

Interpretation

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Reflections on Patriarchy and the Rebellion of Daughters in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*

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From Shakespeare's examination of the republican experiment which his two Venetian plays, *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tragedie of Othello, The Moore of Venice*, reveal, there emerges a three-dimensional portrait of the relations between fathers and daughters.

The setting of the two plays in republican Venice is not accidental to the character of the relationships between Brabantio and Desdemona and Shylock and Jessica. Venice in the sixteenth century, a tolerant, prosperous republic thriving on its worldwide commerce, gave promise that it would be a society where, at last, "men could live as men, not as white and black, Christians and Jews, Venetians and foreigners."¹ Within this setting, at either end of the filial spectrum, Shakespeare gives us Desdemona, who indirectly causes her father, Brabantio, to lose his life and Jessica, who directly but figuratively causes her father to lose his life by losing his religion and his fortune. The alternative to both these extremes is Portia, the center of the triptych, whose father exercises more power in death than ever Brabantio or Shylock in life. What survives Portia's father's death and causes him to be honored and obeyed, even though absent, is his wisdom, the true basis of all title to rule.

Both plays suggest that republican regimes do not necessarily guarantee the best, most enlightened patriarchal rule, either at the public or private level, while *The Merchant of Venice* hints that, in the best world, rule in the public sphere by an outstanding female is not only possible but beneficial.

I propose to examine the threefold father-daughter relationships portrayed in these two plays by focusing on what Shakespeare tells us about each father and his daughter. Let us begin with Brabantio. Before we meet Desdemona, the wayward daughter, Shakespeare introduces her father.

BRABANTIO AND DESDEMONA

Brabantio is a good, solid Venetian citizen; he is a man of property and importance in the community. When he threatens to punish Rodorigo, he says ". . . be sure my spirit and my place have in them power to make this bitter to thee" (I.i.113).² He believes in the ordered and civilized way of life in the city

of Venice where such things as robbery do not often happen but if they do, they are punishable to the law's full extent.

Brabantio has no doubts about the superiority of Venetian ways and customs over foreign tastes and beauty. This very conventionality is what constitutes Brabantio's virtue as a citizen. Because one's own is familiar and well known, it is usually identified with what is good. Brabantio understands all natural attraction to be the attraction of like to like or between those equal and the same. He is thus blind to the possibility of attraction between the unlike, or opposites, such as his daughter and the Moor. Such unions are unnatural and unspeakable. Thus, the first word that opens the play is an exclamation of disparagement, pronounced by Rodorigo and designed to silence Iago as he speaks of the Othello-Desdemona marriage.³ For the good citizen, as Brabantio and Rodorigo are, the entire horizon of the universe is constituted by the city and its values; only the conventional is natural, and therefore any rejection of it must be caused by magic, something beyond nature. Unfortunately, Brabantio's republican virtue has not cured him of the patriarch's susceptibility to tyrannic impulse. Thus, when he hears the account of Desdemona's flight, he remarks that he has already seen it in his dreams: it is the stuff of his paternal nightmares (I.i.156).

Rodorigo, a former suitor of Desdemona, suggests that Brabantio is partly responsible for his daughter's "grosse revolt" (I.i.147). At this point, however, it is hard to see why he should say such a thing or to what he is referring. Brabantio believes it must be supernatural, and he reasons as follows: Would a pretty, young girl, from one of the best families, leave her secure, affluent home to risk public ridicule by marrying someone socially unacceptable, unless she were under a spell or bewitched? Especially since this pretty, young girl was so opposed to marriage that she had turned down the best that Venice had to offer?

Brabantio certainly seems to have a point in common sense. Yet common sense should not have allowed him to assume without question that turning down all the spoiled, rich, young bloods of Venice necessarily meant his daughter opposed marriage because she preferred her father's house. Rather it indicates a young woman bored with what her society says is best for her. Yet the more Desdemona refused to marry, the longer she continued in her father's "guardage" (Brabantio uses the word, I.ii.87)—a term which refers to the law giving custody of the person, property (or both) of an infant, an idiot or other person legally incapable of managing his/her own affairs. (cf. *OED*, s.v. guardian, 2). The legal status of all daughters was the same as for infants and the mentally retarded. Because Brabantio does not see that it is possible for some daughters not to fit that legal category, he does not see that a young woman, disdainful of society's views of the beautiful and noble, will not only risk public disgrace by choosing something opposite to those views but may even court disgrace.

There is a profound discrepancy between Brabantio's view of his daughter and her self-description. At her very first opportunity, she repudiates the status of one incapable of managing her own affairs: "That I love the Moore, to live with him,/ My downe-right violence, and storm of Fortunes,/ May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdu'd/ Even to the very quality of my Lord" (I.iii.276).⁴ Although her show of independence may appear somewhat compromised here, since defiance of her father is manifested as a heart subdued to her husband, it remains to be seen in light of her understanding of herself and Othello. Her father, on the other hand, describes her thus: "A Maiden, never bold:/ Of Spirit so still, and quiet, that her Motion/ Blush'd at her selfe" (I.iii.113).

Brabantio believes that what has happened to him has implications not only for the rule of all Venetian fathers but for the state itself, as he says, "For if such Actions may have passage free,/ Bond-slaves, and Pagans shall our Statesmen be" (I.ii.120). In other words, Brabantio believes male hyperagamy, or men marrying above their station, has the effect of reversing the proper order of rule in the republic: free gentlemen over bond-slaves, Christians over pagans.

The profoundest disagreement between Brabantio and Desdemona, however, concerns what it means to be a daughter. Brabantio feels his daughter has been stolen from him, the way one's property is stolen. Othello has married his daughter, but Brabantio feels "cheated." His daughter has been "charmed" away from him. As a matter of fact, that image of stolen property is used by Iago when he alerts the father: "Looke to your house, your daughter, and your Bags,/ Thieves, Thieves" (I.i.87). Desdemona, as part of Brabantio's household which he rules, is part of his being.⁵ In other words, Desdemona's being is inherited from her father, and as part of his flesh and blood, he never really sees her interests separate from his own.

Although we meet Shylock before we meet Jessica, he has no occasion to mention her, and so Desdemona is the only daughter whom we get to know first through her father's and then her husband's description of her. In contrast to Brabantio's vision, Othello shows us a young woman fascinated by tales of derring-do, in faroff, exotic places.

