"Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will": Melancholy Epistemology and Masochistic Fantasy in The Merchant of Venice

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“Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will”: Melancholy Epistemology and Masochistic Fantasy in *The Merchant of Venice*

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I. Weariness and Wariness

**Foreclosing knowledge from its first line**, *The Merchant of Venice* may begin but it doesn’t quite open. We begin startled, at impasse, greeted by this concession of defeat:

**ANTONIO**

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

(1.1.1–7)

For Antonio, melancholy is not only an illness—it is a discourse, a field of study, and one whose daunting curriculum (etiology, source, transmission, substance, and origin) mocks his exhaustion. Presenting this failure in the play’s first line, *The Merchant of Venice* commences with an invitation to interpret melancholy pitched oddly between opportunity, challenge, and therapeutic responsibility. Its epistemological mystery anticipates the seeming causelessness central to Burton’s portable definition of atrabilious disease in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621): “a kinde of dotage without a feaver, having for his ordinary companions,

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This essay was written under the successive guidance of Richard Halpern and Janet Adelman; I am grateful to them both for their criticism, advice, and generosity. Janet Adelman’s death, which occurred in the interim between this essay’s acceptance and its publication, deals a stark blow to both Shakespeare studies and psychoanalytic criticism. Although it can only be slight recompense for the gift of her teaching and her friendship, I dedicate this essay to her. I also thank the editors of *Shakespeare Quarterly* and my anonymous readers for their helpful corrections and suggestions.

feare, and sadnesse, without any apparent occasion.” Regardless of whether we take Antonio’s negation of self-knowledge as a direct confession of a problem he cannot solve or as a coy evasion of a truth he would rather not speak, his statement constitutes his sadness as an interpretive puzzle for others, within and without the play. His melancholy at once creates and resists knowledge.

We already know what psychoanalysis would have to say about this condition: the translation of early modern “melancholy” into Freudian “melancholia.” The widespread adoption and absorption of psychoanalytic terms and phrases into ready-to-hand critical commonplaces have coincided with canonical acknowledgments of psychoanalysis’s reductions and biases, the historical, cultural, and hermeneutic horizons of what Derrida was already calling in 1979 “these extremely old matters.” In the case of Antonio—and he is presented as a “case,” complete with diagnostic speculation and a therapeutic race for a cure—one might expect psychoanalytic theory to encourage us to dutifully uncover the lost object of love, the person or idea that has undergone a symbolic “death,” now mourned and encrypted beneath the troubled surface of the melancholy symptom. Registering the overfamiliarity of such a reading, Henry S. Turner speaks for the impatience of many in politely wanting to change the subject: “How are we to explain the cause of Antonio’s sadness? One ready psychoanalytic answer—a melancholia brought on by the failure to incorporate a lost Other; a generalized mourning constituted by a lack in the subject’s (unconscious) refusal of a (homo)erotic object—risks foreclosing full considerations of the play’s ethical and political difficulties.”


4 I invoke the term “case” with due caution. Lauren Berlant’s apt definition of the case as “any irritating obstacle to clarity” indirectly recalls Antonio’s own self-regard; for my purposes, Berlant goes one better in flagging the response that such irritations call forth (“What matters is the idiom of the judgment”); the means through which Antonio’s sadness generates judgment constitutes the therapeutic effect of melancholy for his spectators and would-be caregivers within and without the play. See “On the Case,” Critical Inquiry 33 (2007): 663–72, esp. 666.

psychoanalysis that does the foreclosing, but a too-pat reduction of the psychoanalytic interpretation of melancholia into an Easter-egg hunt for a lost Object, in which such losses are necessarily prior to the ethical or political constitution of the subject. Such an orientation would not necessarily exclude or preclude those domains (for example, despairing thoughts of personal damnation could prompt the loss of the self as an object of love for ethical reasons; internalized shame at one’s exclusion from citizenship could prompt the loss of the self as an object of love for political reasons). I take even a reductive account of psychoanalytic reading to at least potentially assist us in considering the ethical and political difficulties rather than to foreclose or preempt them, and I intend in this essay to do just that. But one must also take Turner’s point as an index (dare one say symptom?) of a broader phenomenon: the waning critical purchase of psychoanalytic explanations within Shakespeare studies.

One would not expect a critic who is, as they say, “of another party” to allow psychoanalytic terms to impede the business of interpreting Antonio’s mysterious affect within The Merchant of Venice; but the absence of such critical rubrics is more striking in recent interpretations of the character and the play from psychoanalytic critics themselves. Janet Adelman and Julia Reinhard Lupton are exemplary here. Their recent accounts of Antonio push off from within psychoanalytic language and frameworks, but they instead concentrate upon intellectual and religious history, political theology, and scriptural exegesis. Thus, the weariness of Antonio in thinking about the cause of his own sadness finds its mirror and complement in a certain ambient wariness on the part of early modern literary critics about the capacity of psychoanalysis to understand Antonio. Case closed?

I share the wariness, but the potential oversimplification of a hostile takeover that the standard theory of melancholia offers when brought to bear upon Antonio is not a sign of the limits of psychoanalysis itself, but of a too-credulous reliance upon the translation of early modern melancholy into its clinical near-

297–315. I want to point out that Turner’s weary / wary familiarity is not the same as Greenblatt’s dismissive rejection; it represents a historical bend in the road in which psychoanalysis is not so much conceptually wrong (and therefore worthy of spirited opposition) as it is an all-too-satisfying and overfamiliar resting place for critical practice, an intellectual comfort food that one must forego for the sake of rigor. This is a fate worse than hostility.

6 To be sure, psychoanalytic modes of argument surface in Adelman’s text, as when she speaks of Lancelot’s “fantasy” of the Christian knave begetting Jessica as a “condensation”; overall, such language is the exception rather than the rule. Adelman’s readings in Blood Relations rely far less upon psychoanalytic concepts than her previous work, and the thrust of the book’s arguments are historical and exegetical, rather than psychoanalytic. See Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in “The Merchant of Venice” (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008), 66–98, esp. 72. See also Julia Reinhard Lupton, Citizen-Saints: Shakespeare and Political Theology (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005), 73–101.
homonym. The interpretive pathway into Antonio’s self-defeating sadness suggested by psychoanalysis should not proceed along the standard route toward its preordained answer, but ought to tackle the antagonism and difficulty of this character, the resistance to knowledge that hides behind the demand to be known. How do we connect Antonio’s desire for the source of his sadness to be known with his curious, indeed queer, desire to be seen to suffer that threatens to erupt in the trial scene?

If Antonio begins the play as a melancholic who cannot name the source of his despair, by the trial scene he has found a way out in the imminent spectacle of his own torture and death. Antonio’s anxious cry “Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will” (4.1.83) articulates a desire that is explicable only if we go beyond the clinical understanding of melancholia and instead consider its contours in terms of a no less psychoanalytic critical formulation: masochism. Retroactively, the contract between Antonio and Shylock can be understood as a classic masochistic contract and expresses a collaborative dynamic of suffering and spectatorship that we see underlying Antonio’s initial display of melancholic suffering. Were this account to burrow into Antonio’s psyche in search of further local confirmation for a freestanding logic of the symptom, the result would grant Turner’s scenario of foreclosure: the psychoanalytic reading would disavow the ethical and the political stakes, privatizing critique at the level of the literary subject. But as I will show, the structure of subjection and desire at work within Antonio’s melancholy and his masochism bears a wider resemblance to the buried contradictions that drive the turning worlds of Venice and Belmont. The extraction of the pound of flesh is not Antonio’s masochistic fantasy alone, but the political and ethical fantasy of subjection at the heart of the playtext that surrounds him.

Disentangling the knot that joins melancholy and masochism cannot proceed unless the tension in application and sense between these two terms always remains in play; their very separateness within the experience of the play (Antonio begins as a melancholic and ends as a masochist) and within psychoanalytic theory (melancholy is theorized in terms of identification and masochism in relation to libido and the drives) must be drawn out in order for the structure and effects of their productive collision in Antonio to emerge more clearly. Antonio’s masochism is not a symptomatic expression of the previous condition of his melancholy but rather a revision of it that both repeats and expands its problematic: melancholy’s epistemological deadlock of barred but possible meanings gives way to masochism’s overproduction of coextensive erotic, juridical, economic, and religious meanings. The first critical reference to Antonio as a masochist that I have discovered occurs as a tantalizing—albeit momentary—glance at Antonio’s “intimation of masochistic satisfaction” in René Girard’s “To Entrap the Wisest: A Reading of The Merchant of Venice,” in Literature and Society, ed. Edward W. Said (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), 100–19, esp. 115. Having flagged this possibility, Girard’s text moves on to its own concerns with scapegoating and mimesis.
II. The “Standing Pond” of Melancholy

Antonio’s opening assertion of ignorance does not go unchallenged. In confidently suggesting that Antonio’s sadness is not a mystery at all but a result of the financial insecurity of his risky business ventures, Salerio and Solanio convey Antonio’s occupation as the titular merchant and sketch the dangers and rewards of the broader world of Venetian mercantile capital. Salerio’s account of how the visual details of one’s surroundings could call up associations with the absent ships laden with merchandise provides a miniature account of the workings of the melancholy mind:

Should I go to church
And see the holy edifice of stone
And not bethink me straight of dangerous rocks
Which, touching but my gentle vessel’s side,
Would scatter all her spices on the stream,
Enrobe the roaring waters with my silks,
And, in a word, but even now worth this,
And now worth nothing? Shall I have the thought
To think on this, and shall I lack the thought
That such a thing bechanced would make me sad?

