instigation for these destructive desires of others though they remain latent, proscribed imaginative possibilities for all who communicate in the suppressive vocabulary of sociality (211).

Gratiano’s explanation is further supplemented by fishing imagery as his final request to Antonio is to “fish not with this melancholy bait/ For this fool gudgeon, this opinion” (1.1.101-2). Gratiano’s advice imagines Antonio’s body as bait for others’ consumption, as though Antonio is purposefully dangling his melancholic body as a tantalizing lure prompting others to know his interior, proleptically setting up his corporeal body for destruction once again. Yet in a community where such desires and interpersonal relations grounded in a language of violence, risk, and death are socially illegible, it is inevitable that his friends’ attempts to discover and cure his melancholy fail to truly penetrate the surface and reach him. These Venetian Christian

⁶ Shakespeare repeatedly places imagery of deceptive surface and hidden truth in the mouths of melancholics (see Hamlet’s obsessive images of morbidity and infection concealed beneath the bodily surface) and there is much attention paid to the interior/exterior difference within *The Merchant of Venice* itself. For example, Antonio speaks of Shylock: “The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose./ An evil soul producing holy witness/ Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,/ A goodly apple rotten at the heart./ O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!” (1.3.94-8). The lack of correspondence between interior nature and exterior show is also what drives the casket test and leads to the Prince of Morocco choosing the gold casket.

⁷ This task closely mirrors that of exegesis, which, as Frank Kermode notes, “is to penetrate the surface and reveal a secret sense; to show what is concealed in what is proclaimed.” See Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, 1979), x.

gentlemen remain obstinately opposed to and willfully ignorant of forging a communion with Antonio in the way their vocabulary pregnant with violence intimates. While their metaphors may hint at the prerequisite of risks and costs for communion, they persist in ignoring and extricating their interpersonal relationships from this submerged discourse of intimate violence.

The relationship between Antonio and Bassanio is the play's primary example of Christian amity and community, but Bassanio, too, can only speak and understand Antonio on a discursive register of sociality that inevitably fails to reach him. Bassanio responds to Antonio's melancholy by requesting a subsidy for his hyper-orthodox courtship plot, blindly disregarding Antonio's sadness and precarious state of his finances.⁸ Yet the language surrounding this loan is once again charged with violence and ruin. Antonio confesses his financial limitations: "Thou know'st that all my fortunes are at sea,/ Neither have I money nor commodity/ To raise a present sum" (1.1.177-9). Regardless, Antonio agrees to fund Bassanio by taking on the debt himself: "Therefore go forth—/ Try what my credit can in Venice do; That shall be racked even to the uttermost/ To furnish thee to Belmont to fair Portia" (1.1.177-82). Antonio encourages Bassanio, a self-professed prodigal, to solicit Antonio for another loan in a manner that invites self-ruin: "My purse, my person, my extremest means/ Lie all unlocked to your occasions" (1.1.138-9).⁹ While many critics have commented on the homoerotic suggestiveness of Antonio's metaphor and the potential intensity of same-sex male bonds, I want to draw attention to the actual

⁸ This turn to courtship and marriage at the expense of friendship fits precisely into the behaviors of a burgeoning system of alliance in which, as Lorna Hutson puts it, "the contracting of matrimony will ensure productive social relations" (70-1). Marriage to an endlessly wealthy lady will allow the gentlemen to avoid the awkward scene of plying a merchant for loans in a discourse that turns on an assertion of exact similitude. It is only on the terms of pursuing a hyper-orthodox, heterosexual courtship plot can Bassanio communicate with Antonio. See Lorna Hutson, *The Usurer's Daughter: Male Friendship and Fictions of Women in Sixteenth-Century England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁹ Engle has described the inverse debt relation between Antonio and Bassanio as resembling "that between Citibank and Zaire, whereby the creditor, by the magnitude of the investment, becomes the thrall of the debtor, who can cause ruin by defaulting on or repudiating the debt" (83). See Lars Engle, "Money and Moral Luck in *The Merchant of Venice*." *Shakespearean Pragmatism: Market of His Time*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993. 77-106.

language of opening, excess, ruin, and intimacy that percolates in the giving of this subsidy.¹⁰

Antonio's language portends his own bodily suffering, which will indeed be racked "to the uttermost" to furnish Bassanio, but Bassanio can't even recognize this mode of social transaction or communicate reciprocally in this vocabulary.

Although Salerio and Solanio's, Gratiano's, and Bassanio's reactions to Antonio's sadness are quite different, it is interesting to note the consistent yet forcibly obstructed vocabulary of violence and image of Antonio's body that runs through these communicative transactions: a body that must be breached in order to be known. Both Salerio's and Gratiano's unusual choices of imagery posit Antonio as a closed body that must be penetrated and consequently annihilated before true communion can be achieved (a rich merchant vessel that must be pierced by a rock and a still pond that must be fished in); and Bassanio, too, is told that Antonio's "person" lies all unlocked to Bassanio. Yet, Salerio, Solanio, Gratiano, and Bassanio's conceptions of Antonio's melancholic body that requires violent penetration for intimacy remain stubbornly at the level of metaphor, precluded from their working vocabulary of sociality and

¹⁰ I both build on and diverge from these homoerotic readings of Antonio and Bassanio by defining intimacy in this way. My focus is on the violent discursive register invoked by the play's characters when describing both homoerotic and communal bonds and introducing the bond between Antonio and Shylock as a dangerous, threatening homoerotic alternative to the Antonio and Bassanio dynamic. For key works that focus on homoeroticism in *The Merchant of Venice*, see James L. O'Rourke, "Racism and Homophobia in *The Merchant of Venice*," *ELH* 70.2 (2003): 375-397. O'Rourke argues that when Antonio offers Bassanio free access to his "person", the audience is set up to believe that they have spotted "one of them," an Italian sodomite, and that his status as an exemplary Christian is clouded by his status as a "semi-covert homosexual [who] is excluded from the center of the social structure" (379). Seymour Kleinberg calls Antonio "the earliest portrait of the homophobic homosexual," and suggests that Antonio projects his self-loathing onto the stigmatized figure of the Jew "in a classic pattern of psychological scapegoating" (120). See Seymour Kleinberg, "The Merchant of Venice: The Homosexual as Anti-Semite in Nascent Capitalism," *Journal of Homosexuality* 8 (Spring/Summer 1983). Daniel interprets the contract Antonio scripts with Shylock as one designed to produce a certain kind of helplessness in Bassanio that ports subjection outward to this viewer, bringing him into affective alignment with the scene he watches. This very helplessness forces Bassanio to suffer a mimetic desire to take Antonio's place, and thus to avow the same feeling as his friend. See Drew Daniel, "Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will": Melancholy Epistemology and Masochistic Fantasy in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61.2 (2010): 206-234. While these critics draw our attention to the thinly veiled homoeroticism undergirding the Antonio/Bassanio relationship, I am more interested in how Antonio's excessive, homoerotic attachment to Bassanio must be directed elsewhere and finds its outlet in the terms of the bond, for this kind of same-sex love and connection cannot be accommodated nor understood in terms of Venetian sociality.

therefore impossible to be realized. The Christian male homosocial community can only speak of Antonio's body as one that desires its own self-destruction in a tropological register; they determinedly impede the notion of self-expenditure at the expense of self-preservation from ever coming to fruition as a radical possibility of communion. Their interactions with Antonio are profoundly invested in maintaining and perpetuating homosocial relations of sanctioned economic exchange that enable Venetian sociality to function, refusing to engage with the violent register that lies furtively in wait beneath the surface.

