

Shylock's Slavery Argument

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Ask Shakespeare critics what is Shylock's most indispensable monologue in *The Merchant of Venice*, and we should not be surprised if the answer is, more frequently than not, the "Hath Not a Jew" speech in which Shylock denounces Antonio for mistreating him despite the fact that all men share the same essential characteristics (3.1.50-69).¹ The reasons that this particular speech have fascinated readers and critics need hardly take up much space in the main text of this article. Suffice it to note that the speech has been called, in its appeal for Shylock's humanity, "the only moment of genuine nobility and dignity" for the character, and an opportunity for Shakespeare to expose "the irrationality and evil of prejudice."² And yet, despite the attention paid to "Hath Not a Jew," I will argue that the most interesting and significant speech given by Shylock in the play is his less appreciated speech on slavery in the trial scene, a speech I will refer to as "Many A Purchased Slave."³ Where "Hath Not A Jew" shocks by its stark evocation of hatred, its vitriolic confrontation of the ideology of difference, and its chilling promise of "hard" vengeance, "Many A Purchased Slave" challenges us to wrestle with a more complex and nuanced production of Shylock's rhetoric and to do so in a more suggestive social and historical context.

Up until the moment when Shylock delivers the slavery speech, a powerful defense of his claim for the forfeited pound of flesh, his

descriptions of his own motivations for revenge on the merchant Antonio have been largely private. We have heard, for instance, his dream about catching Antonio "once upon the hip" (1.3.43), but that is in an aside; we have heard, likewise, second-hand, how he has shared his revenge plan with two close confidants, Tubal and Cush (2.3.284-285); and he gives his wild and impromptu rant to just two other men in the "Hath not a Jew" speech already mentioned. But in the trial scene Shylock is called upon, for the first time, to advance his position formally, publicly, and on the record, a discursive context which necessitates a more sophisticated, and consequently more dramatically fascinating rhetorical attack than he has yet attempted.

Of course, no speech in Shakespeare has been completely ignored, and modern readers have found much to appreciate in "Many a Purchased Slave," even, if, as I will argue, there are further complexities to explore and alternative readings to propose. In particular, readers have often approved of what they see as an oppressed character using the Venetian practice of slavery to turn the ethical tables on a tyrannical elite just when and where they are unable to legally silence him—as much as they might like to. In this vein, Shylock, suggests one critic, "exposes the slave-owning Venetians for the hypocrites—or morally frail creatures—that they are." Another writes: "Shylock effectively counters Antonio's accusations of inhumanity with the Christian example of inhumanity, slavery." Still another calls this one of the "sharp satiric thrusts he sends to the interstices in his enemies' armour of righteousness."⁴

Such readings are attractive because they see the play advocating the same values of tolerance and resistance that we ourselves routinely advance today. Conversely, such readings are *so* consistent with today's values that we ought to pause, since the ethics of past centuries so often fail to align with our own. Indeed, a careful reading of the slavery speech reveals a number of complexities and complications which call into question the enticingly tidy interpretation which sees the speech as a masterful and defiant rejoinder by an indomitable survivor towards a complacent ruling class. Thus, as an alternative view, this essay proposes that the speech is far less critical of Venetian morality than critics usually allow. In my view, the speech does not indict

Venice for its cruelty, nor does it seek to humiliate its citizens for their hypocrisy. Indeed, it does not even succeed as a logical defence of Shylock's own case for enforcing his fatal bond. In fact, in "Many A Purchased Slave," Shylock, rather than landing a knockout blow against his oppressors, swings wildly and misses, bruising his own legal, civil, and moral authority just when he needs it most. And that, as far as the larger play is concerned, is precisely the point. These sites of confusion and contradiction are not flaws in the speech; they are exactly what makes it the most intriguing speech in the play.

As an additional prelude to this argument, I must note that when one writes of slavery one is naturally prone to think in terms of race, and from today's vantage point, that usually implies African peoples who are enslaved. To be sure, early modern Europe saw African slaves, but the racial realities of slavery in the late sixteenth century were complex. While Ian Smith argues that the matter of race has been downplayed by historians and that even by the sixteenth century, slavery was often associated with blackness,⁵ the fact remains that slaves in the period could originate in any racial group depending on circumstance. Many Venetian slaves, for instance, were captured from the borders of the Ottoman empire, with the understanding that if Turks captured Venetians to make slaves, it was acceptable to do the reverse.