Roderigo is correct in saying Brabantio is responsible for his daughter's escape in many ways, and, at least, in this one: he first introduces the Moor into his household. Like father, like daughter, he too enjoys hearing fantastic tales of distant lands. Othello says Desdemona steals away from her household chores to listen to him (I.iii.151 et seq.), making us suspect that, unlike Portia, Desdemona, reared by her very traditional father, excels more in household skills and religion than in liberal arts. On the other hand, she is, according to Othello, "free of speech" (I.iii.187–89; III.iii.212–15), a habit frequently associated with liberal education. Perhaps more to the point, however, daughters of doting fathers and wives confident of their empire over their husbands are characteristically outspoken.

Othello's stories have a profound effect upon Desdemona. She wishes she were a man herself to experience such adventures. Next best to Desdemona's impossible desire is to be loved by a man such as she herself would wish to be, hence her heart subdued to Othello is in service to a more beautiful image of herself. Othello comprehends Desdemona loves him for his courage and he, in turn, loves her for the pity his pains and labors stirred in her (I.iii.190). The husband perceives the daughter's capacity for courage that the father does not see in his "Maiden Never Bold."

At last, Desdemona appears. Her first words describe the daughter's state: a divided duty (I.iii.205). Brabantio believes a daughter is always a daughter, even if she becomes a wife. Hence, first allegiance is always to parent and family. Desdemona disagrees; a daughter is a daughter first, until she becomes a wife, and then she is a daughter only secondarily. Brabantio is shocked and wounded that his own daughter prefers and gives precedence to a nonrelative over her own flesh and blood. In his dismay, the legal fiction of generation seems preferable to procreation, for if exogamy means that nonrelatives take precedence over the love of one's own flesh and blood, then better to adopt children than to beget them naturally (I.iii.217).

Desdemona's flight from the paternal nest is her golden opportunity to approximate her impossible wish. By going with Othello to Cyprus to wage war against the Turks, she can experience all the adventures of men while remaining a woman. She tells the Duke that she would rather accompany her husband than to remain behind as "The Moth of Peace" (I.iii.284). Her voyage to Aphrodite's island affords the "Maiden Never Bold" the occasion for her transformation into a Butterfly of War.

Brabantio's last words, "Looke to her Moore, if thou hast eyes to see;/ She has deceived her Father, and may Thee" (I.iii.323), may imply a similarity between the relationships of father and daughter and of husband and wife. Does a daughter bold enough to defy her father indicate a wife capable of betraying her husband? Do all faithful wives begin life as dutiful daughters? Or does he mean that craft and guile, once employed, become a way of life?

In warning Othello against his daughter's capacity for deception, Brabantio, if he is reasoning from his own experience, does not have in mind the adulterous innuendo Iago supplies when he reminds Othello of the father's words (III.iii.236 ff.). The kind of guile a daughter practices on a father, when she appears to be what she is not, the better to get what she wants, may be the same she would practice on a husband, but not for the same reasons nor for the same goal, except insofar as father or husband assume the tyrant.⁶ Othello forgets Desdemona's duplicity was for his sake and at her father's expense. But Brabantio's words, spoken in the spirit of the jealous patriarch and domestic tyrant, "I am glad at soule, I have no other Child,/ For thy escape would teach me Tirranie/ To hang clogges on them," (I.iii.222-24) find echo in the heart of Othello, for much the same spirit.

More than her capacity for guile, Desdemona's downfall springs from two aspects of her character, her delight in listening to fantastic tales and her tendency toward superstition. "The Lady Superstitious," as Shaftesbury calls her, seems indicated in the etymology of her name, "fearful of demons."⁷ She lies once, perhaps twice, but only once to Othello, on the occasion of the completely fantastical, portentous tale he invents about the handkerchief he has given her.⁸ Given to his mother by an Egyptian mind-reader to ensure his father's love and fidelity, it was, he says, woven by a two-hundred-year-old Sybil from sacred silkworms and dyed in mummy juice from virgins' hearts (III.iv.69 ff.). He swears that if she loses it, terrible things will happen, and so, instead of confessing she has lost it, she lies. It is her undoing because on the lost kerchief Iago builds his case against her. What frightens her is the tale's hint of evil omen (III.iv.92, 117), which actually comes about by her failure to read the cause of the tale's invention separately from its image. The image is: as the handkerchief ensured the love and fidelity of Othello's father for his mother, so its loss, she fears, may jeopardize Othello's love and fidelity *for her*. But the truth is, in inventing the tale, Othello shows his mind's reflection: the fear that the lost kerchief signals Desdemona's lost fidelity and love *for him*. Shaftesbury remarks:

'Tis certain there is a very great affinity between the passion of *superstition* and that of *tales*. The love of strange narrations, and the ardent appetite towards *unnatural* objects, has a near alliance with the like appetite toward the *supernatural* kind, such as are call'd prodigious and of dire omen. For so the mind forebodes on every such unusual sight or hearing. Fate, destiny, or the anger of heaven seems denoted, and as if it were delineated, by the monstrous birth, the horrid fact, the dire event. For this reason, the very persons of such *relators* or *taletellers*, with a small help of dismal habit, suitable countenance and tone, become sacred and tremendous in the eyes of mortals, who are thus addicted from their youth. Tender virgins, losing their natural softness, assume this tragic passion, of which they are highly susceptible, especially when a suitable kind of eloquence and action attends the character of the *narrator*. A thousand Desdemonas are then ready to present themselves and would frankly resign fathers, relations, countrymen and country itself to follow the fortunes of a *hero* of the black tribe.⁹

The passion of superstition and that of tales spring from the same root: the irresistible desire for knowledge. Desdemona is such a manifestation and one that will not be put off by mere appearance. Indeed, tender young virgins, the innocents of experience, are all appetite for knowledge. Shaftesbury seems to recognize, however, that spiritedness is also present in Desdemona's behavior because the moment of seizure by the "tragic passion" is simultaneous with a loss of the softness characteristic of virgins. How else to explain Desdemona's disdain for mere body, a certain toughness that allows her to consent to marry someone so completely opposite to her own "Clime, Complexion and Degree" (III.iii.271) and disposes her to go to war? In short, Desdemona's appetite for

knowledge inclines her to value the goods of the soul above those of the body, and so she declares that she saw Othello's true face in his mind (I.iii.280).

