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

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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.

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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 Government 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

political imagination. In an essay that focuses on the social and political roles of affect in *The Merchant of Venice*, Daniel persuasively argues that the question of melancholy, of Antonio’s sadness, is answered by a masochistic fantasy that scripts the various legal and economic exchanges that make up the play.² The play demands “a new way to think about the status of subjects as bodies under law” (229), a way of thinking that can account for the double bind of exposure and protection created by the rule of law and, in Daniel’s account, is most effectively explained by psychoanalytic writings on masochism.

This thesis will come as a surprise to readers who want to see in Antonio’s sadness evidence in support of Freud’s theories of melancholia. For Daniel, Antonio’s sadness is a form of solicitation, a role that Antonio plays in order to invite other characters in the play and us as spectators and readers to know him as one who suffers, to watch his suffering as he submits willingly and spectacularly to the rigors of Venetian law. Combining focused close analysis with a sophisticated use of psychoanalytic theory, Daniel proposes that the pleasure Antonio takes in suffering is the anchoring point that exposes the organizing principles through which social and political relations in Venice take shape. It is easy to see *The Merchant of Venice* as a play populated with cruel intentions. The Venetians’ treatment of Shylock, Shylock’s treatment of Antonio, Bassanio’s economic opportunism in his pursuit of Portia, Jessica’s betrayal of her father, Portia’s manipulations in the central court scene, Portia’s father’s strange and intrusive will with its mean-spirited demands: all point to a dimension of cruelty in Belmont and Venice that overdetermines the play’s social fabric. After reading Daniel’s essay, it is difficult—for me at least—not to see all of these instances of aggression through the lens of a primal scene of subjection that converts cruelty into the painful pleasures of obedience as individuals become political subjects within a republican order based on “policie of right.”

Daniel’s essay forges a power link between and among three discourses: psychoanalysis, queer studies, and political thought. Developing a psychoanalytic account of Antonio’s queer desires, Daniel pushes critical conversation on the play beyond friendship, homosociality, and gift exchange, and beyond Jewish-Christian relations, into the domain of juridical reasoning, personhood, and early modern biopolitics. Following a host of psychoanalytic writers, Daniels contends that masochism is distinguished by its paradoxical application of the contract. A bond that dissolves other bonds in its zealous administration, the

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² Heather Hirschfeld makes a similar point in a recent essay on *Merchant*, showing how Antonio’s sadness is linked to the play’s various punitive economies through theological, legal, economic, and psychological discourses of satisfaction. See “And he hath enough: The Punitential Economies of *The Merchant of Venice*,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 40 (2010): 89–117.
masochistic contract works as an ideological solvent that discloses through enjoyment the particular forms of domination by which social and political life is constituted. Antonio’s melancholic masochism “breaks open the conflicts at the core of The Merchant of Venice, bringing its constitutive fault lines . . . into critical articulation” (234). Daniel joins critics like Daniel Juan Gil and James Kuzner who provocatively explore the anti-identititary and antisocial impulses in Shakespeare’s political imaginings, maintaining that masochism is the antisocial element through which Shakespeare apprehends the inner workings of Venetian sociality.3 Daniel implicitly moves ethical accounts of masochism such as Cynthia Marshall’s into the domain of the state, suggesting that early modern political thought as a fruitful arena in which the cross-fertilization between psychoanalysis and queer studies might take place.4 I fully support Daniel’s endeavor and, in an effort to extend it, I would like to draw out some of the critical stakes of the link that Daniel forges and then discuss some ways in which masochism might be seen as both critical and constitutive of community. I have a cautiously optimistic understanding of masochism, and I think The Merchant of Venice does, too.