To complicate, or rather simplify the reading of the play in this nuanced historical context, we must notice that when Shylock invokes slavery it is specifically, explicitly, and deliberately in the context of the slave's status as owned property. He does not invoke any racial categories of the slaves he mentions, and audiences would have understood that no racial, religious, or national identity protected one so fully that some future misfortune might not lead to an enslaved existence, including, by the late sixteenth-century, the "escalating numbers of Englishmen being captured and enslaved in the region."⁶

I

Challenged in the trial scene to explain his "strange apparent cruelty," and urged to provide "a gentle answer" to the Duke's request for "mercy and remorse" (4.1.20-34), Shylock responds with calculated impudence. After some evasive back-and-forth,

he goes on the attack, pointing out to them that “you have among you many a purchased slave” as part of his argument that the court must allow him his promised forfeiture, a pound of his enemy’s flesh (4.1.90). By setting his own personal grievance next to the social problem of slavery, Shylock might seem to be landing a powerful *you-too* uppercut. In fact, Cooper calls it exactly that, saying “Shylock is able to use the *tu quoque* argument very effectively” here, arguing that “Shylock is not the only one in Venice to assert the rights of ownership at the cost of the claims of humanity.”⁷ After all, the Jew only seeks retribution against a particular Venetian merchant who has unapologetically belittled and undermined him. Slavery, by contrast, is, in the late sixteenth century, an ongoing outrage ready to bloom into an epochal atrocity. What moral standing does the Duke have, demanding “human gentleness and love” from Shylock (4.1.25), while he, apparently, participates in and benefits from such a system?

Put another way, Shylock is exploiting a single, once-in-a-lifetime attempt to pay back Antonio for his abuse, whereas the Venetians’ prosperous port city and extensive empire is built upon longstanding systems of oppression. By speaking this truth to Venetian power, Shylock can be seen as “the harbinger of a discourse that exposes hypocrisy and partiality, not only in Venetian laws, but above all in its society,” leaving the readers of the play with still another reason to call into doubt the justice of his ultimate defeat.⁸ The moneylender, in this view, leaves the stage defeated, but not before he “confronts” his accusers “on their own inhospitable ethics,”⁹ and his powerful critique of Venetian oppression remains, even as he himself becomes a victim of it. Another variation on the theme is that that “the Venetians cannot claim to have clean hands in this scene [...] For all their talk of mercy, they are, as Shylock points out, slaveholders.”¹⁰ Shylock, by exposing the suffering of the least powerful of Venetians, calls that practice and the values that underlie it into question.¹¹ At least one critic has gone so far as to suggest that Shylock’s attempt to murder Antonio is morally *superior* to the slave-owners since slaving was contrary to “Christian law” whereas what Shylock proposes is technically legal.¹²

Slavery, had, of course, been a feature of European life since ancient times, whether through various kinds of sale, indentured

servitude or, especially, slaves having been captured in war. Shakespeare's *Othello* is a notable Venetian sold in slavery after having been captured (*Othello*, 1.3.139-140).¹³ The Bible features numerous instances of enslavement, and theologians had long considered slavery as a natural consequence of man's fallen state.¹⁴ Nearer Shakespeare's time, Portuguese slave traders had been bringing enslaved African people to southern Europe at least since the middle of the fifteenth century, some of whom served, for instance, as gondoliers in Venice, ferrying men like Antonio through the canals of the early modern republic.¹⁵ English households also sometimes made use of African domestics, but the law tended to emphasize the master's legal right to their labour, rather than ownership of the servant *per se*.¹⁶ Nevertheless, as an institution generally, European slavery had declined after the Roman period for a variety of reasons, including an increasingly anti-slavery stance from the Christian Church.¹⁷ Shakespeare's England prided itself on being, at least in theory, a land without slavery—though the reality was more problematic and complex.¹⁸ Thus, despite Shylock's claim about the “many” slaves owned by the aristocrats in attendance at the trial, real-life slaves were not especially numerous in European cities of the period; they would have been understood as something of a luxury item in Shylock's Venice.¹⁹

Though wealthy households still employed slaves in the period, “slavery was on the decline by the sixteenth century.”²⁰ Indeed, Venetians were often more concerned about being *captured* as slaves than owning them.²¹ Thus it is possible that Shylock's initial remark that the Venetians have in their possession, “many a purchased slave” may be a deliberate exaggeration for rhetorical effect. After all, a few slaves may be brushed aside as an irrelevant anomaly, but “many” slaves suggest a pattern woven into the fabric of Venetian existence.²² Alternately, given the place of the slave as an expensive status symbol, and given that real Venetian Jews were not permitted to own slaves,²³ Shylock's claim that “you have among you many a purchased slave” he may be deliberately emphasizing *you*, meaning not Venetians generally, but the upper classes: the Duke, his court and the other wealthy grandees of the Serene Republic. *You* have slaves, he may be hinting, whereas *I*, Shylock the humble moneylender, had only a single household

servant, and now I make do even without him. In this way, his statement to the Venetian elite may be that if that wealthy men like *you* take pride in owning expensive slaves consisting of human flesh amounting to hundreds or thousands of pounds, how can you begrudge a hardworking and comparatively poor Jew like *me* his single pound of flesh?