Desdemona's passion for tall tales bespeaks her curiosity for the unknown and the unknowable; she is ever alert for signs by which the divine might signal its presence (IV.iii.63–64). The perfect foil for Iago, the atheist, who expects too little, Desdemona expects rather too much from the divine. Pious instruction as to the mercy and power of heaven to do the impossible falls on fertile ground in such a nature, and so Desdemona is willing to believe the monstrous, the impossible, the contradictory is the divine most manifest. Cassio admiringly testifies that Desdemona's beauty shows itself in just this way, for at her passage, wind, sea, sand, and rock omit their "mortall Natures," letting her go safely by (II.i.79–85). She has the capacity to animate and make moral even the lifeless.

In keeping with her faith in heaven's omnipotence, Shakespeare has Desdemona do the miraculous by returning from the dead. She speaks after Othello has strangled her, and she lies, thus fulfilling another of her impossible wishes: "Heaven me such uses send,/ Not to picke bad, from bad; but by bad, mend" (IV.iii.114–15).¹⁰

SHYLOCK AND JESSICA

Jessica is Shylock's daughter and, as with Desdemona, we meet first her father. He enters intent upon his profession, as his first words express.¹¹ Both Shylock and Brabantio are extremely conventional, each in his way: as Brabantio is bound by his Venetian citizen's view of the world, so Shylock by his strict interpretation of his religion. In both cases the result is a misperception of what, in the human sphere, is natural and artless and what is conventional and artful. In assessing Antonio's wealth, Shylock says that ships are but wooden boards, sailors nothing but men against the perils of water, wind, and rocks, and pirates are really two-legged water rats or water thieves, just as robbers are human land rats (I.iii.22). But ships are not just boards but boards put together by the art of boat-building, and sailors are not just men but men skilled in maneuvering over water, wind, and rocks. Precisely on the degree of skill exercised in each of these arts, excluding thievery, the money-lender's jeopardy is inversely proportional.

Or again, when Shylock justifies to Antonio his practice of taking interest on money lent out, he calls it rather "thrift" and illustrates his understanding of it by the Old Testament story in which Jacob breeds Laban's sheep so as to exact usance from Laban's enjoyment of Jacob's many years' service to him (I.iii.92). Shylock's choice of story to illustrate his point does two things. First, since the Christian objection to usury was that it was unnatural for "barren metal" to reproduce itself, Shylock deliberately blurs the issue by substituting

sheep, which do reproduce themselves naturally, albeit adroitly manipulated by Jacob (Aristotle, *Politics* 1258a 37ff.; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part II, 2d Part, Q. 78). The point, however, is that the same convention establishing money as one form of wealth, may also establish sheep as another. Next, although at first sight Jacob's manipulation of the ewes appears fraudulent, Moses says after the fact that God devised it. To this Old Testament tale, which appears to equivocate on whether it is lawful to seek recompense of injury by fraud, Antonio reacts indignantly with the Gospel observation that even the Devil can cite Scripture for his purpose (Genesis 30.25–43, 31.5–12 Matthew 4.6).

In the matter of the contract that Shylock concludes with Antonio, I think it is clear, from Shylock, when he first proposes it, that he has no intention of collecting: "A pound of mans flesh taken from a man,/ Is not so estimable, profitable neither/ As fleshe of Muttons, Beefes, or Goates" (I.iii.170). Shylock clearly sees that the meat of beef, sheep, and goats has its market value because it is intended for human consumption, and for precisely that reason, human flesh has no market value. Rather, what is valuable is a human life, and Shylock means to have the haughty, Christian merchant forever indebted to him for not exacting the price of the bargain. What then changes Shylock into a monster of revenge? It is the loss of his daughter, his flesh and blood, his stake in the future of his tribe.

The roots of Shylock's understanding of justice lie in his religion, which directs that a decent life is one of respect for and obedience to the law. Respect for the law is also the foundation of the Venetian Republic: "The Duke cannot deny the course of law:/ For the commoditie that strangers have/ With us in Venice, if it be denied,/ Will much impeach the justice of the State,/ Since that the trade and profit of the city/ Consisteth of all Nations" (III.iii.31–36). Without respect for the law governing the republic's commercial relations, both internal and external, Venice could not be the model for the modern political experiment, which is to overcome religious and sectarian differences among human beings by directing their attention to another powerful passion, namely the desire for profit. Venice is accordingly bourgeois, tolerant, and republican (Bloom, p.16).

As the law is central to Shylock's character, his undoing is signalled when he compromises his principles: "I will buy with you,/ sell with you, talke with you, walke and so following/ but I will not eat with you, drinke with you nor pray with you" (I.iii.33–39). When he consents to eat and drink with his Christian clients, can the punishment of being forced to pray with them be far behind? Jessica's flight occurs at the same time Shylock is feasting with the Christians. The simultaneity of events only reinforces his suspicion that all of Christian Venice, with its masques and revels, was privy and conspired to seduce Jessica away from her father's sober religion (II.v.30). Although Antonio is a sad and mournful exponent of his religion (I.i.5–11, 86–88), Jessica finds the Christians gay (Exodus 34.14–16).

As Brabantio believed that his private grief affected the state, so too Shylock in his demand for justice. Both grievances concern, at bottom, rebellious daughters and the republic's ability to preserve its interests and honor its most fundamental laws. As befits a comedy, the issue turns more upon money, contracts, and positive law in the case of Father Shylock than in that of Father Brabantio, who appeals to some natural order of rank and title to rule in the republic.

Shylock and Brabantio are similar fathers in at least two other respects. Shylock suffers from the same lack of knowledge of his daughter's true mind as Brabantio. He shudders to leave his house guarded by a servant he believes is "unthrifty," never suspecting his spendthrift daughter (I.iii.180, II.iii.5). Secondly, both fathers suffer the fear characteristic of patriarchs: dreams of evil premonition about their possessions being stolen, one his daughter, the other his money bags (II.v.19). Of the two, only one might be qualified as a theft, but the culprit is Jessica, the daughter. Both fathers see their daughters' marriage choices as betrayals of the household. Shylock says incredulously, "My own flesh and blood to rebel" (III.i.32), while Brabantio calls it "a treason of the blood" (I.i.185).