Provocative Melancholy

Introduced and self-proclaimed as a melancholic, Antonio's bodily integrity is inextricably intertwined with his psychological state of mind and both are presented as resolutely intact and unbreachable.¹¹ This kind of indomitable psycho-somatic impasse seems entirely antithetical to Bataille's theorization of true communion.¹² While Bataille "propose[s] to admit, as a law, that human beings are only united with each other through rents or wounds...If elements are put together to form a whole, this can easily happen when each one loses, through a rip in its integrity, a part of its own being, which goes to benefit the communal being," this necessary rip or wound that constitutes genuine communion seems a foreclosed possibility for Antonio at the start of the play (*Visions of Excess* 251). Yet it unfolds that his seemingly impermeable melancholy is an unexpected precondition for fomenting a language of violence, penetration, and communion that subtends the Venetian community and is only explicitly brought to the fore through the terms of Shylock's bond.

¹¹ During a period when humoral theory dominated Western medicine, it was widely believed by both physicians and the public that the body and the psyche coincided: the bodily humors of black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm had their correlative psychological temperaments of melancholic, sanguine, choleric, and phlegmatic. For more on early modern melancholy and medicine, see J. Bos, "The Rise and Decline of Character: Humoral Psychology in Ancient and Early Modern Medical Theory." *History of the Human Sciences* 22.3 (2009), esp. 29.

¹² This kind of "egotistic folding back into the self" of the melancholic would evoke the "greatest condemnation" from Bataille, for it is precisely the manifestation of the "absence of 'communication'" (*On Nietzsche* 19).

The current critical consensus on melancholy in early modern England favors a Galenic definition of atrabilious disease as an embodied humoral condition, a pathology of inward fluid imbalance and outward symptom.¹³ But what is most notable about this disease is that although its symptoms are readily palpable and therefore easily discernible, it is impossible to discover, much less understand, its cause from an outside-the-body perspective. Burton's central tenet of this atrabilious disease, defined in the *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), is as follows: "a kind of dotage without a feaver, having for his ordinary companions, feare, and sadnesse, *without any apparent occasion*" (162, emphasis mine). This disease may be better understood through the concept of inwardness as it was perceived in the English Renaissance;¹⁴ Katharine Maus notes that the question of "what relation holds between the overt and the covert, the visible effect and the invisible cause" was a considerable preoccupation and that social life demanded the constant practice of induction, or what the physician John Cotta calls "artificial conjecture."¹⁵ reasoning from the superficial to the deep, from the effect to the cause, from seeming to being.¹⁶

Melancholy thus underscores the epistemological limitations of outward observers who are

¹³ For more on the clinical predominance of Galenism during this period, see Douglas Trevor, *The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004); and Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004). In regards to the portrayal of Antonio's melancholy specifically, it may also be useful to return to the Aristotelian model of genial melancholy: the claim that melancholy provides the subject with access to the truth. See Aristotle, "Book XXX: Problems Connected with Prudence, Intelligence, and Wisdom," in *Problemata*, ed. E. S. Forster, vol. 7 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), esp. 953-33; and Lawrence Babb, *The Elizabethan Malady: A Study of Melancholia in English Literature from 1580 to 1642* (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1951), esp. 58-72. Babb traces the tension between melancholy's Galenic definition as a pathology and its genial, Aristotelian definition as an index of unique personal distinction.

¹⁴ While Maus focuses most of her analysis on courtroom scenes of witchcraft and treason which are tasked to "trace the observable evidence back to its supposed origin in the [accused's] inscrutable inward perversity," I see direct parallels between these essentially invisible crimes and the disease of melancholy which relies on outward public symptoms to discover inward, private cause (39).

¹⁵ See John Cotta, *The Trial of Witchcraft, Shewing the True and Right Method of Their Detection* (London, 1616).

¹⁶ I also find it useful to think about melancholy and the anxieties it dredges up between inward cause and outward symptom by thinking about how this disease may circulate within what Lacey Baldwin Smith has characterized as the "paranoid mode" of English Renaissance political life: "the conviction that things are never as they appear to be—a greater and generally more sinister reality exists behind the scenes—and the corollary that what is standing hidden in the wings, prompting, manipulating, but always avoiding exposure to the footlights, is the presence of evil" (36). See *Treason in Tudor England: Politics and Paranoia* (Princeton, N.J., 1986).

barred from communicating with and understanding the sufferer.¹⁷ Consequently, melancholy's epistemological deadlock of prohibited but possible meanings draws both readers outside the text and characters within the text into a collaborative dynamic to find the therapeutic cause of a disease whose very definition rests on its resistance to being known. While I want to be careful not to translate Antonio's melancholy into Freudian melancholia automatically, I do believe that Freud's simile of melancholia as an open wound can help to inform my reading of Antonio's melancholy and the kind of morbid fascination and collaborative dynamic it inspires.¹⁸ As Freud states in *Mourning and Melancholia*, "the complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energies—which in the transference neuroses we have called 'anticathexes'—from all directions, and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished" (253).¹⁹ Although Freud uses this analogy to describe how the actual complex of melancholia draws in all surrounding cathectic energies until the ego is exhausted, I argue that the patient of melancholia behaves in a very similar way. By exhibiting the symptoms of melancholia and all its epistemological ambiguity, Antonio's melancholic body already behaves as an open wound, drawing in spectators who desire a reliable means of communication and understanding. This melancholic physical impenetrability that "do[es] cream and mantle like a standing pond" begs to be pierced, penetrated, and fleshed out in a violent, real, somatic way.

¹⁷ It is no coincidence that the play culminates in a trial scene where it is arguably Antonio's melancholy that is put on public trial. As Maus notes, "[The early modern English] trial is a paradigm of all social relations that seem to rely upon a more or less highly developed capacity for accurate surmise" (41).