II

All this said, that Shylock even makes the slavery argument is curious, given that his initial position in court is that he need make no argument at all. Indeed, his opening gambit is to decline to offer any defense of his suit demanding Antonio's flesh, saying flatly that he need not give reasons at all, or, if some reason must be given, that it is merely his humour, a quirk of character for which no account need be given nor sought (4.1.40-43). On the basis of inscrutable motives, some men, Shylock says, may be driven by hatred to unprofitable excesses. But such men are still within their rights to harbour their unfathomable hatreds and to pay dearly for very little if they so choose (4.1.44-46). This response is cunningly vacuous: an argument may be refuted, but a non-argument cannot be reasoned against. And it seems as if Shylock hopes to leave it at that, if he can, but pressed by the court to defend this position more fully, Shylock finally does give a more detailed defense of his claim, and indeed, as we have seen, he gives a quite careful one based on a complex analogy: the owning of slaves.

In fact, so carefully crafted is his response in this scene, that it provides a razor-sharp counterpoint to the informal defense he has given to Salerio and Salanio earlier in the play in "Hath Not a Jew." While that earlier speech is in prose, suggesting *ad hoc* invective,²⁴ "Many a Purchased Slave" is in highly regular iambic pentameter, connoting careful reasoning and honed grandiloquence. Notice, for example, the metrical regularity in the crux of the speech: "The pound of flesh which I demand of him / Is dearly bought, is mine, and I will have it." (4.1.99-100). For all his protests that he should not be required to give reasons, and indeed, that he cannot give reasons, Shylock has, after all, anticipated that the court will not take "I'll not answer that" (4.1.42) for an answer, and he has a secondary line of defense scrupulously prepared. Like Othello who

claims to have no skill in oratory and then provides the Venetian senate with an elaborate and moving defense of his elopement with Desdemona (*Othello* 1.3.83-96), Shylock pretends to have no defense before revealing his expertly crafted *apologia*. Thus, he reminds the court:

You have among you many a purchased slave,
Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,
You use in abject and in slavish parts,
Because you bought them. Shall I say to you,
“Let them be free, marry them to your heirs?
Why sweat they under burdens? Let their beds
Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates
Be seasoned with such viands”? You will answer
“The slaves are ours.” So do I answer you:
The pound of flesh which I demand of him
Is dearly bought, is mine and I will have it. (4.1.90-100)

As we have seen, critics have often argued that Shylock not only defends his own bond with Antonio; he simultaneously exposes the Christian Venetians as hypocrites and tyrants. The myopic Venetians look to the mote of cruelty in the Jew’s eye, even as they ignore the great plank of slavery in their own. The gentiles claim to value mercy, but their overworked slaves, no better than beasts, sleep on hard floors and chase after scraps of food — all giving the lie to supposedly Christian virtue. Hence, Phyllis Rackin has argued that “Shylock reminds the court that the universalizing measure of money [...] eradicates every other standard of value,” and Jason Gleckman has called this passage a “powerfully subversive speech equating Venetian contract law with slavery.”²⁵ And yet, revisiting the details of the text, we find that Shylock never actually attacks the practice of slavery, nor does he take the Venetians to task for using it. He invokes slavery, of course, but not to condemn it. Instead, he employs the reality of slavery solely to bolster his own case about owning human flesh. Indeed, it would be counterproductive for him to condemn slavery here because his own case relies not just on its existence but on its moral legitimacy. For Shylock, it is not that a single murder can be overlooked when countless men are enslaved. Rather, it is that the very existence of slavery proves what Shylock proposes is not murder at all. He endorses a broad atrocity to excuse a particular crime.

