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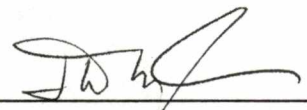
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MARXIST INTERPRETATIONS OF THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

A Thesis

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Master of Arts

Degree

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare presents the struggle of the two competing economic factions of his day, that of an entrenched aristocratic elite, represented by the Christians, and that of a rising capitalist bourgeoisie, represented by the Jew Shylock. Throughout the history of commentary on the play, critics have tried to determine Shakespeare's attitude toward the two groups' rival ideologies in order to identify his sympathies and his message about Elizabethan England's economic and social transformations. This task has proven to be difficult and confusing:

> The play has been seen as the unambiguous triumph of good Christians over a bad Jew; as the deliberately ambiguous triumph of the Christians; as the unintentionally ambiguous, and hence artistically flawed, triumph of the Christians; as the tragedy of Shylock, the bourgeois hero; and as a sweeping attack on Christians and Jews alike. No other Shakespearean comedy before All's Well That Ends Well (1602) and Measure for Measure (1604), perhaps no other Shakespearean comedy at all, has excited comparable controversy. (Cohen 767)

For centuries critics have been stymied in trying to determine whether Shakespeare's play sides with the oppressed but unlikable middle class Jew or the cunning yet engaging patrician Christians. The Merchant of Venice, as A.D. Moody writes, "refuses to endorse any such simple judgements":

> It compels an intensely sympathetic insight into Shylock's tragically corrupt nature, yet we are unlikely to identify ourselves with him. It reveals in the Christians a complacent inhumanity, and yet we are likely to find them attractive in their fashion. No account of the play which offers to see it in terms of simple good and evil can hope to satisfy. (Moody 101)

Marxist criticism, however, offers a solution to this dilemma by focusing particularly on the economic basis for the war between the Christians and the Jew in the play. The crucial task for the Marxist critic in examining class struggle in a work of literature is to explore the means by which an elite holds economic power. Most often the privileged group attempts to secure their strength by the use of fictions which make their hold on power seem natural and inevitable; the Marxist critic then discovers and reveals these myths. Elliot Krieger writes that Shakespeare's comedies are concerned with the means by which the aristocracy develops its myths--the "process through which a class creates its ideology"--and the "strategies that the aristocrats adopt in order to identify their interests with universal interests and with nature" (6). Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice is an especially fruitful work for the type of critical activity which considers this process and these strategies. In "Ideology and Class Conduct in The Merchant of Venice," Frank Whigham writes that both the Christians and Shylock avail themselves of the myth-making and myth-destroying abilities of language in order to promote their economic interests:

> One of the most significant issues in The Merchant of Venice is the rhetorical assertion of social status. Shakespeare locates this activity in a context of social mobility and class conflict, where language and other modes of self-projection serve as both enabling and repressive forces. The styles of the Christians and Shylock are calculated: each aims to manipulate its audience, to secure access to the society's resources of power and privilege. In each case the movements of wooing and assault constitute ideological assertion. (93)

My aim is to consider the myths by which the Christian elite in The Merchant of Venice retain power in the world of the play, their "rhetorical assertion" in Whigham's terms, and to examine Shylock's demystification of their fictions. The action of mystification and demystification is a dialectic, and as Krieger writes, "To understand Shakespeare's plays

and his sense of social class, we must understand how his plays both express and negate an ideology, we must begin to analyze the dialectics of Shakespeare's comedies" (7).

Nevertheless, the elite's myth-making and Shylock's myth-destroying do not form an evenly balanced dichotomy. Shakespeare presents the Jew's subversion of the Christian fictions as more powerful and more admirable because Shylock, although egotistical and ruthless, strips the elite's myths bare. In spite of the superficially harmonious atmosphere of Act V, the Jew's demolition of the elite's mystification leaves their group, at the end of the play, appearing hypocritical, outdated, and desperate--near to defeat in their economic struggle:

> In this play the merchant [Antonio] and aristocrats finally unite to defeat the banker, but not before the latter has revealed his enormous potential power, and not before we have perceived how dependent both merchant and aristocrat have become upon the banker. In Belmont 'Lord Love' may, as Nerissa suggests, rule over human affairs. But in Venice capital is the absolute lord, and Shylock is its priest. (Hatlen 99)

The reader must scrutinize closely the tension between the Christians' seeming innocence and apparent economic strength and their actual greed and economic weakness because, states Moody, "one of the main themes of the play is that 'the world is still deceived with ornament' and the action is constantly exploring the ways in which the appearance and the reality may differ" (104).