(1.1.29–38)

If Antonio initially depicts the melancholy subject as marked by an aporetic void or resistant cluster of ignorance, Salerio’s remark rethinks this, supplementing Antonio’s definition of melancholy as a kind of dumbfounded ignorance with a compensatory potency, familiar from the tradition of pseudo-Aristotelian genial melancholy: the claim that melancholy provides the subject with access to truth. Melancholic speculation upon capital can articulate a hidden knowledge

See Aristotle, “Book XXX: Problems Connected with Prudence, Intelligence and Wisdom,” in Problemata, ed. E. S. Forster, vol. 7 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 953–55; and Lawrence Babb, The Elizabethan Malady: A Study of Melancholia in English Literature from 1580 to 1642 (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1951), 58–72, esp. 59. The current critical consensus on melancholy favors a decidedly Galenic definition of atrabilious disease as an embodied humoral condition, a pathology of inward fluid imbalance and outward symptom; see, for example, Douglas Trevor, The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004); and Gail Kern Paster, Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004). While I grant the clinical predominance of Galenism during the period, I find this framework incomplete as an explanation for melancholy’s promiscuous cultural circulation outside the sickroom. Accordingly, I wish to reanimate the older, dialectical account of melancholy’s intellectual history put forward in Babb’s Elizabethan Malady, in particular, Babb’s account of the tension between its Galenic definition as a pathology and its “genial,” Aristotelian definition as an index of unique personal distinction (1–21). Only such an account can explain the forceful pressure of Gratiano’s account of melancholy as a bid for sta-
of negation which is always threateningly present within it, if only as a latent possibility.

The play’s opening lines shift from a portrayal of the melancholic as one who does not know to a portrayal of the melancholic as one who knows all too well, who attends too closely to an unanswerable threat which is universally, trivially true (the commodity can always be destroyed) and fundamentally “unhealthy” to think about (that is, hostile to the capitalist narrative of profit and increase and thus in a sense, literally counterproductive). To dwell too attentively upon such a possible outcome is, to borrow a phrase from Horatio, “to consider too curiously” (Hamlet, 5.1.205). The stakes of this counterproductivity of melancholy knowledge are considerably amplified in Antonio’s eventual identification with the “tainted wether of the flock” (4.1.114), but it is significant that this model of melancholy knowledge is not claimed or affirmed by Antonio himself but produced by Salerio and projected onto Antonio as a possible content for his troubling emptiness. The constitutive blankness of Antonio’s melancholy, far from stopping discourse short, seduces and triggers it. Salerio’s image of a loaded merchant vessel bursting open and revealing its contents figures the task of melancholy interpretation itself; the rock pierces the sturdy side of the ship, penetrating to the valued content within, making it available yet also emptying it of value. In an anticipation of Antonio’s later shift from melancholic to masochist, being known, being opened, and being destroyed are all brought into a charged proximity from the very beginning of the play.9

With a keen therapeutic thrust, Gratiano interrogates the desire behind Antonio’s announcement of ignorance and issues the first direct challenge to Antonio’s melancholy gambit, suggesting that melancholy is not a retreat from the social but another way of circulating within it:

There are a sort of men whose visages
Do cream and mantle like a standing pond,
And do a willful stillness entertain
With purpose to be dressed in an opinion
Of wisdom, gravity, profound conceit,
As who should say “I am Sir Oracle,
And when I ope my lips let no dog bark!”
(1.1.88–94)

9 As Adelman describes Antonio’s “ambivalent desire for such an opening up,” this speech “images Antonio’s body as a container of riches—its own variant of infinite riches in a little room—made visible only by the touch that would annihilate him” (118).
His caricature of the somber melancholic is so humorous and distracting that one almost does not notice that Antonio’s own melancholy strives to achieve precisely the opposite effect. Far from seeking to induce a silent awe and respect, Antonio strives to generate conversational interest in his secret, repeatedly drawing those around him into its analysis. The effect of Antonio’s melancholy is not to deepen the level of discourse progressively, but to hold stubbornly at the surface. Far from being oracular, as he entertains and rejects his companion’s diagnostic sallies, Antonio seems flatly chatty but blank, at least until Bassanio arrives on the scene. While Gratiano’s speech does not hit home, it does re-inscribe the play’s concern with the epistemology and poetics of opacity: does the creamy standing pond conceal hidden treasure in its depths? Is it brackish wastewater, or simply more surface? 

Rhetorical play upon the lack of correspondence between interior nature and exterior show is the melancholic gambit par excellence. As a trope of melancholic identification, it hints at an inward richness of feeling concealed by the stony external posture of melancholic stasis; as a trope of critique, it allows the melancholic to attack others aggressively and suggest that their surface goodness and happiness mask a hidden reverse of shame, guilt, and morbidity. Shakespeare repeatedly places such imagery of deceptive surface and hidden truth in the mouths of melancholics, culminating with Hamlet’s obsessive images of the morbidity and infection concealed beneath the bodily surface, and there are many analogues to such a poetics within The Merchant of Venice, from the gold casket scene with the Prince of Morocco to Antonio’s proverbial excursus:

The devil can cite Scripture to his purpose.
An evil soul producing holy witness
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,
A goodly apple rotten at the heart.
Oh, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!

(1.3.96–100)

10 For more on contemporary debates and the nature and extent of the supposed connection between melancholy and oracular knowledge, see Winfried Schleiner, Melancholy, Genius and Utopia in the Renaissance (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1991). There is also a long sequence of critical writings on the imagination that are potentially relevant here; see Murray Bundy, The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Medieval Thought (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1927).

11 Among the many examples, the most direct are Hamlet’s warning to Gertrude: “It will but skin and film the ulcerous place, / Whiles rank corruption, mining all within, / Infects unseen” (3.4.154–56); Hamlet’s image of “th’imposthume of much wealth and peace / That inward breaks, and shows no cause without / Why the man dies” (4.4.28–30); and Claudius’s “The harlot’s cheek, beautied with plast’ring art” (3.1.52). Claudius also compares himself to “the owner of a foul disease’ who “To keep it from divulging, [lets] it feed, / Even on the pith of life” (4.2.21–23).
While it shares this standard surface-depth topology, Gratiano’s use of the trope critically changes the value of its standard articulation. Concluding his sermon, Gratiano asks that Antonio “fish not with this melancholy bait / For this fool gudgeon, this opinion” (1.1.101–2). Antonio stands accused of cynically exploiting the very difference between surface and depth that structures the melancholy trope. This discursive reduction of melancholy is left hanging, unanswered and perhaps unanswerable. The image of fishing with melancholy bait interlocks with the preceding image of the standing pond, with the blankly serious face of melancholy functioning as the pool in which one fishes (for the meaning of sadness) and the bait with which one fishes (for the respect and opinion of others). Gratiano’s mixed metaphor is at once a comic failure of wit and the commencement of a subtly violent poetic, in which the epistemological quest for a fixed content for melancholy is articulated through fantasies of opening the body. Here, physical opacity codes epistemological barriers, but frustration at the latter does not trigger fantasies of violence upon the former. Rather, the very stasis of melancholy, its fixity and physical passivity, is represented as an affront, which incites violence. The creamy surface skin cries out to be ripped or slit open to reveal the supposed truths concealed beneath its ostensible blankness, a blankness that incites a violent anatomization of its interiority because of its “too, too solid” material status. The standing pond of the melancholic face is deceptive insofar as a solid skin has formed over a liquid pool—the very solidity of the creamy mantle represents not just enclosure but deception, treachery, and masquerade.