Nowhere in the play does Jessica show herself fearful of the retribution of heaven for her deeds. She first appears in the company of the clown, underscoring what her first words convey, that she finds her father's house a hell: the serious business of making money is dull, boring stuff; his thrifty ways, his religion are at war with her passion for her Christian suitor (II.iii.1, 20–22). When the servant quits to go to another household, she overtips him. As the father is frugal, so the daughter is lavish.

Where Desdemona dreams of being a man of adventure like Othello, Jessica dresses up like one in order to elope. Of all the daughters, Jessica is the most rebellious. Desdemona is innocent, and she dies despite her innocence. Precisely for this reason, we are spared any scenes or details of her one clear act of duplicity, sneaking out of her father's house. Not so our Jess. We have a ringside seat as she cleverly engineers her escape, blatantly lies to her father and, not content just to leave him, she robs him as she goes, dry eyed and remorseless (II.v.48, 60). Indeed, Jessica is such a portrait of unfilial devotion that some commentators have thought to interpret certain lines to mean that she is not Shylock's natural daughter, and therefore she is not really Jewish (II.iii.12–13, III.v.5 ff.). The commentators thus seem to think that, at least in the case of Judaism, religion comes through the blood or approximates race.¹² Jessica's description of herself denies this, however; she says she is ashamed to be her father's child, for although she is daughter to his blood, she is not to his manners (II.iii.16). But perhaps Jessica is more her father's daughter than she realizes.

First, does she really rob her father or merely appropriate her being by direct action? If both law and custom consider that a daughter is part of her father's

property, is it possible for the part to steal from that of which it is a part? Only if the part takes more than its share. But as Shylock's only heir, Jessica, the part, would be entitled to the whole at his death. Is the money she takes the equivalent of her dowry? Is there another way open to her? Shylock would never willingly consent to her marriage to a Christian, and the republic seems to encourage even young women to a love of self-governance. In taking the money, Jessica is nothing if not practical. In contrast, Desdemona's flight to Cyprus appears dictated to some extent by the very real question of where she might suitably live if she remained behind. Her father's house was no longer open to her, nor did she want to return to it. Sufficient finances, had she had them, would have eliminated the problem.

Jessica has seen her father's thrifty ways; she knows how important money is. It can buy pleasures, enjoyment and, most of all, freedom from her father's house (II.vi.40). Shylock's excessive attention to money is matched in his daughter. She not only takes the chest of jewels and money, a fortune in itself, she goes back a second time to "guild" herself with "more ducats" (II.vi.5). Gratiano, in a play on the word "gentle," finds this gesture on Jessica's part worthy of the liberality of a well-born Gentile (II.vi.58). There is no doubt there is something shocking in Jessica's behavior, resembling as it does a kind of father-beating at the hands of the daughter. As the reflection of her father's extreme passion and his punishment, Jessica, the miser's daughter, appears ugly. The effect is to soften Shylock's portrait and call forth sympathy for him.

PORTIA

Unlike the other two daughters, because her father is dead, we do not first meet Portia through a paternal intermediary. Rather, her portrait is first sketched for us by Bassanio, a suitor, and he begins with what is important to him in his speech to Antonio: "In Belmont, a lady richly left" (I.i.171 ff.). Portia is a rich heiress, and that is how Shakespeare designates her in the cast of characters. Her wealth is important, simply, and it is important to Bassanio, in particular, because he is seriously in debt and is attempting to recoup his fortunes. After her money, Bassanio mentions her beauty and last, her "wondrous virtue," which are, he says, even fairer than her looks. He compares her to the other famous Portia, the daughter of Cato and wife of Brutus, two staunch Roman Republicans.

Immediately after this, we meet Portia herself. She is complaining of how boring life is. Her lady-in-waiting, Nerissa, tells her that she has no reason to complain because she has more good luck than bad, which is a mean between the extremes of all misery and superabundance (I.ii.2 ff.). As Nerissa phrases it, "it is no small happiness therefore to be seated in the meane" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.vi-ix). Portia, while acknowledging the wisdom of

Nerissa's maxim, remains dissatisfied with the world. Nerissa reminds her that wisdom is better than "well pronounced" if "well followed." Portia replies with what can only be characterized as a very sophisticated, philosophical point in a neat logical package.¹³ She says, "If to doe were as easie as to know what were good to doe, Chappels had beene Churches, and poore/ mens cottages Princes Pallaces . . ." (I.ii.13–15). In other words, she points to the discrepancy between act and intention, between theory and practice. She ends her argument with a maxim of her own: "it is a good Divine that/ followes his owne instructions."

More to the point, says Portia, than all this wise talk is the problem of getting the husband she wants. It is not that Portia believes theoretical wisdom is useless in practice, but the exercise of wisdom must be accompanied by the ability to choose. This Portia is prevented from doing by her father's will: "the wil of a living daughter curb'd by the will [testament] of a dead father" (I.ii.24–25). Portia's father has devised a kind of lottery, whose aim is to ensure a good husband by eliminating at least two types of men who make poor husbands.

There are three caskets or chests: one of gold, one of silver, and one of lead. Inside one of the chests is a portrait of Portia. The suitor who chooses that casket gets the girl, the fortune, and the kingdom. Portia's father, just before his death, in a prophetic insight, has devised the test, and although Portia grouses a bit, she obeys because she is persuaded, at least thus far, since it has spared her from the Neapolitan prince, the Palatine count, the French lord, the English baron, and the German duke. All of these have defects. One loves wine too much, the other horses too much, one is too serious, the other too giddy. They all decide to leave because they do not want to play the game. Indeed, in their cases, the test of the caskets is unnecessary; their defects are plain for all to see.¹⁴

The problem that the caskets pose, of course, is to reconcile the exterior appearance with the treasure contained inside, in other words, to reconcile seeming with being or reality, a problem encountered previously in *The Moore of Venice*. How does one distinguish virtue from vice, masquerading as virtue? Or how does one discern what kinds of people have what kind of character?