¹⁸ The collapse of early modern melancholy into Freudian melancholia has coincided with canonical acknowledgments of psychoanalysis's reductions and biases, the historical, cultural, and hermeneutic horizons of what Derrida was already calling in 1979 "these extremely old matters." See Jacques, Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume I*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007), 129-42.

¹⁹ Another fruitful analogy for Antonio's melancholy is drawn out by Kristeva who argues that "the metaphor of the 'black Sun' for melancholy admirably evokes the blinding intensity of an affect eluding conscious elaboration" (10). Once again, an outward sign of impenetrability (the black, opaque exterior) is paradoxically what signifies and draws people in to discover a blinding interior which evades any human understanding. The continuity of this idea exists between the understandings of early modern melancholy, Freudian melancholia, and post-Freudian melancholia. See Julia Kristeva, "On the Melancholic Imaginary," *New Formations* 3 (1987).

Violent, Intimate Desires

Antonio's melancholy is both an invitation to a kind of intimacy founded on violence and risk—a provocation to drastic interrelation precipitating the annihilative desires of others—and a precondition of his *own* desire for self-destruction. As Julia Kristeva posits in “On the Melancholic Imaginary,” “the narcissistic ambivalence of the melancholic affect alone finds, in order to represent itself, the image of death as the ultimate site of desire” (10).²⁰ The ambivalent excess of psychical energy demands a complete annihilating expenditure; Antonio desires his own bodily rupturing, opening, and death in order to be “represent[able]” and legible to his community. Antonio's anagnorisis occurs precisely at the extraordinary moment he cries, “Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will,” when he discovers that his desire for being known, being understood, and being legible to his surrounding community in a way that feels to him like true communion exceeds his desire for self-preservation (4.1.82).²¹

Yet the only character who speaks in a vocabulary that Antonio understands and who is willing to form a communion that is costly, angry, and decidedly not ideal is Shylock, the Jew.²²

²⁰ For further reading on Kristeva's formulation of melancholy not as an illness to be corrected with drugs, but as a discourse to be listened to and analyzed which simultaneously builds upon and departs from the insights of Freud, see Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

²¹ Luke Wilson argues that in Antonio's actions, the play's Christian ethic of risk is shown to be “obscene, narcissistic, and perversely self-destructive”—the merchant's failure to insure his ships in the first place is “not only masochistic but antisocial too” (33). See Luke Wilson, “Monetary Compensation for Injuries to the Body, A.D. 602-1697.” *Money and the Age of Shakespeare: Essays in New Economic Criticism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 19-37. Although Antonio's self-destructive desires may indeed be antisocial, I argue that they are antisocial only in their realization of intrasocial violent desires and cannot operate in a contained realm of orthodox sociality. Rather than viewing his desire for violence and wounding as narcissistic, I believe that he pursues this desire as a sacrifice for entering into radical communion where his desires may be understood and reciprocated rather than viewed as obscene and illegible.

²² The Jews occupied a paradoxical subject position in Venetian society: they were simultaneously needed and hated by Venetian society, both a source of salvation for the Christians and markers of sin. As historian Brian Pullan observes, “The Venetians had consistently combined the attitude of ritual contempt for the Jews with a shrewd and balanced appreciation of their economic utility...Jews were deemed to be [in Venice in the 16th century] for the sole purpose of saving Christians from committing the sin of usurious lending” (121). See Brian Pullan. *The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice, 1550-1670*. Totowa: Barnes & Noble Books, 1983.

Shylock's sadistic desire to harm and rip apart Antonio's body is extra-social, only in the sense that it realizes the injurious potential of the intrasocial. His desires for violence appear irrational and excessive, but they merely substantiate the submerged violent vocabulary undergirding all social interactions. Shylock threatens to literalize what were previously only metaphors in the minds of the socialized Christian gentlemen. For instance, Shylock's justification for desiring Antonio's corporeal body and death above all else is revealed in his reaction to the news that Antonio's ships have been lost:

Salerio: Why, I am sure, if he forfeit, thou wilt not take/ his flesh. What's that good for?

Shylock: To bait fish withal. (3.1.48-50)

The promised extraction of the pound of flesh portends to horrifically literalize Gratiano's previous metaphor of "fishing with melancholy bait" as Shylock imagines himself literally baiting fishhooks with the mutilated fragments of Antonio's melancholic body. Using the same fishing imagery, Shylock's remark both echoes and confirms Gratiano's prior insight that the melancholic uses his body deliberately as bait, dangling it before others and provoking them with the tantalizing possibility of knowing his interior secret. However, the more compelling interpretation of this remark in relation to bodies engendering or still remaining in communication even after death is the way that Shylock sees the possibility of how the dead can be used productively to form interconnections.²³ Although the text opens itself up to the possibility of an anti-Semitic reading of this remark by displaying the avaricious capacity of Jews to extract a surplus of capital from dead matter, I take his desire to fish with Antonio's dead body as a means to keep said body in circulation and communication—a radical post-mortem

²³ The anti-Semitic reading of this remark could detect a certain Jewish literalism (Shylock voices not a metaphor about fishing but an actual plan to fish) and "Jewish thrift" (as Shylock sees it, even the dead can be put to work).

practice of utility and intimacy that all others in Venetian community are horrified by.²⁴ Yet, it is through the terms of the bond that Shylock is able to imagine harnessing and utilizing the excess of Antonio's body in death to sustain other life—Shylock figures the bits of dead flesh as a synecdoche symbolizing Antonio's whole body whose work of contagion and communication in death is paradoxically more fruitful than Antonio's body in life. While a "standing pond" of melancholy can only "cream and mantle," existing only by and for itself, the terms of the bond engender a newfound vocabulary that in its excess and fever must necessarily extend. Although Salerio regards flesh as worthless, excremental matter, Shylock discovers the possibility of continuing transaction and social bonds through Antonio's dead body, a kind of sacrificial frenzy that will infect the community.