The play repeatedly figures the violation of Antonio’s melancholic body with such imagery of fishing, and not always in Gratiano’s gently comic tone. Later in the play, this poetic recurs chillingly in Shylock’s reaction at the news that Antonio’s ships have foundered:

**salerio**  
Why, I am sure, if he forfeit, thou wilt not take  
his flesh. What’s that good for?

**shylock**  
To bait fish withal.

(3.1.48–50)

The extraction of the pound of flesh threatens to gruesomely literalize Gratiano’s metaphor of “fishing with melancholy bait” as Shylock imagines himself baiting fishhooks with the morcellated fragments of Antonio’s melancholy body. Far more than just an index of his “Jewish” cruelty, this remark must be read at several levels, in terms of Shylock’s own character and of the poetics of the play as a whole. In the received wisdom, depicted as ambient within the world of the play, Shylock’s remark echoes and confirms Gratiano’s prior insight that the melancholic uses his body as bait, dangling it before others, teasing them with
the possibility of knowing his interior secret. The stock melancholic expression of puzzling sadness and the public announcement that “I know not why I am so sad” are also bait for spectators, tools to acquire the cultural capital that was thought to attend the privileged status of the melancholic as oracular sage or genius: this is the core idea that unites Gratiano’s first image of the standing pond to his secondary accusation of fishing with melancholy bait. Shylock’s final echoing of the same fishing image intensifies that accusation by insisting upon a literal enactment of what was, for Gratiano, only a turn of phrase.

The play also makes available an anti-Semitic reading of this remark, which detects in it the workings of a certain “Jewish” literalism (Shylock voices not a metaphor about fishing but an actual plan to fish) and “Jewish” thrift (as Shylock sees it, even the dead can be put to work). Shylock’s imagination contrives an economically productive use for what his Christian interlocutor Salerio regards as a worthless, excremental remainder, providing a further example for the play’s anti-Semitic spectators of the seemingly magical capacity of Jews to extract a surplus of capital from dead matter. Where a Christian sees an end to circulation, the Jew discovers the possibility of one more transaction through funereal usury. Putting such anti-Semitism aside, we can say that Shylock’s remark ironically ratifies Gratiano’s insight that the melancholic remains in circulation and sutures together the epistemological and economic valences of the fishing-pool image. It translates an economy of cultural capital (where respect and esteem are gained or lost by tricking others into belief) back into a material economy, in which beliefs are bracketed out and value is not a matter of rhetorical persuasion but material possession. What Shylock refuses in this work of translation (and it is a blind spot that will haunt him in the courtroom) is the mirage that hypnotizes both the melancholic subject and his Christian spectators: the possibility of absolute loss.

Building upon the founding presupposition of melancholy excellence in Aristotle’s Problem 30, the cultural capital of melancholic suffering was reintroduced into European culture with Marsilio Ficino’s Three Books on Life. In particular, see the chapters “Learned People Are Subject to Phlegm and Black bile,” “How Many Things Cause Learned People Either to Be Melancholy or to Eventually Become So,” and (with notable self-sabotage), “Why Melancholics Are Intelligent, and Which Melancholies Are So and Which Are Not” in Three Books on Life: A Critical Edition and Translation with Introduction and Notes, ed. Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark (Tempe, AZ: Renaissance Society of America, 2002). As Babb argues (58–72), Ficino’s reassertion of the genial tradition rippled into the broader cultural surround, was imported back to England, and brought with it a concomitant anxiety about the possible falsification of melancholy posture as a bid to secure a reputation for gravity and intellectual depth. See also Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, “Melancholia Generosa: The Glorification of Melancholy and Saturn in Florentine Neoplatonism and the Birth of the Modern Notion of Genius,” in Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art (New York: Basic Books, 1964), 241–54.
The consolation scenes that follow sequentially (for surely Portia’s complaint that “my little body is aweary of this great world” [1.2.1–2] is a melancholic echo of Antonio’s) signal an inconclusive series of distinct, mutually contradictory readings of melancholy: as a problem of knowledge, a sound but comic reaction to financial pressure, a calculated pose, and an economically based surfeit. All of these possible answers have an intuitive appeal, and yet all are partial; none seems quite sufficient. This solicitation of our interpretive energy, combined with a foreclosure of any possible solution, constitutes the epistemology of melancholy as a double bind: a proliferation of potential causal theories that overdetermines the reason for melancholy, on the one hand, and a poverty of verifiability about the inner experience being attested to, on the other.

The effect of this proliferation is not just a confirmation of ambient sixteenth-century skepticism, although that is one of its effects. This dynamic of scarcity-in-glut generates a kind of textual inflammation: a hovering, nonspecific curiosity; a dramatic heightening of desire for access to an absent interior; a hybrid imaginative space between Antonio’s self or soul and his body. This interior can be understood in psychological terms as a psychic self-encryption of affect, and speeches such as Antonio’s opening lament about self-knowledge suggest a working definition of melancholy interiority as mental privacy, or the self-presence of a thinking subject. This interiority can be literally fleshed out, as a somatic state or mode of melancholic embodiment in which the body is subject to a humoral excess of melancholy adust and is flooded with a particular fluid. This understanding of melancholic interiority, as a physically inner space that could actually be opened up, is imagined in images of formal anatomization and corporeal destruction, such as Salerio’s description of the breached ship’s hull spilling its contents. It is this ambition to be known through a violation of the melancholy interior that the melancholic solicits and that the extraction of the pound of flesh threatens to realize so graphically.

Biting at the melancholy bait, countless critics and audience members have responded by proposing various definitive answers to the question of Antonio’s sadness, thereby entering the circle of comforters and would-be eulogizers that his melancholy suffering and contractual doom call forth. Such a reaction misses the extent to which, as Gratiano suggests, melancholy operates within the

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play by hovering above the grounding that any particular answer would provide. Once his ships have foundered and Antonio is caught within a contract that mandates his physical suffering, the flexible vagueness or productive blankness of his melancholy adapts accordingly, shifting from the discursive to the somatic. Antonio’s initial desire to know himself and be known by others quickly modulates into a desire to be seen and to be seen suffering physical pain. The desire to be seen is a revision of the desire to be known that promises to resolve Antonio’s melancholy problematic at the level of fantasy. This translation of the play’s poetics of “opening” from the epistemological to the visual determines Antonio’s conditional embrace of his sentence:

These griefs and losses have so bated me
That I shall hardly spare a pound of flesh.
Tomorrow to my bloody creditor.—
Well, jailer, on. Pray God Bassanio come
To see me pay his debt, and then I care not.
(3.3.32–36)

Facing the threat of Shylock’s bond with a provocatively indeterminate mixture of heroic resignation and self-destructive longing, Antonio’s “standing pond” now offers a scenic point of speculation into the motives beneath its surface calm. The same problems of identity and intersubjective knowledge that obtained in the debates about the cause of Antonio’s sadness in the play’s opening act are sustained and intensified by his troubling reaction to the bond’s mortal gravity. When literary critics and audience members struggle to determine a motivation for this weirdly passive stance, the same promiscuous abundance of explanatory frameworks is called forth—only to fall short. Does he act out of love or hate? And love and hate for whom? Discrimination between the claims of seemingly exclusive discourses (economic, religious, and sexual) ends in aporetic defeat, because the play as a whole represents those three discursive domains as relentlessly interpenetrated, always in circulation, and circularly defined in terms borrowed from each other.

Antonio’s melancholy functions as a discursive switch point that allows it to “carry” any or all of the multiple, overdetermining explanations his behavior solicits: merchant capitalist anxiety, Christian heroism, unrequited homoerotic desire, moral masochism. Constituted by its affective repertoire of stances, poses, and symptoms, melancholy can function without loyalty to any of these


local categories, but draws opportunistically upon all of them. Such an ability to be both everywhere and nowhere has been modeled compellingly in Richard Halpern’s account of “the Jew” as systematized by anti-Semitic fantasy. Drawing upon Marx’s analysis of “the money-form,” Halpern argues that “the Jew is forced to play a representational role with respect to bourgeois cultural values very like the one that money plays with respect to economic value.”

The Jew’s identity accommodates seemingly contradictory ideological valences, a representational overload that Halpern graphs as an example of “general equivalence” in which Freemason equals Jew, Jacobin equals Jew, Bolshevik equals Jew, capitalist equals Jew, and so on, endlessly: “In this static, paranoid structure, the Jews are not part of a general flow or exchange but are the one term capable of connecting others (such as Bolsheviks or bankers) who would otherwise seem antithetical.”