Shylock neither pillories the Venetians for owning slaves, nor condemns them for considering their slaves as fundamentally worse than other men. After all, Shylock himself clearly sees himself as much better than a slave, for earlier in the play he has scorned the humiliating notion of acting like a slave before Antonio, bowing low and whimpering deferentially in a “bondman’s key” (1.3.121). Instead, Shylock agrees that it would be absurd to treat slaves as equals, for the obvious reason, he says, that the slaves are not equals. He does not deny that slaves are property; he emphatically insists that they are property. The ownership of human bodies—the very definition of slavery in his account—proves that it is legally permissible to own human tissue. And if it is legally allowable to own a human body constituting, say, two hundred pounds of flesh, then it must be allowable for a man to own just a single pound of the same commodity. Therefore, Shylock should be able to own part of Antonio—in this case the pound of flesh closest his heart. And if Shylock owns a pound of flesh, it follows that he has the right to take it, for every man has the right to have what he owns, otherwise ownership would be meaningless. John Owen Havard, in the context of Antonio as a prisoner, argues that Shylock compares the merchant “directly” to a slave to justify his position. My reading, by contrast, emphasizes the idea that slavery is invoked to show that the human body can be owned. Shylock’s argument, in my view, is not the direct “ruthless equivalency” that Havard sees, but has intricate, indirect logical moves, and that is part of what makes it fascinating.²⁶

In this reading, Shylock does not serve as a voice of conscience to the slave-owners; rather, he wholeheartedly endorses their barbaric system; if anything, he is morally worse than the slavers on this point, because he accepts their practice and extends its brutal suppression to all men. Shylock does here precisely what he promised to do earlier in the play: executing the villainy he has been taught but bettering the instruction (3.1.67-69). As such, this speech is not subversive; it is not a critique of slavery nor its attendant cruelties. If that were Shylock’s purpose, we should expect that he would have pointed to examples of extreme brutality towards slaves. He does not, though other Shakespeare works include such details. In *Merchant* there is no mention of the terrorizing one’s trembling bondmen (*JC* 4.4.43-45), or the

murdering of a “worthless slave” (*Lucrece* 515). Shylock merely indicates that slaves lack the luxuries and privileges of free men: soft beds, tasty food, aristocratic brides, and so on.²⁷

Even this systematic oppression is cruel from our vantage point, but is not cruelty in Shylock’s estimation; the deprivation of the slave, he argues, is justified by the fact that the slave is property which, in turn, proves that, in Venice, some human flesh belongs to other persons. Those owners can move it and remove it as they see fit. Shylock can no more be forbidden his pound of Antonio’s flesh than the Duke can be forbidden from sending one of his slaves to find him some bread. The Duke, therefore, is not embarrassed by Shylock’s foregrounding of slavery as Arron Kitch has argued when he suggests that “the Duke’s threat to dissolve the court at this moment suggests that Shylock has articulated a difficult truth.”²⁸ In assigning this “threat” to the Duke’s reluctance to discuss Venetian slavery, Kitch, in my view, overstates the value of the juxtaposition.

Admittedly, it is conspicuous that neither the Duke nor anyone else even tries to rebut Shylock’s actual argument about the legality of owning human flesh. Earlier in the play, when Shylock argues for the morality of usury as the kind of thrift enjoyed by the biblical Jacob, Antonio immediately presents a counter-argument that offers a different interpretation of the same biblical incident (which Antonio sees not as thrift in general, but as a divinely-sanctioned venture [1.3.87-91]). But here, no one jumps in with a rejoinder of any kind. Still, the lack of a counter-argument seems to arise, at least in large measure, from the fact that Shylock, cleverly, does not pause to entertain one. The Duke’s suggestion that he may “dismiss” (not dissolve) the court seems to arise from Shylock’s demand for a decision at the end of his speech (“I stand for judgement. Answer: shall I have it?” [4.1.103]) rather than the effectiveness of the slavery argument earlier. Moreover, the Duke immediately goes on to imply that the dismissal would be temporary, expressly to allow him time to consult the legal expert Bellario (4.1.105-107). In other words, the Duke’s point seems to be that he will not be bullied into giving his decision before he is ready and he will not be ready at least until he has spoken to legal authorities.²⁹ Moreover, if the Duke is stymied by Shylock’s slavery

argument, it may be in that way in which one knows an argument is wrong, but cannot articulate precisely why.

Indeed, as I read the scene, the Duke sees no reason to be ashamed, nor does Shylock ask him to be. Shylock is not “repudiating the Christian practice of slavery” in favour of a more moral Jewish tradition as Roger Stritmatter contends.³⁰ Nor, I would argue, is Antonio made “a dispossessed person, akin to a slave,” as Amanda Bailey has suggested.³¹ Rather, Shylock forces the Venetians to grapple with a conundrum: slaves are human flesh; slaves are owned; therefore, human flesh can be owned; therefore, Shylock can own a pound of Antonio’s flesh and take it when he chooses. Today’s readers and audiences simply reject that argument by rejecting its premise: human beings cannot be owned in any moral society. But no one in the Duke’s court seems to entertain that strategy, nor, as it turns out, are they forced to.