Shylock thus invokes an entirely new and disquieting register of violence, destruction, and consumption that radically disrupts and imperils orthodox sociality. Bataille argues that human beings under the necessity to communicate are "compelled to *will* evil and defilement, which, by risking the being within them, renders them mutually penetrable each to the other" (*On Nietzsche* 25, emphasis in original). Shylock, therefore, *wills* Antonio's bodily destruction and death as a precondition to their communion. His lust for revenge is not simply to harm or kill Antonio but is consistently depicted as a kind of *hunger* of the soul, a violent desire to consume the other and forge a communion on the most basic level of bodily incorporation. Several lines in the play articulate Shylock's desperate longing to penetrate surfaces that registers more as

²⁴ The stereotype of Jews as greedy usurious lenders can be seen in Martin Luther's exhortation of their character: "[The Jews'] breath stinks with lust for the Gentiles' gold and silver; for no nation under the sun is greedier than they were, still are, and always will be, as is evident from their accursed usury... They live among us, enjoy our shield and protection, they use our country and our highways, our markets and streets. Meanwhile our princes and rulers... let the Jews, by means of their usury, skin and fleece them and their subjects and make them beggars with their own money." See Martin Luther, *About the Jews and Their Lies*, 1543.

hunger for Antonio's physical devaluation than as sexual lust.²⁵ For example, Shylock tells the perplexed Salerio that "If [Antonio's flesh] will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge" (3.1.50-1); similarly, Shylock declares "I will have the heart of him" (1.1.119-20) and subsequently tells Antonio "Your worship was the last man in our mouths" (1.3.57). There is a kind of hunger here to rip, feed, and consume that conceptually substantiates the violent potential of the intrasocial—a new vocabulary has been invoked that allows for the consumption, destruction, and fusion of individual subjectivities.²⁶ Moreover, the repeated images of feeding on and consuming Antonio's body underscores the permeability of bodily boundaries in social interactions. Shylock is able to imagine incorporating Antonio's body into his own bodily constitution, partaking in the most intimate kind of communion where cannibalism mystifies loss and boundaries between autonomous individuals. The violent vocabulary of Shylock's unexpected desire for Antonio's "fair flesh" enervates the superficial discourse of sociality, exteriorizing the latent concepts of risk, exposure, and annihilation that constitutes genuine communion. Bataille's formulations reveal not only the bodily risks but also the potential ethical and even spiritual costs one must endure to engender true communion. His paradigm gives us a purposive vocabulary to describe Shylock and Antonio's fiercely adversarial relationship that is not only understandable, but posited as a seemingly paradoxical yet still viable means of true communion. Both Shylock and Antonio are deeply invested in the other's devaluation: Antonio

²⁵ Antonio's homoerotic desires have been the subject of many critical essays about the play: Alan Sinfield posits Antonio as a prototype of the pining homoerotic lover in "How to Read *The Merchant of Venice* Without Being Heterosexual" in *Alternative Shakespeares 2*, ed. Terence Hawkes (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 122-39. Catherine Belsey also contends that we may "reduce the metaphysical burden of Antonio's apparently unmotivated melancholy to disappointed homoerotic desire" ("Love in Venice," *Shakespeare Survey* 44 [1992]: 41-53). However, I want to draw attention, not to the cause of Antonio's melancholy which posits Bassanio as the lost object of love, but to the intimate and violent discursive registers and desires that his melancholy provokes.

²⁶ I want to emphasize that I do recognize the sadist/masochist dynamic at work here between Shylock and Antonio: Shylock's fierce desire for Antonio's flesh and Antonio's correlative desire for his own torture and death clearly fit this sadist/masochist paradigm. However, what I am more interested in is how their fierce hatred for each other may be unexpectedly necessary to engender true communication as posited by Bataille.

publicly spits on, verbally reviles, and kicks Shylock while Shylock explicitly calls for Antonio's flesh (and implicit death). Their communion takes the form of a shared active will for defiling, devaluing, and wishing evil on the other, which the play unexpectedly authorizes and validates.

Consent and Reciprocity

Moreover, it is important to look at Shylock and Antonio together, their mutual participation and voluntary consent in engendering true communion, specifically through the terms of the bond. Many critics have focused on the bond of flesh and how it illuminates the homoerotic relationship between Antonio and Bassanio: Keith Geary observes that Antonio's desperate bond with Shylock is his way of holding on to Bassanio in a heteronormative community;²⁷ Lawrence W. Hyman argues that when Portia saves Antonio's life, she is preventing what would have been a spectacular case of the "greater love" referred to in the bible,²⁸ when a man lays down his life for his friend;²⁹ and Coppélia Kahn reads the play through a particular brand of Shakespearean psychology where "men first seek to mirror themselves in a homoerotic attachment...then to confirm themselves through difference, a bond with the opposite sex—the marital bond" (106). While I recognize the affective force of the Antonio/Bassanio bond, the fixation on Antonio's homoerotic attachment to Bassanio distracts from the postulation of a radical form of communion based on violent intimacy between Antonio and Shylock. The homoeroticism between Antonio and Bassanio who share the obvious conditions of "kind" as Christian may arguably be socially permitted and even sanctioned. I want to take the notion of this bond of flesh away from the Antonio/Bassanio dynamic and redirect it

²⁷ See Geary, Keith. "The Nature of Portia's Victory: Turning to Men in *The Merchant of Venice*." *Shakespeare Survey* (1984): 55-68.

²⁸ See John 15:13.

²⁹ Hyman, Lawrence W. "The Rival Lovers in *The Merchant of Venice*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 21.2 (1970): 109-116. Web.

towards the disruptive and transformative force of the Antonio/Shylock bond—an alternative, dangerous eroticism that cannot be accommodated under the terms of a sanitized, socially-sanctioned desire.

While the bond between Shylock and Antonio is initially entered into as a result of Antonio's supposed magnanimous charity toward and filial love for Bassanio, it is Shylock who transforms it from a strictly economic agreement into one that risks the individual subjectivities of both parties.³⁰ In a maneuver that appears strikingly incongruous with Shylock's stereotypical Jewish avarice,³¹ he offers Antonio a loan at no interest so long as Antonio agrees that he is willing to forfeit basic human needs and violate his individual, somatic integrity: "let the forfeit/ Be nominated for an equal pound/ Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken/ In what part of your body pleaseth me" (1.3.147-50). The forfeiture of a pound of flesh of Shylock's choosing speaks both to control over what is one's own and to individual integrity in the extremist fashion. Shylock's final assertion professes that Antonio's body will be used specifically for his pleasure and that his pleasure consists of destroying it. Bataille's formulation of communion further requires consent given freely and willingly by *both* parties: "[Communication] only replace[s] isolated humanness if there's some consent, if not to annihilation, then to *risking* yourself and, in the same impulse, *risking* other people" (*On Nietzsche* 26, emphasis in original). Communication

³⁰ Critics have established the penalty's economic value. Bailey's essay "Shylock and the Slaves" demonstrates how early modern property law regarded flesh and money "as comparable forms of property" (2) suggesting that Shylock's insistence on the penalty rather than repayment can be understood as fiscally sound in that it is an assertion of his rights as a property owner. See Amanda Bailey, "Shylock and the Slaves: Owing and Owning in *The Merchant of Venice*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62.1 (2011): 1-24. Wilson notes the bond's commensuration of money and flesh is similar to fixed compensation for bodily injury in early insurance (30). See Thomas Wilson, *A Discourse Upon Usurye*. London, 1572. For Kerridge, the excessive nature of Shylock's penalty ultimately renders it usurious, nullifying his claim to interest (8). See Eric Kerridge, *Usury, Interest and the Reformation*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2002.