The melancholic proves equally susceptible to such a proliferation of multiple, potentially antithetical identifications, in which capitalist equals melancholic, Christian martyr equals melancholic, homosexual equals melancholic, masochist equals melancholic, and so on. The list of potential additional identities is long; I have sketched only those the play seems to propose as roles for the “sad part” that Antonio plays. Halpern’s structure provides a model for thinking through overdetermination that is not a lateral profusion of equally likely causes but a bottleneck in which multiple components of lived social subjection equally in play (to norms of sexuality, to economic practices, to civil laws) are routed through an organizing trait whose particular qualities allow suspension between conflicting, mutually incompatible rationales.

In the opening consolation scenes, the play insistently locates melancholy identification in relation to economic determination, as the consequence of the risks of merchant capital or the emptiness imagined to attend its acquisition. The play also keeps open the possibility of melancholy as the consequence of repressed sexual desire or barred romantic longing. The constitutive blankness of the melancholic’s “that is not it” in relation to any proposed solution to the mystery of his sadness forecloses the possibility of adjudicating between these competing rhetorics and keeps the engines of interpretation and attention turning over.

This is particularly the case with the curious symmetry between

18 Halpern, 197.
19 I sense here a conceptual linkage between Antonio’s melancholic pleasure in the truth of castration and what Lacan termed the hysteric’s discourse. Alenka Zupančič explains, “‘That is not it!’ is the well-known motto of hysteric when it comes to matters of satisfaction, and the other notorious feature is the emphasis on renunciation, loss, nonsatisfaction, sacrifice. The hysteric is the guardian of the negative, of the incommensurable and the impossible. . . . The hysteric is satisfied with nothing, in both possible meanings of this expression.’ See “When Surplus Enjoyment Meets Surplus Value,” in *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis:*. 
melancholy and homoerotic desire as simultaneously available and resistant explanatory rationales for understanding the affect that underwrites the bond between Antonio and Bassanio.

The mixed plenitude of possibilities and poverty of determining evidence about the cause of Antonio’s sadness constitutes his challenge to the community that surrounds him and the audience members that watch him. Such a stance threatens to turn any critical response into a merely symptomatic repetition of the melancholic guessing game of the play’s first scene, forcing the reader to take Antonio at his word in the very moment of attempting to sound the depth of his mysterious sadness, his “standing pond.” To borrow a Heideggerean locution, that is how Antonio shows up for us, as audience members, as a problem to be solved. But if in his attempts to relate himself to himself Antonio behaves as a thoroughly conventional stage melancholic, his interactions with the principal characters of the play (Shylock, Bassanio, Portia) require another logic in order to be explained. Antonio’s knotting together of public hatred for Shylock, self-sacrificial love for Bassanio, and competitive symmetry with Portia can best be understood in terms not of Freud’s remarks on melancholia but of the Freudian paradigm of masochism. Antonio’s melancholy grounds and draws retroactive support from the masochistic fantasy in which he enters through his conditional embrace of his juridicolegal fate at Shylock’s hands. The transition in Antonio’s characterization in the play, which I have loosely described as a shift from melancholy to masochism, is not a repudiation of melancholy but its Hegelian Aufhebung, a sublation that preserves what it also cancels. Antonio’s sense of himself as a melancholic who “must play a part, / And mine a sad one” (1.1.78–79) prepares him for his role in the masochistic fantasy constructed by the play.

III. Antonio as the Subject of Masochistic Fantasy

To avoid reductive overfamiliarities, it is important to draw a distinction between reading Antonio as a masochist and reading the plot arc bounded by the contract scene and the trial scene within The Merchant of Venice together as scenarios within a masochistic fantasy. While reading the latter may require the kinds of identifications and speculations typical of the former, my goal is not only to offer an analysis of a particular character but also to make a broader claim about the relationship between text and reader in which fantasies of mastery and subjection, contract-making and cruelty are generated and dissolved. The melancholic recruits interpreters and the masochist conscripts torturers, each staging their identity for others by forcing everyday social relations to

ascend to the level of insistent, willfully "excessive" scenarios of suffering or punishment, scenarios which seem to call forth interpretive labor or collaboration. These forms or subjects of discourse (the melancholic, the masochist) provide a pliant template around which the various communities of the play can organize themselves as comforters, rescuers, judges, and friends.

That said, the designation of the trial scene as the staging of a masochistic fantasy prompts the question of how we are to define both "masochism" and "fantasy," and how they can be deployed outside the clinical context of their psychoanalytic formulation. Laplanche and Pontalis have defined fantasy as an "imaginary scene in which the subject is a protagonist, representing the fulfillment of a wish . . . in a manner that is distorted . . . by defensive processes." In a useful supplement to this basic definition, Maria Torok emphasizes the experience of fantasy, which she describes as an intrusion from the imagination into consciousness of material that is a "misfit" with its local context. Fantasy calls attention to itself with an intrusiveness that makes it somehow both wrong and insistent. Moving from the clinic to the playhouse, the audience's experi-

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20 Approaching the nature of fantasy from another direction, Harry Berger Jr. suggests that perhaps "scenario" is too strong for the productively vague quality of the quasi-plots and virtual outcomes that the play ceaselessly generates, which he evocatively terms "the deep structure of latent or tacit action which characterizes the various power struggles . . . . It would not be accurate to call them plots or scenarios, because they unfold at a less conscious level than that which we normally associate with the construction of plots and scenarios. This tacit quality is what makes The Merchant of Venice so haunting and tantalizing a play." See "Marriage and Mercifixion in The Merchant of Venice: The Casket Scene Revisited," Shakespeare Quarterly 32 (1981): 155–62, esp. 157 (emphasis, indicated by underlining, added). It is at this "less conscious" border area that fantasy arises, and I believe that such fantasies are not necessarily tethered to a particular character but to the "deep structure" operative between and among multiple characters. In this limited sense, one could speak of the play having fantasies.

21 J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, The Language of Psychoanalysis, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), s.v. "Phantasy (or Fantasy)," esp. page 314. Commenting upon this entry, Anne Anlin Cheng notes its implicit scenic or dramatic dimension: "This is the paradox in Laplanche and Pontalis’s formulation: that the fantasmatic signifies a process of desubjectivation, a state of agencylessness, that nonetheless constitutes the subject’s sense of integrity and hence his / her potential for agency—a process of scattering the ‘self’ in order to constitute a stage for the self.” See The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 120 (emphasis added).

22 Maria Torok, "Fantasy: An Attempt to Define Its Structure and Operation," in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis, volume 1, ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994), 27–36, esp. 30. Cutting back upon the term’s expansionist tendencies, Torok argues persuasively for a reduced definition of fantasy, in opposition to Susan Isaac's broad definition of fantasy (in Isaac’s "The Nature and Function of Phantasy," International Journal of Psychoanalysis 29 [1948]: 73–97) as "the primary content of unconscious mental processes" tout court (Torok, 27). The clinical focus of Torok’s definition pointedly resists nontherapeutic application; indeed, Isaac’s designation of "dramatic representations" (28) as one example of fantasy's forms is particularly the kind of looseness of application that Torok strives to correct. But if Torok shifts from a definition of fantasy in
ence of Antonio’s fantasy conforms strikingly to Torok’s definition, for it is both counterintuitive and conspicuous, in need of some explanation, and at odds with any rational instinct of self-preservation. Faced with a terrifying ordeal, Antonio seems to advance the claim “I do not object to being tortured (in fact I desire it) so long as I am watched by him.” He tolerates the threatening imminence of his own torture and death by imagining that torture transformed into a spectacle for another, a ritual staged for an audience. In her account of how fantasy acts upon and within relationships of transference, Torok suggests that the intrusion of fantasy articulates just such a collaborative impulse: “Fantasy constitutes a positive attempt to transcend the pure affect and arrive at a representation of it, an attempt in which the analyst is invited to participate. . . . Fantasy is expressive of an attempt at working through the problem and is combined with a desire for collaboration.”

Antonio’s active solicitation of others (as interpreters, as partners in the “problem” of his sadness, as witnesses of his suffering) parallels this transferential plea for participation that Torok detects. The conditional acceptance of Shylock’s bond so long as Bassanio will appear as “star witness” shares this structure; Antonio’s fantasy requires the partnership of others as one of its conditions of satisfaction, and already casts them within it from its first articulation. His letter to Bassanio at Belmont frames this collaboration between the two in terms of his own desire to see his friend: “all debts are cleared between you and I if I might but see you at my death” (3.2.318–20; emphasis added). But the valence of this conditional acceptance of his suffering and death is dramatically reversed when Antonio cries out at the close of the next scene, “pray God Bassanio come / To see me pay his debt, and then I care not” (3.3.35–36; emphasis added). Keeping in mind Laplanche and Pontalis’s account of the revisions and concealments of the fantastic scene, we can understand Antonio’s initial request “I wish to see you before I am tortured” as a defensive distortion of the fantasy’s true valence: “I wish to be seen by you while I am being tortured.”