III

The absolute moral failing of Shylock’s pro-slavery argument need hardly be elaborated: to make his case, he endorses one of the most profound evils in our history. Even in the play, however, the argument, though superficially cunning, does not stand scrutiny. As powerful as it seems in Shylock’s formulation, the slavery argument, with only a little critical pressure, fails as disingenuous and irrelevant. Shakespeare gives Shylock an argument that resembles a display of upright dominoes: impressive but designed to collapse in spectacular fashion.

For one, though Shylock maintains that his pound of Antonio’s flesh is “dearly bought” (4.1.100), it does not follow that he should necessarily be permitted to simply physically carry it away then and there as if it were the “flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats” that he has joked about earlier (1.3.166). If it were really a matter of the exchange value of a commodity, there would be any number of ways of resolving the claim. If a man has a thing that belongs to his neighbor and the item cannot be feasibly returned, the man can replace the item. Or he may provide a monetary reimbursement in a suitable amount. Indeed, reimbursement is precisely what Bassanio offers: to pay a more than reasonable sum in lieu of the specified forfeit. Bassanio’s claims fall on deaf ears of course—just

as Jessica said they would (3.2.283-287). Shylock is not concerned about the flesh's monetary value—for it has no monetary value, something he has admitted to Bassanio already (1.3.164-166). He does not really suppose the flesh connected to Antonio's sternum and ribcage is actual commercial property that he should be able to convey home like the diamond he bought in Frankfurt (3.1.79-80). That is not a legal argument so much as a legal fiction. His satisfaction will come in the cutting itself, the maiming and murdering of his enemy. Shylock is not balancing his commercial books; he is feeding fat the ancient grudge he bears Antonio, as he promised to from the first moments he is onstage (1.3.45). This speech completes, thematically, what Shylock began early in the play when he called Antonio a "good man," but insisting that "good" meant wealthy, and scoffed at Bassanio for naively thinking that such an adjective could refer to something as trivial as a man's character (1.3.15-17).

More significantly, to make his argument, Shylock has to contradict his earlier claims to universal humanity. Prior to this scene Shylock has taken Antonio to task more than once for treating him like a dog rather than a fellow human being (1.3.116-117, 3.3.6-7). But in the "Many A Purchased Slave," he suggests there is nothing wrong with Venetians treating their slaves "like your asses and your dogs and mules" (4.1.91). Similarly, in "Hath not a Jew," Shylock pillories Antonio for failing to see the common humanity among all people, possessing the same living bodies and the same human feelings (3.1.54-62). But in the trial scene, Shylock abandons this earlier broad-mindedness because it no longer serves him. We might have expected Shylock to oppose slavery on the grounds that a slave is warmed and cooled by the same summer and winter as a free man, but here he makes no such observation. With a hypocrisy too little noticed, Shylock no longer cares that a slave will laugh when tickled or bleed when pricked. The slaves, however much they may resemble the Jew, will not resemble him in their freedom (cf. 3.1.59-64).³²

Shylock's rhetorical use of slavery also opens up a flaw in his larger legal argument. By invoking slavery, Shylock accidentally reminds the court that rights in Venice are not distributed equally. This notion fatally undermines his other main assertion in the scene, that he has a contract, and that the republic must enforce all

contracts, regardless of who has made them—otherwise there is, as he says, “no force in the decrees of Venice” (4.1.102). Shylock’s case against Antonio, in other words, is predicated on the universal applicability of justice. Indeed, Shylock bets everything on the assumption that, as Antonio himself admits, the Duke cannot deny the right to equal treatment under the law to anyone, not even a Jew (3.3.26-31). But by pointing out one notable case where the law provides different rights and privileges to different people—that is, masters and slaves—Shylock invites the argument that Jews do not deserve the scrupulous application of the law that Christian citizens do.

In the case of the bond, Shylock’s bet, at least initially, seems to pay off, since the Duke (and Portia ostensibly) is loathe to simply vacate the contract—even as Bassanio argues that the problematic precedent is only “a little wrong” in contrast to the “great right” of preventing Antonio’s murder (4.1.214). Indeed, the one point of broad agreement in the play is that Venetian prosperity is based on trade with “all nations,” and foreigners must be satisfied that their dealings in Venice will be even-handed, or they will take their business to other ports (3.3.26-31).