Daniel constructs his defense of psychoanalysis in response to Henry S. Turner. In a recent essay on The Merchant of Venice and political theory, Turner briefly considers what a psychoanalytic account of Antonio’s sadness might look like, produces a self-consciously pat and nearly parodic reading, and then discards that reading along with the possibility that psychoanalysis would have anything useful or interesting left to say about the topic.5 Ostensibly, Daniel uses Turner’s rejection to register a shift in the very old question about the role of psychoanalysis in Shakespeare studies, but his argument implies a broader, more incisive point than the one that he develops. As readers of Shakespeare Quarterly know, Turner’s essay is a sharp and provocative attempt to move friendship in The Merchant of Venice away from paradigms involving homosocial desire toward problems having to do with political calculation.6 Following Aristotle


and Cicero, Turner derives a “political economy of friendship” in which political and ethical relations are determined by increasingly quantitative and cost-effective modes of reckoning about who counts as a friend and who does not. Daniel’s focus on masochism does not necessarily contradict Turner’s account, but his insistence on the affiliations between the political and psychoanalytic subject reminds us that the calculating subject who emerges in early modern Europe is also a subject who is driven by the passions. Albert O. Hirschman emphasizes this fact in the title of his groundbreaking study The Passions and the Interests, which is meant to indicate that the subject who operates by calculating self-interest is also a subject ruled by fundamentally ungovernable passions. And Lacan draws out some of the implications of this fact when he emphasizes what he calls the logic of fantasy, treating fantasy as a mathematical function that calculates unconscious interests to explain self-destructive passions. In developing a calculus of the unconscious, psychoanalysis might be seen as both the outcome of, and analytic supplement to, a set of crises involving calculation, passion, and community that early modern and modern political philosophy grapples with but seems unable to resolve.

The issue between Daniel and Turner revolves around the assertion of a communal good. In Turner’s deconstructive reading, calculation turns on an aporia “between rival definitions of the common good” that nevertheless must also always be decided: on the one hand, a notion of the common good “that includes only friends and excludes those who have been judged incapable of being befriended,” and on the other hand, a notion of the common good “that extends the necessity of ethical obligations beyond friendship to the enemy—to the absolute singular who may even desire my death.” For Turner, this aporia is the central irritant around which community in Shakespeare’s Venice and, more broadly, the political and ethical bonds of early modern republicanism are constituted. When Daniel argues that masochistic fantasy accompanies a model of republicanism based on voluntary submission to the law, he stresses the critical aspects of masochism, its capacity to disclose hidden forms of domination. But it might also be possible to see masochism performing the aporia

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7 Turner, 425.  
11 Turner, 441.
that Turner identifies. On the one hand, the masochistic subject shows that the more exclusive version of friendship is open to failure by provoking affect associated with enmity. The masochist solicits figures who operate outside the bounds of exclusive friendship, figures granted the power to upset the smooth exchanges of everyday life by strengthening and therefore rendering explicit the grip that authority has on subjectivity and the body in political systems based on rule of law. On the other hand, the pleasure that the masochist experiences in submitting to the absolute singular who may desire my death embodies the more inclusive version of friendship as the condition for “securing pleasure-in-pain, rather than an acceptance of it” (228). That is, the pleasure one takes in accepting the unbefriendable does not escape the ruses of passions and interests but displays an element of self-interested pleasure that reinforces the ego even as it constitutes community around a sense of more general inclusiveness. This is a version of toleration that accepts cruelty rather than negating it. Antonio’s bond opens a space of civil exchange between Christian and Jew while preserving enmity and anti-Semitism. “If thou wilt lend me this money, lend it not / As to thy friends. . . . / But lend it rather to thine enemy” (1.3.132–33, 135). 

And Shylock’s forced conversion at the end of the trial scene reinforces this sense of enmity and anti-Semitism, even as it opens the civic space of Venice to the possibility of Jewish citizenship. 

Gilles Deleuze’s reading of masochism helps us understand the comic potential in all of this. Deleuze notes that both sadism and masochism are produced by crises that attend early modern and modern articulations of law. Both sadism and masochism work on and with the violence released by the aporias upon which political community rests, but they do so in substantially different ways. Masochism may need an element of sadism, and sadism may need an element of masochism, but each has a unique relation to the problem of the common good. Indeed, given the connection that Daniel draws between masochism and voluntary submission, it is possible to map the division between sadism and masochism onto Shakespeare’s thinking about Venice and republican discourse. Deleuze terms Sade’s writings “a new attempt to transcend the law,” substituting a notion of the common good with the idea of “the supreme principle of