Like “fantasy,” “masochism” is a term whose reductive familiarity threatens to do as much harm as good when critically invoked. The creation of the complex manifold of desires, behaviors, and roles known as masochism commences in 1886 with Krafft-Ebbing reading, and reading into, literature: “I feel justified in calling this sexual anomaly ‘masochism’ because the author Sacher-Masoch terms of its psychical location to a phenomenological account of what it is like to experience the fantasy (of another), she opens up the application of her account of clinical experience to other kinds of experience, dramatic representation included.

23 Torok, 36.

24 In activating this slippage from “seeing” to “being seen,” Shakespeare builds upon a certain grammatical ambiguity already present in the source tale Il pecorone: “Ansaldo besought him to delay his death a few days so that if his Giannetto returned, he could at least see him.” See John Russell Brown, ed., The Merchant of Venice (London: Methuen, 1955), 148.
frequently made this perversion, which up to his time was quite unknown to
the scientific world as such, the substratum of his writings.”25 The importance
of Masoch's precipitation of masochism is further borne out by the number
of Krafft-Ebbing's patients who cite his novels as important crystallizations of
their own erotic ideals.26 There is a knotty circularity to the relationship between
literary example, pathological identity, and personally experienced longing that
Krafft-Ebbing's use of Sacher-Masoch begins and psychoanalysis inherits. Ger-
trud Lenzer articulates this problem as follows: “To Krafft-Ebing the content of
these phantasies and the nature of the actions sometimes connected with them
constituted masochism, and masochism, in turn, was made up of these phanta-
sies and practices. In other words, the symptoms of the disease constituted the
disease itself.”27 Lenzer’s suspicion that there is no underlying content to mas-
ochism aside from a checklist of textual components simultaneously simplifies
and troubles the currency between psychoanalytic knowledge and its literary
“example.”28 Susceptibility to reductive definition unites “masochism” and “mel-
ancholy” as social phenomena that can—sometimes—be recognized in the blink
of an eye; they are both superficially easy to detect, yet difficult to define in any
satisfying manner.

Obviously, the mere presence of pain and punishment as plot elements
within a narrative does not in itself entail the operation of masochistic fantasy,
for if that were the case then the concept would be so broad as to be meaning-
less; what is required is that this punishment generate a surplus of enjoyment or
pleasure, and typically this translation of pain into pleasure is regulated through
the impersonal workings of a contract or agreement that governs the relations
between master and slave. Much of the peculiar energy of Sacher-Masoch's
novels is expended in the obsessive articulation of the details of this contract,
whose impersonal legalism stands in a productive tension with its regulation of
the most arbitrary and perverse erotic caprices. This resonant narrative pattern
unites Sacher-Masoch's novels and Shakespeare's play. Among other things, The
Merchant of Venice is about a written contract that entails a ritualized spectacle
of physical punishment as its outcome, and the slow process through which the

26 Krafft-Ebbing, 153.
28 In a suitably comic denouement, the psychoanalytic appropriation of literature concludes
in a literary appropriation of psychoanalysis, for if the exemplary case of masochism threatens
to dissolve Krafft-Ebbing's science of sexual pathology into a précis of the novels that inspire it,
the distorting effects of narrative lead to Psychopathia Sexualis's notorious circulation as a form
of erotic literature in its own right, its case histories functioning as a kind of Arabian Nights of
perversion.
bondsman of that contract comes to articulate his desire for that punishment. The contract not only provides Antonio with a role as bondsman, scripting and fixing his position in the masochistic fantasy; it also makes possible the play’s dramatic tension, its effect of suspense—a term that is, of course, one of the constitutive elements of masochistic sexuality. 29 By posing a threat, the contract makes a certain masochistic pleasure in the hypothetical possibility of that threat available for Antonio to enjoy. Reading backward from Antonio’s acceptance of his fate to the initial sealing of the bond, we can view the contract scene as an already erotically charged exchange of power between men. Such a reading is already imagined when Krafft-Ebbing compares the power dynamic of masochistic relationships to economic relationships, such as the one that the contract creates. In cases of what he terms “sexual bondage,” “the will of the ruling person dominates that of the person in subjection, just as the master’s does that of his bondsman.” 30 Krafft-Ebbing’s “just as” seems to assert a comparative analogy between master-bondsman relations and master-slave relations, but it marks a constitutive jump from everyday surface to sexual substratum that the discovery of masochistic fantasy beneath the guise of everyday social relations requires and renders evanescent. It is not that everyday economic relations are shown to be always already inherently masochistic, but rather that the domination by another’s will that is taken for granted in everyday economic relations becomes a specific source of pleasure for the masochist, and so a dimension of the everyday is no longer endured but enjoyed.

Suturing Krafft-Ebbing’s comparative terms together, we see that Antonio is literally both masochist and bondsman, for his pleasure in subjection as bondsman occasions his masochism. From Antonio’s position, what was for Krafft-Ebbing a rhetorical figure, the “just as,” becomes a literal equation, which one might phrase thus: exactly where I am simply and coldly treated as a bondsman by a master, it is there that I am most clearly enjoying masochistic pleasure. 29


Krafft-Ebbing, 182 (emphasis added). Analogies are not equations; were Krafft-Ebbing’s comparison reversible, it would render all of Elizabethan London’s apprentices, debtors, and bondsmen masochistic—surely not his intention, or mine. But what is crucial in this assertion of family resemblance between one form of domination and another is not only its promiscuous capacity for slippage between the economic to the sexual or the mutuality with which it implicates both participants as necessary components within masochistic narrative, but the particularly perverse manipulation of the universality of contractual form, the twist within neutrality, that it makes possible.
of duties and the sufferance of penalties become impersonal, a function of the organizing text. In this sense, the bondsman stands in thrall to the literal text of the bond, rather than to the master who is its representative on earth and carries out its dictates: the masochistic insistence that the contract be carried out “to the letter” (a staple in Sacher-Masoch’s plotlines and in the erotic literature of masochism) demonstrates the constitutive importance of the contract, its seemingly magical capacity to drive the narrative, a capacity that will undergo ironic transformation in Portia’s wielding of “the letter of the law” in the trial scene.

The interlocking structure of Shylock’s and Antonio’s complementary hatreds and desires defines the operation of masochistic fantasy in the play: while the contract is entered into as a result of Antonio’s self-sacrificial “charity” toward Bassanio, it is Shylock who transforms it and exceeds the purely monetary terms of the economic by proposing the pound of flesh as a penalty:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{let the forfeit} \\
\text{Be nominated for an equal pound} \\
\text{Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken} \\
\text{In what part of your body pleaseth me.}
\end{align*}
\]

(1.3.147–50)

Shylock’s appraisal of Antonio, which begins in a pun on his being “a good man” in both credit and morality, ends in an assertion that his body will be used for Shylock’s pleasure. I believe we can hear a desire at work in Shylock’s discourse about Antonio’s body and its uses, a desire that registers more as hunger than as sexual lust:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Salerio} & \quad \ldots \text{thou wilt not take} \\
\text{his flesh. What’s that good for?} \\
\text{Shylock} & \quad \text{To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else,} \\
& \quad \text{it will feed my revenge.}
\end{align*}
\]

(3.1.48–51)

These lines and others like them (“I will have the heart of him” [ll. 119–20]; “Your worship was the last man in our mouths” [1.3.57]) articulate a destruc-

\[31\] On the changing role of contract in seventeenth-century culture, see Victoria Kahn, Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640–1674 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), esp. 58–67. Although Krafft-Ebbing and the specifically masochistic contract are notably absent, Kahn’s persistent pressure upon what she terms “the specter of irrational subordination” identifies the lurking question about the motivating passions that drive formalized displays of obedience to the terms of contract; early modern subjects noted that “carried to its logical and perhaps affective extreme, the contractual account of obligation implied the legitimacy of voluntary enslavement for reasons of ‘fear, hope, love or any other passion’” (58, emphasis added). In The Merchant of Venice, Antonio’s masochism constitutes one such “other passion” saturating the bond between creditor and debtor.
tively violent desire to consume the other, depicting Shylock’s lust for revenge as a hunger of the soul, the appetitive inversion of Portia’s surfeit and Antonio’s exhaustion. Shylock answers Antonio’s passivity with a feared (and longed-for) aggression, an animal longing that penetrates surfaces and, to borrow Aragon’s turn of phrase, “priest . . . to th’interior” (2.9.28). Such a mirroring relationship determines our reception of both parties, for the anatomizing interpretive energies that Antonio’s melancholy initially draws upon itself will later rebound upon Shylock, transformed into speculations upon the hardness of his “Jewish heart” (4.1.80).