Once the matter of contracts is obviated by the loophole in the bond’s language, however, the differential application of the law comes back to bite Shylock like the dog he admits to being (3.3.7), for he is quickly found to be an alien who has conspired against the life of a citizen (4.1.345-360). Now on the defensive, Shylock cobbles together a case that employs the same logical shadiness that he employed in the slavery argument. That is, throughout the trial scene, Shylock takes the implicit position that he has the legal right to Antonio’s flesh and is not responsible for the consequences of insisting on that right. His official position is that Antonio’s death would be a legally irrelevant side effect of enforcing the bond, and that any medical consequences to Antonio are simply not Shylock’s responsibility (4.1.255-60).

But later in the scene, Shylock will make the reverse argument in regard to his own life. When the court proposes taking all of Shylock’s wealth as a penalty for conspiring against Antonio’s life, Shylock argues that the court cannot simply enforce the law without regard for the consequences of that ruling. Specifically, without capital, he cannot earn income, and without income he

will starve: "You take my house when you do take the prop / That doth sustain my house" (4.1.373-74). Shylock now insists that the court must consider the foreseeable consequences that follow from the enforcement of statutes. If the court's larger intention is to spare his life, than it must consider the effects of taking his livelihood. They must not execute the man by executing the judgement.

The Venetians might well reply that the consequences of enforcing the confiscation judgement (Shylock starves) are surely just as irrelevant here as when Shylock sought to enforce his bond (Antonio bleeds out). Shylock, just a few minutes earlier, had refused to give any weight to the fact that collecting his pound of flesh would be, effectively, murdering the merchant. Now, Shylock insists that taking his money is cruel, because depriving him of income deprives him of his life. The moneylender's hypocrisy is stark: Shylock seizing what is legally his property is morally acceptable regardless of the consequences; the state seizing what is legally its property is barbaric because of the consequences.

Shylock's positions in the scene conspicuously contradict one another. When he needs the exemplar of slavery to justify owning human flesh, then some men are little better than beasts; but when he needs to argue that his bond cannot be vitiated, then all men are equal before the law. When it comes to the death of his enemy, consequences are nothing; when it comes to saving himself, consequences are everything. It is not quite that Shylock changes his principles; it is that he has no principles at all. He has only rationalizations that support his own interests in the moment.³³ He is precisely the man Antonio says he is early in the play: "An evil soul producing holy witness [...] a villain with a smiling cheek" (1.3.97-98).

In "Many a Purchased Slave," Shylock does what he has done elsewhere in the play: provide a seemingly rational argument for a position that is really self-serving and amoral. This speech is akin to his defense of usury early in the play, and his defense of revenge generally a little after that. This failed argument, like all his failed arguments, need not be seen as "merely sensational"; it fails and must fail.³⁴ Indeed, its very failure is the point. Shylock's slavery speech demonstrates that any position, no matter how contradictory and ethically questionable it may be, can be couched in the language of reason and justice. And it is no coincidence that

in nearly the exact centre of the play, Bassanio gives a long speech on this very topic, that the appearance of virtue is not the same as virtue itself, that a fine beard, for instance, may conceal a wicked heart (3.2.83-86). Thus, when we hear Shylock's claim that cold-blooded murder is legal and right, and that the existence of slavery proves it, we are reminded of Bassanio's complaint about how, in law, a gracious voice can superficially season any plea no matter how "tainted and corrupt" (3.2.75-76).

Notes

1. All references to Shakespeare are in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare Sixth Edition*, ed. David Bevington (New York: Pearson, 2009).

2. Jerome Carlin, "The Case Against *The Merchant of Venice*," *The English Journal* 42.7 (October 1953): 389. doi.org/10.2307/809133; Anthony J. Lewis, "Response to Prejudice in *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *King Lear*," *The English Journal* 61.4 (April 1972): 491. doi.org/10.2307/813555. John Cooper terms the speech "the chief piece of evidence for the sympathetic interpretation" of Shylock. John R. Cooper, "Shylock's Humanity," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 21.2 (1970): 117. Similarly, Amy Greenstadt contends that the speech "contributes to a nascent vision of human equality." Amy Greenstadt, "The Kindest Cut: Circumcision and Queer Kinship in *The Merchant of Venice*," *ELH* 80.4 (Winter, 2013): 949. Neema Parvini sees the speech as a response to "bullying" in which Shylock seeks to be but is unable to be understood as a recognized member of the Venetian community. Neema Parvini, *Shakespeare's Moral Compass* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 11. And yet, critics have also noted that this nobility is undermined to some extent by the fact that the speech is, in the end, a justification for murder. Thus, the speech poses "a stirring question, even though Shylock may well be fingering his sharp blade as he voices his complaint." John Scott Colley, "Launcelot, Jacob, and Esau: Old and New Law in *The Merchant of Venice*," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 10 (1980): 184.