³¹ English moneylenders were also often described as or compared with Jews since "Judaism" was treated as a synonym for usury; see David Hawkes, *The Culture of Usury in Renaissance England*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, esp. 67-71. The Jewish body has a history of being depicted as monstrously deformed, a grotesque amalgam of male and female, and his lusts—a confusion of greed, sex, and profanity—as sodomitical. See Marc Shell, "The Wether and the Ewe: Verbal Usury in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Kenyon Review* 1 (1979), 65-92.

thus requires the active, shared consent of both parties to risk themselves and others not necessarily to death, but to its risk. Bataille's italicization visually punctuates his emphasis on the consent to risking annihilation, rather than the annihilation itself, establishing the fact that the consent to risking death does not automatically prescribe death. By creating a new, communal being, both individuals must consent to an integral loss, opening themselves up to whatever unpredictable potentialities may result from the destruction of their subjectivities into a creation of a new union. It is not enough to simply acquiesce to the terms and risks of communication, but one must actively *will* this kind of intimate violence. Shylock's consent to enter the contract is presumed by merely being the bondsman who determines the terms of the contract, while Antonio's reciprocal consent can be readily seen in his reply to the new, perilous terms: "I'll seal to such a bond,/ And say there is much kindness in the Jew" (2.1.148-9). While Bassanio protests "You shall not seal to such a bond for me,/ I'll rather dwell in my necessity" (1.3.150-1), Antonio's unexpected, voluntary consent to enter into a contract where his death is a very real possibility reveals Antonio and Shylock's mutual vocabulary and understanding of each other. They recognize that their shared, destructive desires expand, rather than violate, the limits of viable social contract. This is by no means a bond of love or affection in any conventional sense of the term, as can be seen by Bassanio's instantaneous averse reaction, but Shylock's bond finally speaks in a register that Antonio can understand and that he desires. Antonio even goes so far as to say that there is much *kindness* in Shylock's terms—Shylock presents the terms of the bond as kindness and it is received by Antonio as kindness. The scene ends with Antonio's observation, "The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind" (1.3.174). The word "kind" in Renaissance English means not only "compassionate" but "similar" or "akin."³² Through this

³² "kind, *Ib., n.*," The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 14 December 2015 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>.

seemingly innocuous observation that Shylock is growing more benevolent, more Christian, the coded double meaning of “kind” as “akin” reveals the unforeseen likeness and communion between them:³³ Antonio and Shylock speak the same language of intimacy, violence, and risk.³⁴

However, the seemingly one-sided nature of this interchange must be addressed: while the terms of genuine communication may be appropriately set, it appears that there is a distinct wound-er and wound-ee rather than a willingness of both participants to wound themselves and each other and communicate through these mutual lesions. The *Merchant of Venice* invites us to recognize the complexities of risk in a sacrificial context that encompasses both subjectivity and embodied personhood when forming a communion. This shared risk is occasioned by Bataille’s model wherein both parties must be willing to wound themselves just as much as the other:

[Communication between two beings] is fully disclosed only when the other similarly leans over the edge of nothingness or falls into it (dies). ‘Communication’ only takes place between two people who risk themselves, each lacerated and suspended, perched atop a common nothingness. (*On Nietzsche* 20-21)

Bataille argues that to truly communicate with another being requires both participants to lean over the abyss beyond human bounds, the abyss of nothingness, the abyss that is death itself. What Antonio and Shylock’s bond demonstrates is that a meeting point at a site of shared risk

³³ Antonio’s perverse movement toward self-destruction, his solitary position outside of the marriage bond at the play’s conclusion, and the homoerotic nature of his love for Bassanio all link him to the character of Shylock and homologically to conceptions of usury as unnatural generation, or as Mosse writes, “a kinde of Sodomie in nature” (110). See Miles Mosse, *The Arraignment and Conviction of Usurie*. London, 1595. For the link between usury and sodomy, see David Hawkes, *The Culture of Usury in Renaissance England*. New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2010.

³⁴ Their likeness can be further supported by Portia’s oft-quoted question when she first enters the trial scene: “Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?” (4.1.169). Shylock and Antonio are fastened to each other in reciprocity of both affinity and alienation, as two individuals who are willing to sacrifice their viable social subjectivities to achieve communion. For more readings of the parallel between Shylock and Antonio, see Rene Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991, esp. 246-55 and Lars Engle, “Money and Moral Luck in *The Merchant of Venice*.” *Shakespearean Pragmatism: Market of His Time*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993, esp. 87-92.

can be created even if the demands imposed on each participant differ, for as long as both parties are willing to risk their autonomous, segregate subjectivities, then the potential for true communion emerges. By speaking in a language that Antonio understands and can recognize as “kind,” Shylock partakes in his own kind of wounding, binding himself to his fiercest enemy through this instinctive vocabulary of violence that gives way to mutually destructive desires. Shylock deliberately forgoes the practice of usury and instead insists that he will lend to Antonio in “kindness,” that courtesy reserved by the play’s characters for those of their own kind: “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;... This is the *kind* I offer” (1.3.133-7, emphasis mine).³⁵ By proposing a bond of flesh that has the potential to mobilize and realize their antisocial desires, Shylock picks up Antonio’s language of radical interrelationality. Indeed, Shylock’s “merry bond” (1.3.169) is so effectively offered in terms of amity that Antonio recognizes a kinship between them: “[Shylock] grows kind” (1.3.174). The freely-given consent and mutually understood reciprocity in their communicative exchange creates a radical, more dangerously expansive concept of “kind-ness” that the socially-sanctioned Christian “kind” cannot accommodate.

Bound to the Law

Rather than viewing the outcome of the trial scene as an aggressive foreclosure of consummation of the bond of flesh and a violent reinscription of orthodox sociality, we can view

³⁵ That the bond between Shylock and Antonio is an instance of interest rather than usury was observed three decades ago by Walter Cohen: “The crisis of the play arises not from [Shylock’s] insistence on usury, but from his refusal of it. The contrast is between usury, which is immoral...and interest, which is perfectly acceptable...Antonio immediately recognizes that Shylock’s proposal falls primarily into the latter category” (769). See Walter Cohen, “*The Merchant of Venice* and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism.” *English Literary Renaissance* 49.4 (1982): 756-89. However, rather than viewing the easy acceptance of Shylock’s “merry bond” as an instance of where Shylock adopts the play’s Christian model of lending and thus picks up the language of sociability that Antonio can accept, I am arguing that the violent discursive register of the terms of the bond itself is what forms a likeness or kinship between these two adversaries.

the outcome through the radical terms of risk that the bond mobilizes and see how it opens up potential reimaginings of community, initiated during the trial scene and continuing even in its afterlife. Through the terms of the bond, the Venetian community confronts a crisis in the trial scene where the gap between the law and the will of the people is forced into visibility. Shylock and Antonio forge this alternative mode of interacting and transacting that is available within and still consistent with the laws of society. Precisely through adhering to the letter of the law, Antonio and Shylock threaten to realize their dangerous, destructive desires. Their contract of a bond of flesh makes the satisfaction of these desires possible by enabling the disavowal of these antisocial desires under the protective shade of their impersonal formality—the legitimacy of their contract is authorized by its legality. Shylock and Antonio’s socially-illegible desires to violate and destroy their viable social subjectivities is propelled by the regulatory function of the law. The violent yet legal terms of their bond become a catalyst for the recognition of such bonds that are possible that endangers the enclosed and immured complacency of the social world.