For example, husbands who swear their wives are more precious than gold perhaps really want wives *with* gold, because gold is the accepted measure of desirability. This is the Prince of Morocco, one of the suitors. He represents the acceptance of conventional taste, and that is why his first words are a reference to his color: "Mislike me not for my complexion" (II.i.5). Convention, too, is the reason he chooses the gold casket. The casket speaks for itself: "Who chooseth me, shall gain what men desire."

The silver casket reads: "Who chooseth me, shall get as much as he deserves," while the lead casket says: "Who chooseth me, must give and hasard all he hath." The Prince of Aragon, true to his national trait of excessive pride,

assumes he is worthy and so chooses the silver casket to get what he deserves. Thus, as the notes in the respective chests reveal, one suitor is too young and hasty in judgement, accepting the convention for lack of sufficient pride and confidence in himself—traits acquired with age and experience. The other suitor is older, wiser, and less subject to common opinion but because of that, he wants always to be in the right. His judgement is too slow, too deliberate, and he suffers from the pride which fears to make a mistake.

As these two extremes are dismissed, Bassanio, who has borrowed money from Shylock, through Antonio, the Merchant of Venice, in order to try his luck in winning Portia, arrives on the scene. Portia wants him to win and, good daughter that she is, she abides by the test of the caskets, but she gives him all the help short of telling him the answer outright. Bassanio chooses “not by the view, and so chances fair and chooses true” (III.11.138–39). Portia’s “very likeness” is in the lead chest. Portia manages what none of the other daughters do; she reconciles the compulsion of duty and her own sweet will; she obeys her father and also gets the husband she wants. A remarkable display of freedom.

But why Bassanio? It seems a bit difficult to understand Portia’s taste for him. He is certainly not as outstanding or exceptional as Othello. He is, however, a Venetian, a scholar, and a soldier, i.e., a man of a certain amount of courage, with a taste for learning (I.ii.108). He is liberal, almost prodigal, in matters of money, and although being lavish with money is not itself a virtue, it is certainly closer to the virtue of generosity than stinginess. Bassanio also believes in the virtue of friendship, so although he is not perfect, he is intelligent, able to reason, and yet young enough in body and spirit to be willing to chance and gamble.

What jeopardizes Portia’s freedom, in fashioning her happiness, is Antonio’s desire for martyrdom, a passion his religion seems to foster.¹⁵ Portia is determined not to allow the friendship between Antonio and Bassanio to run such a course; moreover, she says that if there is friendship between the two, there must be a certain likeness of character.

Portia dresses up as a man and judges the case of Shylock against the Merchant of Venice. She overturns it on what may be called the merest verbal quibble (Furness, pp. 403–20). The contract that calls for one pound of human flesh does not include, strictly speaking, any blood. The quibble turns upon the tension between equity and the strict letter of the law.

Sanctity of contracts may be the first law of all commercial relations and the fundament of the Venetian Republic, but more so is the presupposition underlying all contracts: a nature capable of promising itself into the future is the guarantor of contracts, and as such, is not itself a legitimate object of contract.¹⁶

Disdain for mere money is one of the qualities that the two friends Bassanio and Antonio share, and which also characterizes Portia. It is the concomitant to the principle that human excellence resides not simply in living but in living

nobly. Presumably this principle prompts Antonio to risk his life for a friend, but Antonio notwithstanding, one may not contract to sell one's life as one would a horsecart.¹⁷

The virtue of the contract between Shylock and Antonio lies in its impossibility, the equivalent of a hyperbolic denial that a human life is no more valuable than that of a two-legged rat. It is a wager that neither believes in, proposed by one, accepted by the other, in order to compel belief from either obstinate unbeliever.¹⁸ If, when first proposed, the contract is not understood by both to be impossible, then the Jew is guilty of premeditated murder and the Christian of wanton suicide (Furness, pp. 295–96).

There is no doubt that having the advantage over the merchant is sweet to Shylock, whose dealings with Antonio heretofore afforded him neither satisfaction nor revenge. But anger has overheated Shylock's reason. In his need to requite, he wants his tears, his sighs, his ill luck answered in kind by his enemy. And yet his greatest power over the Christian lies not in its use to exact payment, but in the free and willing restraint of such exercise which thus preserves the constant potential to act. Mercy is most appropriate to gods, who, in this way, show themselves doubly potent in their will.

As Shylock refuses to admit anything but the narrow reading of his bond, so Portia matches him with a quibble which, in demonstrating the impossibility of collecting the forfeiture, simultaneously reveals the absence of mercy as the presence of murderous intent, an intent earlier testified to Portia by Shylock's own daughter (III.ii.301–5). It is for this that he is punished.

At least two things are notable from this event in the play. First, it is a female, albeit disguised as a male, who is successful in interpreting and judging a matter of law. Since we are not sure about Desdemona, Portia is the second, if not the third, to disguise herself as a man to assume command of her life. Further, were it not for Portia, who is neither, the conflict between Christian and Jew would have had a bloody ending. That is to say, the conflict would have had an ending more disastrous than the end which is, without doubt, a disaster: Shylock is forced to convert, forced to recognise an unwanted son-in-law's claims upon his estate, and forced to lose half his fortune. It is enough to make one adopt children rather than beget them, as Brabantio recommended.

CONCLUSION

The double portrait of republican fathers and daughters becomes a triptych when set over against the image of Portia and her dead father, and yet, as Brabantio hinted, the three-panelled picture appears to take on a certain depth and dimension only when viewed against the relation of daughters and husbands.

While not ignoring the body's demands, Othello and Desdemona believe they transcend them. Othello seconds Desdemona's pleas to accompany him to

Cyprus, not “to please the palate of my Appetite;/ . . . But to be free, and bounteous to her minde” (I.iii.290 ff.). And yet neither appears to see how this very high-minded, body-disdaining union of souls is peculiarly vulnerable to the suspicion of gross sexual temptation. In soaring too quickly to the highest realm, they ignore the capacity of the lowest to pull them down by its sheer weight.

This ignorance is most patent in Othello. He who, in the Venetian Republic, must rely on others’ willingness to recognize that, although resembling a barbarian in color and birth, his seeming is not the same as his being, yet demands, in an access of childish innocence, that all others be exactly as they seem (II.iii.351–53). But it is the very nature of body to appear and to seem. When it comes to matters of love, Othello, the warrior, really would like to do away with body.