3. While it is impossible to measure precisely how much attention any given speech has received, at the time of writing, the version of the JSTOR scholarly database available through my institution returns 396 results for "hath not a jew" but only twenty-six for "many a purchased slave."

4. Derek Cohen, "The Rage of Shylock," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 18.3 (1982): 198. Joan Ozark Holmer, "The Education of the Merchant of Venice," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 25.2 (Spring, 1985): 309. Ron Klingenspon, "Play and Interplay in the Trial Scene of *The Merchant of Venice*," *Thalia: Studies in Literary Humor* 9.1 (1986): 39.

5. Ian Smith, *Race and Rhetoric in the Renaissance: Barbarian Errors* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009): 45-46.

6. Guasco, Michael, *Slaves and Englishmen: Human Bondage in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014): 144.

7. Cooper, "Shylock's Humanity," 122.

8. Marcone Costa Cerqueira, "Shylock and Individual Freedoms in Classical Liberalism," *Prometheus: Journal of Philosophy* 38 (April, 2022): 83.

9. Sophie E. Battell, *On the Threshold: Hospitality in Shakespeare's Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023): 96.

10. Paul A. Cantor, "Religion and the Limits of Community in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 70.1 (1987): 254.

11. Indeed, in China, where theatre goers are less familiar with the details of Western theology, this speech is sometimes read as one of the moments where the play calls into question the entire system of early capitalist thought. After all, if the commercial success of Venice produces racism and enslavement, where is its real value? Thus, "Though Shylock is a supporter of the system of private ownership, his frank exposure of his own suffering and that of others can be regarded as a condemnation of the Renaissance commercial system. Since the conflicts in Venice are conflicts among people who share the same mercantilist commercial values, the correct solution must denounce the values of commerce and law in Venice in their entirety." Fan Shen, "Shakespeare in China: *The Merchant of Venice*," *Asian Theatre Journal* 5.1 (Spring, 1988): 27-28.

12. Ming-kae Wang, "A Legal and Moral Discourse on the Roles of Shylock and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Tamkang Review: A Quarterly of Comparative Studies between Chinese and Foreign Literatures* 25.3 (1995): 320. A related view says that the speech points to a contradiction in early modern cultures: that trade required increased traffic with foreigners even as those foreigners were often denigrated and despised. Kim F. Hall, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? Colonization and Miscegenation in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Renaissance Drama* 23 (1992): 94-95.

13. Jeffrey Fynn-Paul, "Empire, Monotheism and Slavery in the Greater Mediterranean Region from Antiquity to the Early Modern Era," *Past & Present* 205 (November 2009): 8.

14. Guasco, *Slaves and Englishmen*, 14-16.

15. Kate Lowe, "Visible Lives: Black Gondoliers and Other Black Africans in Renaissance Venice," *Renaissance Quarterly* 66.2 (Summer 2013): 413. Lowe notes that most Venetian slaves served as domestic servants (421), though some freed slaves served as gondoliers (415).

16. Amanda Bailey, "Shylock and the Slaves: Owing and Owning in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62.1 (Spring 2011): 13.

17. Fynn-Paul, "Monotheism and Slavery," 15-17.

18. Camille Slight shows how "English culture ... exhibited contradictory understandings of the nature of slaves and slavery" seeing it as familiar and yet denying its existence. Camille Slight, "Slaves and Subjects in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48.4 (Winter 1997): 381. Others have noted that English people used the term "servant" broadly so as sometimes to include slaves and other bound laborers, without explicitly saying so. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, "*The Tempest* and Early Modern Conceptions of Race," in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Ayanna Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021): 146. Still further: "just as Tudor Englishmen were increasingly inclined to insist that they were unique in a global

and European context to their commitment to liberty, there was a perceptible rise in the incidence of human bondage within England and some serious discussion that the nation could benefit from the application of certain kinds of slavery in unique circumstances (Guasco, *Slaves and Englishmen*, 25).

19. According to one historian, had Europeans been the only clients for African slaves, the trade may well have died out in or not long after the sixteenth century. William D. Phillips Jr, *Slavery From Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 169-70.

20. Rothman, "Contested Subjecthood," 428.

21. For this reason, Venice established a slave-ransoming office in 1586. By 1620, the cost of redeeming Venetian slaves had become a serious problem. Robert C. Davis, "Slave Redemption in Venice, 1585-1797," in *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297-1797*, ed. John Martin and Dennis Romano (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 456-458.