In the trial scene, all of the Venetian citizens are bound to the law. While the Duke, Salerio, Bassanio, Gratiano, and Portia all exhort Shylock to be merciful, he refuses to surrender his bond even when offered three times his initial investment and all must watch on helplessly because the bond remains coherent with the community’s laws. Shylock’s speech accumulates a forceful potency as he continues to reiterate, “I stand here on my bond” (4.1.237). When asked by the Duke why he desires a “pound of this poor merchant’s flesh,” Shylock responds: “I give no reason, nor I will not...I am not bound to please thee with my answers” (4.1.22, 58, 64). Shylock is not bound to please others or bound to serve the will of the community—he is only bound to law and the “law doth give [him his bond]” (4.1.295). Shylock has no reason to give for demanding Antonio’s flesh and is aware that his will to violence is born of a “mistress of

passion, sways it to the mood/ Of what it likes or loathes” (4.1.50). As Kathryn Schwarz states, “reason authorizes will to govern the senses and order the soul, but will, ‘the highest and most sovereign virtue of desiring,’ chooses its course with unchecked liberty. This quality of autonomous mediation is the central paradox of will” (28). Shylock’s will for Antonio’s destruction does not answer to reason, is not bound to reason, and while reason may hold the zenithal position in the hierarchy of the faculties, it is his will permissible through the law that overpowers both his reason in act and the “common” will of the surrounding Venetian community. He who stands on the bond is no longer answerable and need no longer listen—the “bond” of interrelationality and insistence on the law in Shylock’s mouth threaten to render the body politic tongue-tied. Shylock becomes the only coherent, consistent voice of the law in this trial scene who resolutely stands for judgment, insusceptible to exhortations of mercy and the superficial language of sociability. Shylock ends this speech with the obligatory demand that the law speak: “The pound of flesh, which I demand of him,/ Is dearly bought; ‘tis mine and I will have it./ If you deny me, fie upon your law:/ There is no force in the decrees of Venice./ I stand for judgement. Answer: shall I have it?” (4.1.100-2).³⁶ Shylock’s demand for the law to answer and faithfully execute its letter puts Venetian law in the awkward position of being aligned with and facilitating his destructive desires. Shylock has demanded and bought Antonio’s flesh and the law gives him the right to own, control, and destroy it. Shylock speaks for a decidedly

³⁶ This is in direct opposition to the way Louis Althusser imagines the power of ideology working: “It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are ‘obviousnesses’) obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot *fail to recognize* and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out (aloud or in the ‘still, small voice of conscious’): ‘That’s obvious! That’s right! That’s true!’” (161, emphasis in original). Although Althusser argues that the true power of ideology is in its internalized “obviousness”—the fact that we innately believe it to be right and true and that no one would fail to view it otherwise—the power of Venetian law is precisely *not* obvious for Shylock. Shylock becomes the threatening site of extreme consistency, literality, questioning, and demand, of forcing the law into a kind of explicitness that makes the law speak for, justify, and answer to itself. See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation.” In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, 121-73. London: New Left Books, 1971.

enlivened—an animate, mobile, volatile, destructive—version of the law itself that forces the community to recognize the efficacy and potency of the discursive register he invokes. A gap opens between the utterly ineffectual speech of mercy of men operating in sociality and the forcible letter of the law of violence of men operating in radical communion that in this moment precariously fail to coincide.

Antonio, too, is unable to provide a socially-legible rationale for his annihilative desires yet his death wish, which is consistent with the laws of the community, can be seen in his willful acquiescence of his sentence. In fact, it is only through the ostensibly impartial and unalterable law that Antonio can realize his self-destructive desires. He ardently recognizes that since “no lawful means can carry me/ Out of [Shylock’s] envy’s reach, I do oppose/ My patience to his fury, and am armed/ To suffer with a quietness of spirit/ The very tyranny and rage of his” (4.1.8-12). The law gives him the right to his bond, the means by which to realize his annihilative desire to be the sacrificial savior for Bassanio, the mechanism whereby he can play the central martyr in a fantastic, gruesome spectacle. The execution of duties and the sufferance of penalties become impersonal and realizable through the letter of the law.

Both Antonio and Shylock, then, share the same will to destruction, the will to do violence, the will to violate their legible subjectivities that goes beyond the parameters of reason and overpowers reason in practice, yet is still consistent with the law. Shylock asserts “by my soul I swear/ There is no power in the tongue of man/ To alter me. I stay here on my bond” (4.1.235-7) which Antonio directly echoes with “Most heartily I do beseech the court/ To give the judgement” (4.1.238-9). Shylock remains deaf to the Christians’ pleas of mercy and avows that no amount of persuasion or admonishment can alter his will, desire, and lawful right to his bond. In his mouth, the common language of the law assumes a force of the language of radical

communion which reduces the language of sociability to impotence. It mocks, and makes a mockery of, all sentimental claims to a “higher truth” clothed in elevated rhetoric which cannot produce its credentials in the only court there is: the state’s. Portia’s oft-quoted lines about the quality of mercy that “droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven” (4.1.180) are notable not so much for their eloquence, as for their impotence—they are of no use, fall on deaf ears, *do* nothing. Antonio, too, wills the court to pass judgment, eagerly awaiting the opportunity to display the full extent of his love to Bassanio. This bond of communion between Antonio and Shylock demonstrates that a bond of communion is not necessarily a bond of affection or a bond to do good—rather, it is a bond of shared risk, of a willingness to immolate one’s recognizable subjectivity, that is unexpectedly and dangerously accessible and allowable within the laws of this Christian community. Beneath its neutral language, the contract and the law function as a site for a plethora of destructive desires, generating the promise of a self-destructive satisfaction for Antonio and of a correlative consumptive satisfaction for Shylock that are implicit within social vocabularies and accessible to social subjects.