Desdemona’s understanding of body is equally tinged with contradiction. The body in its vulgar manifestations and demands holds little sway over her, but when she says that she would never commit adultery for all the world, her lofty disdain exaggerates, thereby making the body the most important thing in the world itself. Perhaps it is Desdemona’s Christianity that inclines her to the absolute sanctity of marital fidelity. Lacking Emilia’s low, common view of such matters and the manmade laws regulating them, she is less equipped to counter Othello, in contrast to Emilia, whose vulgarity is in direct proportion to her ability to defend herself against male injustice.¹⁹

Desdemona believes the Moor, “true of minde, and made of no such baseness,” is incapable of jealousy because the sun of his birthplace has leached it from him as it burned into his skin (III.iv.29 ff.). Jealousy is the fear that, without one’s consent, the good one possesses is being shared by another (III.iii.313–16). At the very least, it strikes her as a passion more characteristic of the mean spirited than of a man secure in the fullness of his worth. Hence, as Desdemona reads it, Othello’s blackness, far from being a defect, is the sign of the absence of defect, for the sun would not have inflicted such cauterization except in view of some good. Desdemona believes Othello’s nobility of soul is warrant his complexion is not ugly. When first he proves unjust toward her because of a lost handkerchief, she is alarmed to find his true character and being so altered, that were it not for his countenance, she would no longer know him. When the nobility of soul departs, only Othello’s distinctive color remains to testify he is the same.

The disproportion shocks Desdemona; the image of her lover is a reflection of her ideal self and hence a reflection on herself as the beloved. In attempting to keep faith with that image, while reconciling it to her experience of Othello’s injustice over a small thing, she makes an odd comparison. She conjectures either some state matter in Venice or unhatched plot made demonstrable in Cyprus has puddled Othello’s clear spirit. In this, she remarks, he is behaving as men do in politics, hotly disputing petty, insignificant things, all the while

having as their first intention matters of great weight and import.²⁰ It is a falling short of the mark that she likens to an experience of women but which turns out to be the inverse of the men's experience, "For let our finger ake, and it endues/ our other healthfull members, even to a sense/ of paine" (III.iv.168–70). In Desdemona's comparison, the women's experience more accurately reflects the healthy republic wherein an injury to one class is felt by the entire body politic, while the great men of state come to sight as myopic trivializers of the great into the small.²¹

Desdemona has a low opinion of men in politics.²² She suspects her father, who was not above making a public issue of his private griefs as he attempted after her elopement, may very well be responsible for Othello's dismissal from Cyprus and recall to Venice (IV.ii.53–56). Accordingly, the behavior she cannot square with Othello's heroic virtue, she attributes to politics.

The revelation that men in politics behave like women with a finger ache, making a big todo about nothing, leads Desdemona to reverse a belief she presumably held heretofore and/or to enunciate a general directive for women, starting with Emilia and herself: "Nay, we must thinke men are not Gods,/ Nor of them looke for such observancie/ As fits the Bridall" (III.iv.170–72). When all was well between them, Othello called Desdemona his "faire Warrior." Now she taxes herself with being an "unhandsome Warrior" because she has unfairly indicted Othello for his unkindness: only gods are both strong and gentle. But precisely in that passion she thinks unworthy of him is Othello's resemblance to the gods, for the divine is most characterized by its unwillingness to share, which is the same as its desire to be itself and nothing else. Perhaps men most imitate the gods in politics when they fight and wrangle over petty things to keep from sharing their jealously guarded possessions and prerogatives. But whereas a jealous god may even be a mighty god, a jealous man is a paltry creature indeed.

The extent of Othello's possessiveness toward Desdemona is matched by her self-assured command of his love. The Moor himself testifies to it (I.iii.190), Iago corroborates it (II.ii.342, 376), and Desdemona boasts of it with what one critic calls "strumpet-like resolution" (Furness, p.160 n.28). So confident is she that she stakes Cassio's reinstatement on the strength of her dominion over Othello. But there is too much false security, too much complacency in this power that, forged from and soldered to her image of herself as a not-unhandsome warrior, precludes any willingness to peer into the ugliness inseparable from all warriors and heroes, Othello and herself included. Othello loves Desdemona for her pity precisely because it precludes seeing him as ugly. Pity, as Aristotle observed, is a kind of pain caused by some damaging stroke of evil that happens to one who does not deserve it (*Rhetoric* 1385b13ff.). Othello reported Desdemona said she wished she had never heard his tales; the pains they depicted must have pained her, and yet she wished she were such a man to undergo them (I.iii.183–86). The passion of pity is always accompanied by the

painful experience of one's own innocence as the imagination of oneself suffering the same unmerited misfortune.

On her return from death, Desdemona succeeds in duplicating Othello's experiences for which she pitied him. She says three things (V.ii.147–56). First, "O falsely, falsely murder'd" (which may or may not refer to herself, coming on the heels of Othello's "murther's out of tune" reference to Rodorigo). Then, "A guiltlesse death, I dye" (which now clearly does refer to herself). Last, in answer to Emilia's "Who has done this deed," she says, "No body: I my selfe, farewell:/ Commend me to my kinde Lord: oh farewell." Is this the lie by which she hopes to bring good from evil, exculpating Othello by accusing herself? Either the goodness of the lie protects a silent Othello from punishment and simultaneously enables the victim to pardon her murderer, an act of Christ-like nobility, or the goodness of the lie provokes Othello to tell the truth and uncover Desdemona's innocence. The first alternative is well within Desdemona's character, but the second actually occurs.²³ Desdemona's confession of guilt is the expression of conscience generated in the face of Othello's disbelief in her innocence. The inability to persuade another of one's own innocence leads to assuming responsibility for all that happens to one, in short, one's pitiless fate. Hence Desdemona says that no body has done the deed but she herself.

Othello, on the other hand, believes himself nothing if not perfectly just in killing Desdemona for her infidelity (V.ii.79–80). He believes her deathbed lie not only damns her soul to hell but offers more proof of the reason for which he killed her: she was false, she was other than she seemed. He cannot keep silent: "She's like a Liar gone to burning hell,/ Twas I that killed her" (V.ii.162–63). His justice demands to be made public: "O, I were damn'd beneath all depth in hell:/ But that I did proceed upon just grounds/ To this extremity" (171–73).²⁴ What Othello loved in Desdemona was her ability to feel his pains as her own, i.e., unmerited. Her innocence reveals her pains as unmerited; his are most richly deserved and so he kills himself. Desdemona's lie retains its character of selfless nobility while resulting in Othello's death. The morality of the believer's faith in the impossible appears to have triumphed over the unbeliever's denial of the miraculous.