Sade offers an ironic vision of the law but, as Deleuze points out, irony subverts in order to reinscribe. Specifically, sadistic irony reinscribes the paternal dimension of cruelty and turns that into a hyperbolic form of the rule of law. Here, we might think of Othello and specifically of Desdemona’s willful suffering, her willing embrace of her own “wretched fortune” (4.2.128). Like Antonio, Desdemona seems to accept her punishment without much protest; however, she does so in a distinctly sadistic situation, organized by Iago who turns Othello into sadistic instrument and victim, in which her suffering and murder reinforce the cruelty of the paternal order, Brabantio’s initial curses against her and Othello. Following Deleuze, we might say that what is tragic about this version of Venice is that paternal cruelty is allowed to script the dominant organization of political community.

Masochism, by contrast, transforms the law, rendering it absurd, by reducing it “to its furthest consequences.” Although masochism provokes cruelty, for Deleuze part of the masochist’s project is to use that cruelty in the service of disavowing the law and imagining a new order. Unlike sadism, Deleuze argues, masochism purges the symbolic order of patriarchal cruelty (which is not to say, of all cruelty) by beating the image of the father out of the picture. On this count, Deleuze is highly critical of Freud. Working through a critical survey of psychoanalytic writings alongside a philosophical reading of Sacher-Masoch’s fiction, he writes that “the function of the masochistic contract is to invest the mother-image with the symbolic power of the law.” And not just any mother-image either, but the “oral mother,” the one “who nurtures and brings death.”

For me, Deleuze’s account of this maternal figure recalls Portia, who on some level is a harbinger of death. If her suitors choose the wrong casket, they are prohibited from the bond of marriage. And in manipulating Venetian law so as to enable the arbitrary authority of the Duke, Portia brings the threat of a very real death to Shylock, whose own life is at stake once Portia shows that he has contrived against the life of a Venetian citizen. At the same time, Portia uses her relation to death to reinvent social bonds: the terms of her father’s will; the relations between and among authority, law, and citizenship in Venice; and the conditions of loyalty, deception, role-playing, and cheating in marriage. Although he focuses on Antonio, Daniel is more inclined to view The Merchant of Venice from the perspectives opened up through the problem of Shylock, and it is dif-

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15 Deleuze, 8.
16 Deleuze, 76.
17 Deleuze, 55.
ficult after the history of the twentieth century to read the presence of Shylock as anything other than tragic. But if, as Daniel contends, the social and political world of *The Merchant of Venice* is organized by a masochistic fantasy that finds its most visible subjective manifestation in Antonio’s embrace of punishment, then given Deleuze’s suggestions, we might also see Portia as the other key figure in that fantasy, a recuperative figure who opens the comic dimensions of Shakespeare’s republican imaginings. This may be why at the end of the play Portia is presented as a new Shylock, taking Antonio’s soul as the “surety” (5.1.254) that secures this new social and political order, while at the same time dropping manna like a goddess, leading her people to a promised land. Portia’s role is, in large measure, enabled by Antonio’s masochism, and more generally it might be possible to see between those two—in however mediated a fashion—an attempt to reconstitute community against the backdrop of a paternal order that is being aggressively disavowed.

“Want-Wit” Discipline

Jacques Lezra

Drew Daniel’s rich and provocative essay is not a psychoanalytic explanation of *The Merchant of Venice*, if by this one means an explanation of the motives that characters have for their actions onstage, or for the emotions they express. The essay seeks to solve the “interpretive puzzle” (207) of Antonio’s sadness, but that, it seems to me, is accidental. Daniel’s essay does not address the author’s motives in writing the play; still less does it try to explain, through *Merchant*, determining features of the culture from which the play emerges. (Again, the essay provides these, but *en passant.*) So if we grant that Daniel’s essay is indeed an example, an excellent example, of psychoanalytic criticism, then what is psychoanalytic criticism today? What objects does it treat, what sorts of knowledge does it produce? How does it escape the hoary charges of anachronism (the dirty “application” of current paradigms to chronologically anterior situations) and chauvinistic universalism (Oedipus forms us all)? And why should it matter to us today, in the brave new world of psychopharmacology, functional magnetic resonance brain imaging, and elective families?

One way to get at these questions is to notice the space in which the essay lines up its concepts. Here is Daniel: “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