The violence of Shylock’s unexpected desire for Antonio’s “fair flesh” intrudes upon the comic surface of the play’s discourse with the inexplicable force of a fantasy. The play has suggested that affects and emotions (melancholic despair, sexual love) are at the mercy of economic determination; the contract scene strikingly revises this one-way directionality by suggesting that the economic sphere is itself a medium through which extraeconomic desires and drives act themselves out. Contracts make the satisfaction of desire possible, but they also enable the disavowal of that desire under the protective shade of their impersonal formality. Beneath its neutral language, the contract functions as a site for a plethora of libidinal investments, generating the promise of masochistic satisfaction for Antonio and of a correlative sadistic satisfaction for Shylock, under the cover of business as usual. If Antonio recruits Bassanio and Shylock as collaborative participants in his masochistic fantasy, Shylock’s own increasingly shrill insistence on the satisfaction of the bond, crowned by his refusal to accept a profitable financial restitution when it is offered, suggests a correlative sadism on his part.

What to make of this reciprocity? Freud’s account of masochism resonates in complex ways with both Antonio and the will-to-torture in the play surroun-

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32 The pall that hangs over his sentenced conversion to Christianity can in this sense be read as the revenge of the very epistemological deadlock that, at the beginning of the play, hovered around the interpretation of Antonio’s melancholy as a blind spot in social knowledge. At the play’s end, Shylock must not only join Antonio’s faith, but as a converso whose full membership in that faith will always be open to question, he must submit to the same radically unverifiable speculation about what his interiority conceals that Antonio’s melancholy already endures.

33 Here, we can perhaps venture a fuller understanding of Bassanio’s relation to this encounter: he is the occasion for Antonio’s entry into the contract, the longed-for collaborator whose spectatorial passivity—even impotence—finds its inversion in the violently energetic activity of Shylock. Shylock’s cruelty becomes a means by which Antonio can amplify the imagined love and tenderness of Bassanio for his suffering body. But the solicitation of concern is not all. The scenario Antonio scripts with Shylock seems designed to produce a certain kind of helplessness in Bassanio that ports subjection outward to this viewer, bringing him into affective alignment with the scene he watches. This very helplessness forces Bassanio to suffer a mimetic desire to take Antonio’s place, and thus to avow the same feeling as his friend.
ing him. But lest we risk oversimplification, it must be pointed out that Freud’s theory of masochism was not static but shifted dramatically over time from its founding hypothesis that masochism is a redirection of hostility. In the transition from “A Child Is Being Beaten” (1919) to the “The Economic Problem of Masochism” (1924), Freud altered his account of masochism as a transformation of originary sadism to a more controversial assertion that, in the wake of the death drive, there is an “erotogenic” masochism which is not a transposition of an underlying aggression but a basic, “biological and constitutional” capacity for pleasure-in-pain entailed by a principle of teleological movement from excitation toward “the stability of the inorganic state.”

The result in the later theory is a taxonomy of masochism in three distinct but related forms: erotogenic, feminine, and moral. Erotic masochism provides the basic, underlying constitutive possibility upon which the expressive forms of feminine masochism and moral masochism are constructed, and Antonio’s own masochism arguably partakes of both forms. Fantasies of feminine masochism “place the subject in a characteristically female situation; they signify, that is, being castrated, or copulated with, or giving birth to a baby.” For Freud, such gendered categories are by no means tied to the biological sex of the masochist in question; indeed, he commences his analysis of feminine masochism with the blithe assertion “We have sufficient acquaintance with this kind of masochism in men (to whom, owing to the material at my command, I shall restrict my remarks).” Thus, Freud’s very elaboration of “feminine masochism” as a position within fantasy is underwritten by clinical observation of these fantasies in men. While we may bracket the assumption that to imagine one’s self as castrated is necessarily to imagine one’s self in a female position, the specific scenarios elaborated in this account of female masochism are nonetheless potentially useful for clarifying in what sense Antonio’s reaction to his predicament can be termed masochistic. His identification with this “feminine situation” occurs directly within the play. In the process of justifying the swift execution of Shylock’s bond, Antonio specifically defines himself as castrated: “I am a tainted wether of the flock, / Mearest for death. The weakest kind of fruit / Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me” (4.1.114–16). The shock of this designation enters the play with the intrusive

34 Freud, 160.
35 Freud, 161.
36 Freud, 162.
37 Freud, 161.
38 For an analysis of the divergent consequences of this gendered reading of masochism as an imaginary occupation of “the feminine position” for both male and female masochists, see Kaja Silverman, “Masochism and Male Subjectivity,” in Male Subjectivity at the Margins (London: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1992), 185–213.
force of fantasy that Torok describes. What could such a claim literally mean, and how might it clarify the connection between melancholy and masochism?

In describing himself as a “tainted wether of the flock,” Antonio explicitly takes up the masochistic fantasy position which Freud found definitive of “female masochism”: he imagines himself as already castrated and thereby weakened and unfit to live. What is interesting is the circularity with which Antonio asserts this imagined status in order to reify rhetorically Shylock’s claim upon the pound of flesh. When naturalized into the logical outcome of Antonio’s castrated status, the evisceration and removal of the pound of flesh are framed as somehow secondary to an original act of violence projected proleptically forward, transforming Shylock’s cruelty into both its double and its justifiable, inevitable consequence. The extraction of the pound of flesh will castrate Antonio a second time, a fate he deserves because he has already suffered it.

As numerous critics have been quick to point out, Antonio’s comparison of his melancholic body to a castrated male sheep recalls Shylock’s taunting deployment of the parable of Laban’s sheep earlier in the play; but if such a link is easily established, its particular meaning remains elusive. M. M. Mahood’s editorial wariness in glossing the line is typical: “Antonio may mean he is expendable because he has no family of his own. But the image may relate to Shylock, seen either as a shepherd culling a useless beast from the Christian flock (suggested by his talk of Jacob in 1.3), or as a dog worrying sheep.” This is the problem of the “tainted wether” epithet: it prompts the question of whether the “taint” figures the proleptic cause and justification of the castration, or its consequence. Antonio describes the weakened and disabled melancholic body as somehow not generative, infertile, incapable (and therefore unworthy) of breeding. Such a claim provides a crucial insight into the relationship of mutual support between Antonio’s melancholy identification and his embrace of the masochistic fantasy that surrounds him; the two are connected in the flamboyant proclamation of his castrated status, fusing until castration comes to figure both melancholic cause and masochistic outcome. Answering the question “Is there a Cause of the Subject?” Slavoj Žižek figures this logical loop within the causal sequence: “a certain radical ambiguity pertains to cause: cause is real, the presupposed reef which resists symbolization and disturbs the course of its automaton, yet cause is simultaneously the retroactive product of its own effects.” This temporal circularity (I deserve to be castrated because I am already castrated) partakes of the formal endlessness already encountered in the speculative interpretation of melancholy causality: “Are you sad because of X?” “No.” “Are you sad because of Y?” “No.” “Are you sad because of,” et cetera. But it also exhibits the repeti-

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tion characteristic of masochistic fantasy as it lurches toward, yet prolongs the suspenseful anticipation of, end-pleasure. Masochistic sexuality obtains in the ritualized threat of pain as much as in the experience of it: the “to be” of the castration-to-come must always be imminent but never arrive.

We can now see that the masochistic fantasy of being “already” castrated symptomatically literalizes at the level of the body what was registered in melancholy as an epistemological loss. The feeling that “there is something missing, something that I lack” has been translated from an affective loss (I no longer know why I feel sad, I have lost self-access) to a physical loss (I no longer have a body part, I have lost the phallus). Antonio’s transition from melancholy to masochism does not rearticulate the “same” affect through a change in his behavior; it introduces a surplus of pleasure or enjoyment in the shift from the epistemological to the somatic. Furthermore, the admission that “I am a tainted wether” constitutes a kind of melancholy self-knowledge suggesting that, through his entrance into the masochistic fantasy with Shylock, Antonio self-consciously revises and replaces the melancholy ignorance that began the play. What was an ignorant blind spot has now been illuminated by a bitterly pleasurable “truth”: castration.