The easy banter between Lorenzo and Jessica regarding her possible dalliance with the Clown (III.v.28–29) is unthinkable between Othello and Desdemona, but then neither is Lorenzo a jealous husband nor Jessica as sure of her empire over Lorenzo. She wants to hear reassurances of his sentiments *before* she hands over the money she appropriates as she elopes, and even *after* the elopement, Jessica guards her playful scepticism of Lorenzo's frequent pledges, as if his lighthearted promotions of himself as a paragon of fidelity hinted an insufficient grasp of the gravity of her actions. The moondrenched night inspires Lorenzo to conjure the stock romantic scenario of the constant lover and his faithless beloved, Troilus and Cressida. Jessica counters with the

tragic tale of two very young and innocent lovers, Pyramus and Thisbe, thwarted by family opposition. Sensing a correction, Lorenzo responds invoking Dido, abandoned by Aeneas. Jessica counters once more, calling up the image of Medea, gathering plants to aid in her sorcery. Lorenzo, at last, comes nearer the point. Both of his examples depict lovers betrayed by their beloveds, first a man, then a woman, but in Jessica's two examples, neither woman is faithless; on the contrary, both disobey and betray their parents, the better to keep faith with their loves. The closest mirror to Jessica is Medea, who disobeys her father's orders to save Jason's life, who marries into a foreign circle and rejuvenates her father-in-law, but not before cutting his throat. There is just a trace of remorse, mingled with self-justification, in this image of a rebellious daughter cutting a patriarch's throat for his own good, much as Jessica rejuvenates her father by causing him to be born again as a Christian.

Jessica, like Othello, is a convert to Christianity, but her reasons are pragmatic. Becoming a loving wife and a Christian are inextricably linked for her. Her new religion requires her to lose a father to gain a husband (II.iii.21–22; v.59–60), and she willingly pays the price. Desdemona is also willing to relinquish a father for a husband, but if renouncing her Christianity were a condition for marriage to Othello, it is not at all clear she would have consented with the same lighthearted ease as Jessica. Jessica never utters an oath nor calls upon the divine as guarantee. She invokes not God but her lover's name only once as the guarantor of the success of her elopement (II.iii.20). For Othello and Desdemona, heaven and hell are real. Desdemona believes heaven controls the increase or decrease of joys on earth (II.i.222–25). Jessica, the most brazen of the daughters, believes it is possible to find the joys of heaven on earth, if one but observe the mean. Her example of this felicity, seated in the mean, is Portia, she who has no equal among women (III.v.69–74) nor, we suspect, among men. It is Portia who reveals that the mean differs greatly from either extreme. Through the theme of friendship, which figures in both plays, it is possible to glimpse this difference.

Desdemona values friendship as a virtue. It prompts her to press for Cassio's reappointment. It is, however, an exaggerated zeal, fueled by a conviction that her virtue as a friend demands she do more than she is requested (II.i.185). This assessment, although Iago's, is later confirmed by Desdemona herself (III.iii.26–27) and appears to be the result of his observations of Desdemona when she virtually commands him praise the best of women since he has thus far praised the worst of women best. Desdemona defines the best woman: she whose merit is such that malice even despite itself corroborates it. That Desdemona has herself in mind as the actualization of the definition is not as certain as that its expression is an ideal to which she aspires. Iago most perversely praises the best worst, and Desdemona is stung by his cynical prediction that even Butterflies of War end up domestic drones. All her actions, from choosing Othello, going to war, championing Cassio, even to her return from

the dead, emphatically repudiate the fate of the best woman to accomplish no more than "To suckle Fooles, and chronicle small Beere" (II.i.185).

Portia, in her turn, values friendship, but she chooses the occasion of its display with more prudence than Desdemona. She is all too conscious of Antonio's grip upon her husband, in the name of a kind of friendship reminiscent of Jesus' sacrifice of his life in friendship for mankind. The Christian, forever indebted, mourns the great loss for his sake, as would Bassanio if Shylock had his way. Portia is careful not to appear to be the wife who would tie her husband tightly to her apron strings. Her willingness to allow her husband to go off even before the honeymoon earns the admiration of Lorenzo for such a godlike concept of amity. It is rather more than divine in its apparent willingness to share, and although we take seriously her subsequent speech regarding the mutuality of friendship, we also note that she has a plan by which to suit action to words.

The plan is a forked attack. The first stroke by which Portia pries her husband loose from Antonio's bonds is to dissolve the bond Shylock holds over Antonio. Next, she ensures the primacy of her bond with Bassanio by the game of the rings. In asking for the ring she had given him, the disguised Portia tests Bassanio's pledge, literal and symbolic, never to part with it. Bassanio is staunch, until Antonio insists the wife's commandment be weighed against the young lawyer's merit and Antonio's love. In essence, Antonio has pitted his importance against Portia's. The young lawyer's merit consists only in having saved Antonio's life, and Antonio's love means not just his love for Bassanio but Bassanio's reciprocation.

Portia's final coup is to use the same ring to make Antonio bind himself to her as the guarantor of Bassanio's fidelity to Portia. Thus, when she reveals that she was the young Daniel, Antonio realizes he is doubly bound to Portia, the sweet lady who has given him both life and living in returning his wealth.

At least two of the women resort to some masculine disguise in order to take command of their lives, but only Jessica's is intended to repudiate the notion upheld by the law that daughters are their fathers' property. The success of Portia's masculine disguise is more suited to Desdemona's spiritual home, the best republic, whose virtue it is to give justice according to souls rather than bodies. In contrast to Jessica and Desdemona, some part of Portia's success in conducting her life must be attributed to her status as an heiress, already in possession of her estate, while the other two seek to establish theirs. The remainder of her success is due in no small part to her mind which is quick and not nearly so innocent as Desdemona's.²⁵

The Venetian Republic's fundamental commitment to accommodate both citizens and foreigners on the basis of commutative or commercial justice is seriously threatened by the marriages of Jessica and Desdemona. These marriages outside the family betray the family and affirm eros as lawless. Figurative parricides, the republican daughters are more violent in their rebellion than Portia.