22. Jamie Paris has argued that Portia's Belmont estate was probably "staffed with slave labor"; her claim depends heavily on the interpretation that the unnamed "Moor" with whom Launcelot is said to have had an affair is, in fact, a slave (3.5). Paris suggests "serving woman" might be a euphemism for slave, but I have been unable to locate that phrase in the play. Jamie Paris, "Mislike Me Not for My Complexion," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 20. 4 (Fall 2020): 41.

23. James O'Rourke, "Racism and Homophobia in The Merchant of Venice," *ELH* 70.2 (Summer, 2003): 394. O'Rourke argues, rightly in my view, that in this speech Shylock points out that "slavery was an institution that produced categorical distinctions between Christians and others" but where he implies Shylock is deliberately pointing out a broad moral failing in Venice, I argue that Shylock is embracing that moral failing, at least as long as it serves his rhetorical purpose.

24. As Jacob Tootalian notes, it is well established that Shakespeare employs prose for certain characters and situations as, for instance with "madmen." Jacob Tootalian, "Without Measure: The Language of Shakespeare's Prose," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 13.4 (Fall 2013): 48. More specifically, Warren D. Smith has argued that if Shakespeare intended "Hath Not A Jew" to be a grand piece of philosophical reasoning, he would "in accord with his usual custom [...] have cast it in poetic verse rather than in prose." Warren D. Smith, "Shakespeare's Shylock," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15.3 (Summer, 1964): 198.

25. Phyllis Rackin, "The Impact of Global Trade in *The Merchant of Venice*" *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch* 138 (2002): 79. Jason Gleckman, "*The Merchant of Venice*: Laws Written and Unwritten in Venice," *Critical Review* 41 (2001): 84. By contrast, some critics have considered Shylock's desire for Antonio's flesh in terms arising from a perceived erotic pun where flesh means *penis*, even after the play specifies the flesh in question is Antonio's chest, not his genitalia. Along these lines, James Shapiro sees the taking of the flesh as an implied circumcision, but does not emphasize, as this essay aims to do, Shylock's own explicit characterization of the act. See James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996): 126-130. Janet Adelman builds on this reading, seeing circumcision tropes throughout the play, but not emphasizing the slavery argument. Janet

Adelman, *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 99-113 passim.

26. John Owen Havard, "Calculating Shylock: Commerce, Captivity, and the Free-Born Subject," *The Eighteenth Century* 60.3 (2019): 341.

27. In fact, in Venice, slaves could marry though it was rare for slaves to marry free people. If the free spouse was unaware of the slave's status at the time of the union, the marriage could be annulled. Hannah Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260-1500*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019): 77. Indeed, some Venetian slaves were freed, in theory after no more than four years or once they were baptized, though these rules were not scrupulously followed. Conversely, for some freed slaves, their former masters became important patrons as they established their new lives in the complex social world of Venice. E. Natalie Rothman, "Contested Subjecthood: Runaway Slaves in Early Modern Venice," *Quaderni Storici* 47.140 (August 2012): 427-428.

28. Aaron Kitch, "Shylock's Sacred Nation," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59.2 (Summer 2008): 150.

29. Kitch, "Shylock's Sacred Nation," 150.

30. Roger Stritmatter, "'Old' and 'New' Law in *The Merchant of Venice*: A Note on the Source of Shylock's Morality in Deuteronomy 15," *Notes and Queries* 47.1 (March 2020): 70.

31. Amanda Bailey, "Shylock and the Slaves," 12.

32. On occasion, real Venetian slaves who were not set free did seek freedom, and it was up to the Senate to decide their fate. In one late fourteenth century case, a freed Tatar man came to Venice with the aim of living as a free Venetian. Unfortunately, he fell into the hands of another freed Tatar named Antonius who sold him to one Zanino Calcaterra who, in turn, sold him to a Catalan. Antonius was punished and Calcaterra compensated, but whatever became of the unfortunate freed slave is not known. Barker, *Precious Merchandise*, 27.

33. Theatre directors who see Shylock as sympathetic here might well consider his self-serving hypocrisy. Indeed, at least one director takes a sympathetic Shylock as, rather than one interpretation, a matter of settled fact: "Of course, it is impossible to stage *The Merchant of Venice* antisemitically, because the bearer of sympathy in the play is really Shylock and always will be Shylock." Peter Zadek and James Leverett, "Radical Stagings of Shakespeare," *Performing Arts Journal* 4.3 (1980): 110.

34. Bailey, "Shylock and the Slaves," 12.