While Antonio’s masochism fits the contours of the Freudian paradigm of “feminine masochism” in its castration fantasy, it has other features aligning themselves more productively with Freud’s final account of “moral masochism.” In contrast to the erotic and sexualized scenarios of feminine masochism, moral masochism, with its calculus of unconscious guilt producing potentially unlimited punishment, places the specific identity of the agents at an abstract remove and focuses instead upon a nonspecific, endless work of self-punishment typically enabled by a quasi-ethical or religious rationalization of one’s suffering as the result of one’s sinful nature. Freud suggests that this layer of narrative abstraction allows the agents of cruelty within the moral masochist’s fantasy to be refigured into the completely impersonal workings of fate: “All other masochistic sufferings carry with them the condition that they shall emanate from the loved person and shall be endured at his command. This restriction has been dropped in moral masochism. The suffering itself is what matters; whether it is decreed by someone who is loved or by someone who is indifferent is of no importance. It may even be caused by impersonal powers or by circumstances; the true masochist always turns his cheek whenever he has a chance of receiving a blow.”

The naturalized imagery of Shylock’s cruelty that Antonio’s imagination produces (he figures Shylock as “flood,” “wolf,” and “mountain pines” [4.1.72, 73, 75]) demonstrates this principle of abstracted agency at work within moral

41 Freud, 165.
masochism; precisely at the extraordinary moment when he cries, “Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will” (l. 83), Antonio imagines himself suffering at the hands of the cosmos itself rather than at the hands of a single businessman. The Christian turn in Freud’s account of moral masochism, his conviction that “turning the other cheek” is an expression of a desire for pain, and a means of securing pleasure-in-pain, rather than an acceptance of it, is developed further toward the end of his essay, and should be kept in mind when reading credulous accounts of Antonio’s *amor fati* as a pious Christian act of martyrdom. In a direct parallel with Antonio’s headlong pursuit of his own extermination, Freud details the lengths to which the moral masochist is prepared to go to secure a “chastisement from the great parental power of Destiny,” yielding a confirmation of the power and authority of his tormentor which is also a tribute of love to the super-egoic source of the suffering: “In order to provoke punishment . . . the masochist must do what is inexpedient, must act against his own interests, must ruin the prospects which open out to him in the real world and must, perhaps, destroy his own real existence.”

Such an analysis not only illuminates Antonio’s “Let me have judgment” but also retroactively allows us to see the same dynamic at work in his initial acceptance of the bond in the first place. The very rashness of his generosity takes on the contours of a moral masochism that seeks the fulfillment of the trial scene as a consummation devoutly to be wished, its necessary consequence and underlying goal. The relentless nature of these self-destructive urges also helps to bring into focus why Freud articulates originary masochism in relation to the workings of the death drive, for what is longed for, ultimately, in the harvesting of the pound of flesh is not just suffering, but death.

IV. Sacrifice, Subjection, and the Melancholy Pound of Flesh

Earlier in the play, Antonio’s melancholic “blankness” made his body the site of a certain proliferation of meaning; in the trial scene, the subjection of his body to an impersonal, universal logic of a sacrificial law makes a certain pliancy or flexibility of that torture’s meaning possible, which allows for this triple exposure of multiple (Jewish, Christian, masochistic) sacrificial logics. What the play makes available here is not an external, safe position of choice between these logics (considering Portia’s triumph and Shylock’s forced conversion, how could it?) but rather the direct experience of their contest as the final site of an ongoing process of subjection: the subjection of civil subjects to the laws of the city, the subjection of humanity to divine justice. The pandemic of overdetermination releasing the flood of possible melancholic and masochistic meanings is always shown to be subject to the regulatory forces of law that enable some forms and

42 Freud, 170.
foreclose or forbid others. There is, then, no “alternative” to subjection that the play imagines—no liberating “outside”—and the choice between these competing regimes remains, in each case, a choice of who shall be master.

How can we think through this interpenetration of Christian and Jewish meanings in relation to the empty neutrality of a civil order that would seem to stand outside of either of them? Where does the law stand between Christian mercy and Jewish sacrifice? The Christian reading can be rehearsed as follows: as the person who pays the mortal debt of another, Antonio explicitly takes on the position of the suffering, martyred Christ, and he does so in a manner calculated to display “Jewish” cruelty in the process. The pound of flesh is the payment for the sins of others (doubly profane, Bassanio’s worldly debts have been incurred for the sake of erotic conquest). These debts are taken up by an asexual, pure, and guiltless sacrificial victim who is threatened with death by the bond that holds him in thrall to a bloodthirsty Jew (although Antonio’s self-designation as “tainted” catches in the throat). If the fantasy scenario of Antonio’s death at the hands of Shylock registers as a shocking irruption of alien values (the dead letter of a “Jewish” law) into a Christian community of love and mutual concern for human life, Antonio’s embrace of the very terms of this ostensibly “alien” contract is experienced as the necessary act exemplifying and manifesting the spirit of the Christian community. Thus, the anti-Semitic projection of the inhuman, ravenous Jew serves as a prop to Christian self-understanding by negatively consolidating its members as witnesses to Antonio’s proposed sacrifice, a sacrifice which, were it to occur, would mirror the exemplary sacrifice of Christ to his Jewish and Roman executioners. But in describing himself as the “wether of the flock,” Antonio also seems to occupy symbolically the position of the sacrificial animal within Jewish ritual. Although his crucial addition of the word “tainted” disqualifies him from such a position, we can nonetheless detect typological echoes of an older, paradigmatic construct in Antonio’s urge to sacrifice himself: Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac as a sacred test of his subjection to divine authority, with Antonio playing Isaac to Shylock’s Abraham. When read in terms of Abraham’s test, Antonio is that which must be consumed or destroyed as a sacrifice to a higher principle understood as self-justifying, absolute, and, to its horrified Christian onlookers, “irrational” in its literalism; this principle is allied not with a personified agent such as Christ but with the abstract power and absolute necessity of a universally binding Law.

The predominant opposition between the Christian spirit of mercy and the Jewish letter of the law has, at this point in the history of the play’s critical reception, collapsed the play’s complexity into an altogether too-pat collection of Pauline theological commonplaces. Perhaps what is needed is a new way to think about the status of subjects as bodies under law, with subjection redefined
as the mark of being subject to an external authority that conditions and makes
the subject possible through a network of laws protecting the body and subject-
ing it to universal codes of regulation, punishment, and control. The promised
spectacle of Antonio’s “fair flesh” being subjected to the law and forced open
initiates a crisis for the civilizing regime of Venice, for it promises to rend and
reveal the body’s carnality, its thing-like priority to any symbolizing and civiliz-
ing process. If Shylock receives his bond, that regime will be made to do so in
the service of maintaining civil order. If Shylock does not receive his bond, then
the laws of Venice are null; the revelation of the pound of flesh, which the main-
tenance of civil order requires, will reveal the murderous violence inherent in the
exercise of civil order and so discredit the very state it is meant to legitimate. 43
Antonio risks exposing the “Jewish” character of Venetian civil order, that is,
the rigorous subjection of its citizens to the letter of the law. In this sense, law
is simultaneously foundational (it provides the rules by which Venetian society
is to be ordered) and foundationless (it cannot itself be justified; it is the law).
Thus, the tautological bedrock of the law, its foundational status and universal
applicability, is both “full” (it saturates the social field and must apply absolutely
and in every case; otherwise, it would not be the law) and “empty” (it rests
upon nothing but its own self-identity, its status as itself-as-law, and cannot be
propped up by anything outside).

Shylock’s urgent claim “I stand here for law” (4.1.142) telegraphs his hopes
that he can dissolve the partiality of his suit into an equation with the imper-
sonal rule of law itself. Of course, in terms of the standard Pauline oppositions
both complicated and kept in play by recent Shakespeare criticism, Shylock, in
speaking as a Jew, already “stands for law,” in a manner calculated to centrifugally
oppose his “Jewish” legalism to Antonio’s supposedly “Christian” self-sacrifice. 44
We may also experience this claim as Shylock striving to dissolve his very Jew-
ishness into the categorical blankness of membership in a generalized citizenry;
he appeals to his right to the bond not as a specific Jewish usurer but as an
impersonal, abstract subject of the law. Shylock asserts the universal applicabil-