The decisions the Duke makes regarding them oblige him to consider distinctions in the importance of Othello, Shylock, and Antonio to the republic, distinctions more consonant with distributive than commutative justice. Portia, on the other hand, is better matched than either Jessica or Desdemona, since she is not obliged to seek her happiness in alien or exotic circles. In the matter of her marriage to Bassanio, there is some question, however, whether he is as extraordinary a man as she is a woman. If he is not her equal, it may well be that it is more difficult to marry off exceptional women suitably than exceptional men.

As Bassanio is not his wife's equal, neither is Othello nor Lorenzo. Bassanio's value as a husband is perhaps more apparent in comparison: he would not have deserved either Shylock or Brabantio as a father-in-law.

Jessica fares better than Desdemona because of her insolent courage; Desdemona is courageous but, prompted by pity, too willing to take upon herself the burden of imaginary sins (IV.ii.125–27). Portia, who fares best of all, gets what she wants while acceding to patriarchal demands. Such felicitous reconciliation of the necessary and the voluntary is rare but perhaps not accidental for Portia who, alone of all the daughters, dwells in no existent republic, while her name conjures reminiscence of another more perfect republic, in a time long ago, whose deeds now remain only in writings and speech.

NOTES

1. Allan Bloom, "On Christian and Jew," in Allan Bloom with Harry V. Jaffa, *Shakespeare's Politics* (New York, 1964), p. 14.
2. All citations are to the Furness variorum edition (Philadelphia, 1888).
3. "Tush," appears in the quartos but is omitted from the first folio (1623); cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. Thus, while the play's first words enjoin silence, the last words proclaim the intention to make public the tale: "and to the State, / this heave Act, with heave heart relate" V.ii.447–48.
4. It is not surprising that Desdemona, reared in a republican regime, should value the capacity for self-governance and take pride in that independence; cf. III.iv.53–54 and I.iii.281–82.
5. This notion of property and substance as somehow connected is visible in classical Greek, where the word for "substance" or "being," as used in philosophy, is the same word for property or possession, *ousia*; cf. Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v.
6. There is a similarity between Desdemona's behavior and Iago's professed *modus operandi*. Desdemona, to get what she wants, is willing to appear not to be who she is. Thus, in following a feigned image of herself, she appears not to follow herself, III.iii.236ff. Iago says that he follows Othello, the better to serve himself; "I am not what I am," I.i.45ff., especially 62–71.
7. Anthony Ashley Cooper, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (London, 1714), vol. 1, p. 348; Bloom, p.72 n.44.
8. Chief among this play's distinguishing marks is the pervasive duplicity of its major characters; everyone lies either in speech or deed.
9. Cooper, p. 349. The kinds of tales Othello tells, and the delight they awaken in those who hear them, resemble the description Cervantes gives of the tales of chivalry and the passion they engendered. Miguel Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Samuel Putnam (New York: Modern Library, 1949), p. 131 bottom, pp. 275 ff.

10. Desdemona is the only one in the play to invoke the divine with such frequency: she calls upon Heaven thirteen times.

11. There has been much ink spilled on the subject of Shylock, and I should like to avoid drowning in that sea. I take my cue from Allan Bloom (p.18) that Shakespeare depicts Antonio and Shylock not merely as individuals but as types representative of Christianity and Judaism, although neither is a pure or ideal specimen.

12. Furness, *The Merchant of Venice*, pp.80–81 nn. 12,13, especially Dyce; also pp.443–44. For more on Judaism as a matter of race, see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1979), pp. xi–xii.

13. Irving Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, 8th ed. (New York,1990), p. 269.

14. For an interesting interpretation of the true identities of these suitors, see “Portia’s Suitors,” by Richard Kuhns and Barbara Tovey, in *Philosophy and Literature*, 13, n.2 (October 1989): 325–31.

15. While Shakespeare seems to suggest that Christianity encourages self-sacrifice, there is probably more to the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio than either religion or simple friendship. See Barbara Tovey, “The Golden Casket: An Interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice*,” in *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, ed. John Alvis and Thomas G. West (Durham, N.C., 1981), pp.215–37.

16. H.F. Jolowicz, *Historical Introduction to the Study of Roman Law* (Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp.161–65, 166–69.

17. Shylock cannot be allowed to win, for at this point Antonio does not represent so much himself as all those who subscribe to this principle of living nobly; cf. Plato, *Crito* 48b. Antonio, however, is no Socrates, because at Antonio’s age, Socrates took care to preserve his life by staying out of politics.

18. The wager thus symbolizes the profound disagreement between Christian and Jewish beliefs.

19. There is a certain similarity in Emilia’s view of justice between men and women and Shylock’s view of justice between Christians and Jews; cf. *The Merchant of Venice* IV.i.53–66 and *Othello* IV.iii.95–112.

20. Aristotle, *Politics* 1303b17ff.; Desdemona is present when her father equates the theft of his daughter with the theft of Cyprus by the Turks, I.iii.236ff.

21. Plato, *Republic* 462c. See also Cervantes (p. 523) where Quixote explains the very same thing to Sancho Panza in relation to themselves.

22. Nevertheless, Desdemona does understand politics; cf. III.i.48–54; III.iii.15–17.

23. Desdemona is willing to pardon even such a villain as Iago, IV.ii.159.

24. Othello is most concerned about Desdemona’s soul; cf. V.ii.29–38, 61–67, 161–62. It is important that Desdemona’s revival and the news of Cassio’s survival occur together. There is no point to the former without the latter. Desdemona is unaware of Emilia’s role in the lost handkerchief and so believes Cassio is her only means to establish her innocence. Thus, upon Othello’s testimony, when she believes Cassio is dead, she says, “Alas, he is betray’d, and I undone,” V.ii.96.

25. That Portia is not as virginal in mind as Desdemona seems attested by the rather frank conversation she has with Nerissa, as they discuss the escapade of dressing up as men, III.iv.59–81, especially the last lines. Some commentators look for excuses to read the passage another way, the better to save a certain false image of Portia and feminine modesty; cf. Furness, pp.179–80 n.75.