The other members of Venetian society are also acutely aware of being bound to the law. The presiding Duke has no power to dissolve the bond for it remains within the law—he can only “expect a gentle answer, Jew” (4.1.33). When the insistent pleas of mercy fail to move Shylock from his bond, Gratiano bitterly exclaims, “O, be [Shylock] thou damned, inexorable dog,/ And for thy life let justice by accused!” (4.1.127-8). He curses the law for permitting Shylock’s “wolvish, bloody, starved, and ravenous desires” be realized while simultaneously acknowledging his boundedness to this same law (4.1.137).³⁷ Bassanio then begs Portia to “wrest

³⁷ In the trial scene, both the Christians and Shylock recognize the role destructive passions play in his suit against Antonio. Antonio speaks of Shylock’s “envy” (4.1.9), “fury” (4.1.10), and “rage” (4.1.12) as motivating desires. Shylock acknowledges “a lodged hate and a certain loathing/ I bear Antonio” (4.1.59-60) as reason for pursuing his “losing” suit (4.1.61) and it is the letter of the law that allows these destructive passions to be realized.

once the law to your authority,/ To do a great right, do a little wrong,/ And curb this cruel devil of his will” (4.1.210-2) to which Portia responds, “It must not be. There is no power in Venice/ Can alter a decree established./ Twill be recorded for a precedent,/ And many an error by the same example/ Will rush into the state. It cannot be” (4.1.213-5).³⁸ Even when Bassanio implores Portia to usurp the law just this once with her authority in order to enact the common will of the Venetian community and return to the language of legible sociality, it is maintained that all are bound to the law and none have the power to alter or negate an established law.³⁹ The fact that the bond’s vocabulary of violent intimacy is consistent with the laws of the community and sanctions destructive desires force the citizens to confront this gap between their laws and the “common” will.⁴⁰ While the letter of the law is ostensibly the basis of a community, a codified set of rules and regulations that professedly speak in and reinforce the language of orthodox sociality, Antonio and Shylock’s threateningly antisocial yet socially legal bond exposes the inadequacy of the law to enact the common will, or perhaps even exposes the common will as antithetical to an idyllic representation of community.⁴¹ The violent, legal bond expands the

³⁸ I have deliberately chosen to leave Portia out of my reading of *The Merchant of Venice* in order to redirect interpretations of the central bond to the communion between Antonio and Shylock. I recognize the suggestive possibilities, however, of readings such as Marianne Novy’s which link Shylock and Portia as outsiders by virtue respectively of their race and sex. See Marianne Novy, *Love’s Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), esp. 64.

³⁹ It is worth noting that Portia appears in the trial scene, not as Portia, but rather as an avatar of the law, designated masculine and put into circulation through disguise. Her impersonation as a lawyer underscores the way in which the law as an abstraction is manifestly present, even immanent, during the trial and that Portia as Balthazar is the manifestation of the need to mobilize avatars in the court of the state.

⁴⁰ In discussing identity theory, Žižek articulates this constitutive entanglement of the rule of law with the threat of violence: “We can sense this concealed dimension of violence already apropos of the everyday, ‘spontaneous’ reading of the proposition ‘law is law’—is not this phrase usually evoked when we are confronted with the ‘unfair,’ ‘incomprehensible’ constraint that pertains to the law? In other words, what does this tautology effectively mean if not the cynical wisdom that law remains in its most fundamental dimension a form of radical violence which must be obeyed regardless of our subjective appreciation?” See Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, 2d ed. (London: Verso, 2002), esp. 34.

⁴¹ Drakakis argues that if Shylock receives his bond, the present community must do so in the service of maintaining civil order and law but if Shylock does not receive his bond, then the laws of Venice would prove illegitimate; that “the revelation of the pound of flesh, which the maintenance of civil order requires, would reveal the fundamentally contradictory political practices of the community and so discredit the very community it is meant to legitimate” (73). However, rather than exposing the contradictory nature of the law, I argue that the terms of the bond expose

capaciousness of viable, social bonds, revealing that bonds of intimate connection need not be conventionally ideal bonds of affection and amity. The Venetians are forced to confront their own desires for violent intimacy for the first time, irrevocably dismantling their safe, contained notion of sociality to make way for the terms of radical communion. This newly-evoked excessive and violent discursive register is put on display in a public space, demanding members of the Venetian community to witness and incidentally partake in desires of intimacy and destruction that have thus far remained latent and obstructed.⁴²

Shylock's disappearance from the final act of the play seems to motivate an inevitable shift of focus to the Christians.⁴³ Jonathan Goldberg argues that the play's conclusion is a never-ending Christian carnival where "Shylock is literally the final subject of the strictures of carnival; once everything has been wrung out of him, the Christians are seemingly freed of all constraints" (432). He posits Shylock as the one who supplies the raw material for the Christians' carnival, an isolated scapegoat who forever remains the used victim.⁴⁴ Alan Sinfield focuses his analysis of

the gap between the law and the "common" will of the people which the law is ostensibly meant to represent. The threat of Shylock and Antonio's bond of flesh is precisely that it is legal. See Drakakis, John. "Historical Difference and Venetian Patriarchy" in *The Merchant of Venice*. Ed. Martin Coyle. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

⁴² Edward Berry contends that the trial scene and Shylock's forced conversion is "arguably the darkest moment in Shakespearean comedy" and that "although some critics (mercifully few) argue that from an Elizabethan perspective forced conversion represents genuine mercy, the moment seems intended to shock. By losing his status as 'other,' Shylock loses his sense of self...Acceptance of the 'other' seems in this case more malicious than ostracism" (126). However, rather than focus on his Shylock's violently coerced conversion, I aim to direct our attention toward putting such a bond of flesh on display and the contagious effects of its aftermath. See Edward Berry, "Laughing at 'Others'" in Leggatt, A. [ed.] *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy*, Cambridge: C.U.P., 2002, 123-38.

⁴³ Some critics such as James O'Rourke argue that this hostile, artificial, and hypocritical Venetian community is merely reinscribed and validated by this very trial scene, underscoring the trial's outcome and Shylock's muted acquiescence of his sentence and subsequent disappearance from the play. Others such as Sigurd Burckhardt have a more generous reading of this scene and posit Portia as one who learns "the grim prose of the law in order to restore it to its true function" (262). It is true that Shylock loses his property, daughter, and personhood through Portia's cunning utilizations of a previously invisible writ law and that his conversion to Christianity is a stipulation of the Duke's "mercy." However, this coercive conversion deliberately underscores the violence and merciless secularity of this act of "grace," exposing the gap between the will of the people and the Christian ideals they espouse. See O'Rourke, James L. "Racism and Homophobia in *The Merchant of Venice*." *ELH* 70.2 (2003): 375-397 and Burckhardt, Sigurd. "*The Merchant of Venice*: The Gentle Bond." *ELH* 29.3 (1962): 239-262.