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

44 I have in mind Julia Lupton’s consideration of the place of Paul in his own time and in
early modernity in her chapter “Citizen Paul” in Citizen-Saints, 21–48; in the background is the
sequence of interpretation leading from Jacob Taubes to Alain Badiou and beyond.
ity of law to both citizens and “strangers” in order to gain leverage against his religious and economic enemy, only to discover through Portia’s final coup de grâce that that law is riven by distinctions between aliens and citizens, and that these distinctions can and will be used against him. Portia’s celebrated excursion upon mercy would suggest that there is a principle prior to law which stands ready to rescue us from the choking grasp of the literal, yet her own merciless application of Venetian law against Shylock places mercy outside the text (it is mercy that is “alien”). Portia’s insistence upon the literal flatness of the law (exactly one pound, no more and no less) is a joke at Shylock’s expense that recalls Deleuze’s assertion that “irony and humor are the essential forms through which we apprehend the law.” But the larger joke is that mercy is only ever the gift of power, and Shylock is not entitled to share in that power. Portia’s urgent command to carve up Antonio and her show-stopping reversal of that command come from the same authoritative position. Dr. Balthazar’s ostensible grounding in the text of Venetian law (itself an act of imposture that dissolves Portia’s responsibility into so much comic drag) just barely conceals the lingering threat—what has been here reversed can also be reversed again, endlessly—yet in either case her decision would be just as demonstrably founded in law. This neutrality demonstrates the powerlessness of power to interpret itself. As a code that is always hypothetically reversible, always to be applied, the law generates and makes possible a manifold of different forms of subjection (sacrificial victim, exemplary case, anecdotal precedent, guilty criminal). Subject to interpretation, the law can also be turned and turned again to serve the interests of the very individuals it subjects; it is a template whose blank neutrality enables Antonio’s

45 Shylock’s status at the margins of legal protection, and the troubling threat he poses to the integrity of the civil order that both rejects and subjects him, can be usefully compared with Giorgio Agamben’s remarks on the place of the refugee in relation to the rhetoric of human rights guaranteed and delimited by membership in the nation state: “Rights . . . are attributed to the human being only to the degree to which he or she is the immediately vanishing presupposition (and, in fact, the presupposition that must never come to light as such) of the citizen.” See Means without End: Notes on Politics, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000), 15–25, esp. 20.


48 As Carl Schmitt puts it, “Every concrete juristic decision contains a moment of indifference from the perspective of content, because the juristic decision is not traceable in the last detail to its premises and because the circumstance that requires a decision remains an independently determining moment.” See Political Theology, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985), 16–35, esp. 30.
embrace of the masochistic fantasy, Shylock’s pursuit of his sadistic lust for revenge, and Portia’s bitter reversal of both their desires.

What would it mean to “stand for law”? What sheltering camouflage might the impersonal rule of law provide? Gilles Deleuze has depicted the hyper-conformist embrace of the law as a critical act of identification with the law concealed within postures of obedience to it: “By observing the very letter of the law, we refrain from questioning its ultimate or primary character; we then behave as if the supreme sovereignty of the law conferred upon it the enjoyment of all those pleasures that it denies us; hence, by the closest adherence to it, and by zealously embracing it, we may hope to partake of its pleasures.”

Deleuze’s insight helps us to grasp Portia’s adherence to the letter of the law during the trial scene as a parodically pleasurable identification with law’s arbitrary sovereignty. Portia’s execution of her father’s will, with its chastely modest fulfillment seasoned by wisecracking asides, prepares the audience for this troubling identification with an absent yet all-powerful authority by modeling an obedience which is both humorously subversive and yet faithful to the very letter. Portia is compelled from without by her father’s will, but what the play shows us in the Belmont scenes is that each moment of obedience to that will is an active moment of choice. Agency is constituted in and by a subjection that is not merely external and separate from agency, but is itself one of its modes of expression. Considered from a position in which compulsion and choice actively interpenetrate each other, the weary critical debate about whether or not Portia fixes the outcome of Bassanio’s choice of caskets can be seen to rest upon a more troubling, and more interesting, underlying problem: freedom and its pleasures issue from a constitutive underlying subjection. Read this way, Portia’s occasional protestations of revolt against the compulsion of parental authority scan as a technique for muffling or concealing the intolerable pleasure of obedience. This dynamic is not limited to Portia. According to the schematic of the play’s “apparent content,” Antonio is compelled from without, forced to submit to the threat of a terrifying ordeal. Yet, as with Portia’s active obedience, the play also shows how Antonio has chosen that compulsion, reveling in the impersonal authority of the law while turning it to serve the ends of his anti-Semitic hatreds and masochistic scenarios, using it to ratify his melancholic self-understanding as “meetest for death” (4.1.115).

Antonio’s “Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will” troubles the surface plot of legal compulsion by revealing Antonio’s predicament as an obscenely pleasurable masochistic choice. The law compels a decision, but the vigor with which Antonio calls for his sentence exceeds the law that occasions it. This is

49 Deleuze, 88.
why the fantasy of the extraction of the pound of flesh creates such intolerable anxiety within the play, and why the threat of its realization in the courtroom can only be assuaged through the emergency reinscription of a generalized subjection to the rhetoric of mercy, prompting Portia’s desperate yet dazzling campaign to close over the trembling void of the pound of flesh. In striving to have his interiority torn open for inspection, Antonio’s masochistic embrace of this fatal scenario represents the apotheosis of the melancholy self-anatomizing that begins the play. What began as a longing to have his suffering understood by his fellow citizens and comforters becomes a fantasy scenario in which those citizens are nearly forced to preside over his suffering and death in a gruesome spectacle that threatens to rupture and discredit the civic bond itself. When we read his masochism and his melancholy together as deliberately incomplete structures whose provocative gaps and troubling spectacles allow the question of desire to be raised, Antonio’s curiously exceptional status as a satellite to the marriage plot dissolves. What comes into view instead is a critical sense of Antonio’s melancholy and masochism as modes of subjectivity that force into the open the disavowed conflicts at the heart of the society that surrounds him through their insistence upon active partnership and collaboration. Instead of an isolated, inconsolable figure at odds with the heteronormative comedy in which he suffers, we can see the symptomatic logic through which Antonio’s showy declaration of his sadness and his frightening embrace of his own domination mirror the broader forms of subjection that drive the subjects of Belmont and Venice throughout the play.

In reading Antonio’s melancholy and his masochism together as an index of a general logic of subjection that sustains familial, economic, political, and religious relational networks, I hope to banish the specter of interpretive foreclosure posed by Turner at the beginning of this essay. Far from tunneling inward into an abyssal privacy that ignores economic and political meaning, psychoanalytic readings might provide the means to discover the exceptional, sacrificial, and symptomatic logic(s) of fantasy within the political and economic contours of lived experience. In the workings of Shylock’s economic contract, in Portia’s obligation to her father’s will, in Bassanio’s pledge of marital fidelity, in the Duke’s need to uphold the laws of Venice, subjection saturates the social fabric of *The Merchant of Venice*, determining Antonio no more and no less than his fellow citizens. My expansive use of the term “subjection” rests upon the assumption that to occupy a legible place within the social is to remain answerable to the forms of authority which ground it: “to be a subject” and “to be subject (to authority)” are more than kin and less than kind. In this minimal sense, “subjection” marks the point at which personhood and citizenship border and presuppose each other; the exceptional status of refugees, aliens, and criminals
indexes the grey zone of subjective disappearance at the borders of authority. Much of the comic energy and nerve-wracking momentum of *The Merchant of Venice* stem from the ingenious means through which this constitutive sense of subjection (on its own, a merely grounding fact that the self is always a self-in-society) metastasizes, as arbitrary, cruel, or questionable demands are placed upon the characters within the play: the will of the father that enforces lifelong celibacy upon those who fail to guess the casket riddle, the terms of the contract that stipulate the pound of flesh, the final sentence of forced conversion—these outcomes render the status of daughter, bondsman, or citizen problematic by pushing the obligations entailed by each term to their limits. Seemingly compelled by forces beyond his control, Antonio’s masochistic or melancholic cry of desire—“Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will”—breaks open the conflicts at the core of *The Merchant of Venice*, bringing its constitutive fault lines (between Christian and Jew, master and bondsman, letter and spirit, Venice and Belmont, economics and politics) into critical articulation.

Converting Cruelty and Constituting Community in Shakespeare’s Venice: A Response to Drew Daniel

Graham Hammill

A number of Shakespeare’s contemporaries viewed Venice as an ideal republic, a state that embodied the rule of law. In his dedicatory sonnet to Lewes Lewkenor’s 1599 translation of Gasparo Contarini’s *Commonwealth and Gouernment of Venice*, Spenser suggests that Venice represents a more enduring political order than either ancient Babylon or contemporary Rome because its government is based on what he calls “policie of right.”¹ Shakespeare, by contrast, imagined Venice to be a political order in which the rule of law shelters and unleashes perverse enjoyment, cruel pleasures, and aggressive drives. How, Shakespeare asks us to consider, do the same legal, political, and economic institutions that make the Republic of Venice into a remarkably stable imperial power also foster the tragic emplotment of sexual, racial, and religious differences? Drew Daniel is extraordinarily sensitive to this aspect of Shakespeare’s