⁴⁴ The hypocritical practices of usury often involved, as *The Merchant of Venice* depicts, a convenient scapegoating of the Jew while turning a blind eye to Christian usurers. Since the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290, the

the final scene on Portia, Bassanio, and Antonio, proposing the possibility of a kind of polyamorous relationship, a more capacious understanding of bonds that extends beyond the heterosexual couple where hints of a ménage à trois for these three exist (*Shakespeare, Authority, Sexuality* 84). By banishing Shylock from the final act, the *Merchant of Venice* might tempt us to forget him, but to do so would be to ignore the unsettling afterlife of the bond he has forged. What if, instead of imagining the excision of Shylock from the play through his use/scapegoating or the focusing away from Shylock, we imagine the non-consummation of the bond as a strength and entertain the possibility that its afterlife will remain with the community?

Bound to the Violent Bond

The final scene makes a very deliberate move back to Belmont, conventionally perceived as a private realm of love, closer to the setting of one of Shakespeare's romances.⁴⁵ Yet this aggressive shift in setting along with the conventions of comedy that make compulsory the language of love, marriage, and happiness in forming these bonds are feeble attempts to cover the ripples of destabilization that the language of the bond has introduced in the community.⁴⁶ Even if Shylock is not present in this scene, the idea of interconnection mobilized by the bond of flesh between Antonio and Shylock that requires some kind of sacrifice and a willingness to

usurers were, of course, English, most famous among them a restricted circle of great London merchants—men who first made their money overseas or retail trading and who then turned to the money-lending business. For more on how England sustained the commercial practice of usury through English moneylenders while maintaining the moral high ground by scapegoating the fictive Jew, see Lawrence Danson, introduction to *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Lawrence Danson (New York: Pearson Education, 2005), esp. 163.

⁴⁵ Sigurd Burckhardt contends that the “world of *The Merchant* consists of two separate and mostly discontinuous realms: Venice and Belmont, the realm of law and the realm of love, the public sphere and the private” (243). See Sigurd Burckhardt, “*The Merchant of Venice*: The Gentle Bond.” *ELH* 29.3 (1962): 239-262. Lawrence Danson and other critics have observed the “play’s unusually prominent series of binary relationships,” *The Harmonies of The Merchant of Venice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), esp. 10. Danson notes that Belmont is a realm of love, sexuality, and familial relationships seemingly free from Venetian economic motives and aims.

⁴⁶ The fifth act begins with Lorenzo and Jessica trying to “out-night” one another in a scene that may be played, certainly, as a light-hearted game between newlyweds. But Jessica’s way of emphasizing themes of infidelity in each of Lorenzo’s citations can foreshadow the upcoming exposure of unfaithful husbands, can recall the betrayal of social bonds in the scenes past, and can precipitate the engendering of a new, radical bond between characters that cannot so easily be broken or betrayed.

stand in surety to guarantee a bond still persists.⁴⁷ While the audience may perceive the final ring episode as a prototypical ending of a comic marriage plot that reinscribes orthodox sociality through the compulsory heterosexual marriage bond, the language surrounding the ring transactions unexpectedly continues the newly capacious understanding and interpersonal bond of sacrifice. Bassanio now stands before Portia as Antonio stood before Shylock. Bassanio's explanations, his appeals to circumstances and motives are in vain; Portia insists on the letter of the pledge and claims the forfeit. The ring becomes the bond transformed and is made to stand out, as "bond" did in the trial scene, with an almost comic but still ominous iteration:

Bassanio: If you did know to whom I gave the ring,

If you did know for whom I gave the ring,

And would conceive for what I gave the ring,

And how unwillingly I left the ring,

When nought would be accepted but the ring,

You would abate the strength of your displeasure.

Portia: If you had known the virtue of the ring,

Or half her worthiness that gave the ring,

Or your own honor to contain the ring,

You would not then have parted with the ring. (5.1.192-201).

The repetition of "ring" at the end of each line enacts what it speaks—the rhyming of "ring" with itself reverberates through his speech, no other bonds suffice, spreading like contagion to infect

⁴⁷ In addition to the persistence of sacrifice and contagion in the final scene's ring plot, Lorenzo, too, prefigures Shylock's body as a sacrifice for the bond of his marriage. He states, "from the rich Jew, a special deed of gift/ After his death, of all he dies possess'd of" (5.1.292-3). Lorenzo's description of this prospect as "manna" for the "starved people" (5.1.294-5) prefigures and already imagines Shylock's death and moreover, turns Shylock's dead body into a sacrificial host that will hold the Christian Venetian community together in addition to being the vehicle of future financial salvation for Lorenzo and his reborn Christian wife.

the language of sociality. Like the bond, the ring is of a piece with flesh so that we can hardly tell whether it has made flesh into metal or has itself become flesh. Portia conceives of the ring as “[a] thing stuck on with oaths upon your finger,/ And riveted with faith unto your flesh” (5.1.167-8). Flesh, therefore, may have to be cut off for it. Bassanio replies, “Why, I were best to cut my left hand off,/ And swear I lost the ring defending it” (5.1.176-7). And in the end, Antonio must, once again, bind himself as surety for Bassanio:

Antonio: I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which, but for him that had your husband’s ring,
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly.

Portia: Then you shall be his surety. (5.1.248-253)

Only with this renewal of the bond is the secret disclosed, the true meaning of Portia’s equivocations revealed. Shylock may have been defeated and dismissed, but the language which he almost succeeded in making synonymous with himself and with the bond of flesh has not. The violent potentialities implicit in the earlier language of Salerio, Solanio, Gratiano, and Bassanio have now all become explicit modes of contract. This language of bonds, debts, risk, and sacrifice—the language of radical communion—enters into the gentle contract of love, the marriage bond, and are now requisite to its consummation. The language of the bond, which necessitates the hazarding of all one has on the chance of making interpersonal communions possible, contaminates the language of sociality and the play ends with the enceinte potentiality that the bond of flesh may become the new organizing principle of communion between two

individuals.⁴⁸ Thus, Antonio and Shylock are avatars for the imaginative possibilities that exceed them, demonstrating that self-expenditure and self-preservation don't necessarily need to be at odds. The consent to giving one's whole self and violate one's autonomous integrity to form a bond with another does not inevitably prescribe one's elimination, destruction of social subjectivity, or death. Communion founded on shared intimacy, violence, and risk need not be untenable nor inimical—it is a bond of communal creation that exceeds any measure of self-preservation and self-love.

⁴⁸ The new prerequisite demands on both parties for the radical reimagining of communication that *The Merchant of Venice* proffers through the bond can be summed up by the inscription on the correct lead casket of Portia's love test: "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath" (2.7.16).

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