After examining the historical context of The Merchant of Venice, the fictions used by the elite, and Shylock's powers of demystification, I will consider several Marxist interpretations of the play for Shakespeare's dramatic utilization of the conflicting economic systems he portrays. I will conclude with my estimation that The Merchant of

Venice approves the energy and honesty of Shylock's bourgeois capitalism, which, if not wholly morally honorable, is the stronger economic force.

CHAPTER II

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although it is essential for the Marxist critic to understand the historical context of the work which he is interpreting, the constraints of this paper force an offering of the historical background of The Merchant of Venice to be simplified and limited. An overwhelmingly complex issue, for example, in discussing the economic history which interacts with the play, is the double layer of the economic context in which Shakespeare lived and wrote, that of Elizabethan England, and the more progressive economic context of the setting, Venice.

From antiquity through the beginning of the twentieth century, the theme of economic history was the power struggle between "swordsmen and salesmen," or agrarian warrior-aristocrats and bourgeois merchants. The literature of the Greeks reflects this battle for the control of wealth; the ideal man in both Homer and Plato, for example, despises the contamination of commerce. However, as early as the first days of the Roman Empire, financially troubled nobles began to immerse themselves in trade while still maintaining a fiction of "being leisured country gentlemen, engaged only in war and politics" (Beard 15). The aristocrats brought their hatred of capitalism to their involvement in capitalist activity and a vehement clash over values and means commenced between the nobility and the middle class.

In The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641, Lawrence Stone writes "the division between the gentleman and the rest was basic to Elizabethan society" (50), and that despite some social mobility, England at the time of Shakespeare was basically divided into an aristocratic elite and everyone else, a non-elite (48). As a capitalist middle class grew to challenge the nobility's stranglehold on economic power, tremendous social changes occurred during Shakespeare's lifetime. Nobles began to be overtly involved in business,

and bourgeois merchants acquired some of the status and power which had before been reserved for those of gentle birth: "Shakespeare lived in the midst of an economic revolution that was changing Europe from an agrarian economy to a commercial economy, from a feudal and aristocratic society to a commercial, democratic, middle-class society" (Bronstein 7).

If one reads the play in the context of English economic history, then, Shakespeare clearly distinguishes two main classes, an aristocracy and a capitalist middle class, in the play. (The working class, represented by Launcelot Gobbo and his father, is accorded little attention.) Portia stands as a sure example of the landed aristocracy, and Belmont is a world of plentiful riches which symbolizes the feudal, aristocratic way of life. In many ways Portia is a typical woman of the Renaissance nobility:

> Portia is regularly referred to as a 'lady,' a term applied to women of a wide range of social ranks, from the gentry through the upper aristocracy, and she herself has at least one lady-in-waiting. More important, all of her suitors are members of the aristocracy. . . . Belmont is, furthermore, clearly a 'great house,' a country estate surrounded by pastoral gardens, and in this respect Belmont represents the agrarian mode of life of the landed aristocracy, which stands in contrast to the urban milieu of the Venetian bourgeoisie. (Hatlen 95)

Belmont is not only aristocratic in its material splendor, but also a place controlled by feudal ideology. In the ways Portia's father's decrees are observed, for example, Belmont is "a thoroughly absolutist society" (Hatlen 95).

Bassanio and his friends, Lorenzo and Gratiano, also belong to the aristocracy; however, they represent nobles who have experienced the pressure of declining fortunes. As E.C. Pettet claims, "Bassanio is obviously a type of the extravagant young gentry who . . . were the chief prey of the usurers" (24). Pettet finds a passage from an Elizabethan

document, Wilson's "Discourse upon Usury," which he says describes Bassanio's type of gallant aristocrat, who had "'unthrift divers ways in good cheer, in wearing gay and costly apparel, in roysteriing with many servants more than needed, and with mustering in monstrous great house, in haunting evil company, and lashing out fondly and wastefully at cards and dice, as time served'" (24). Bassanio represents, then, a kind of carefree young nobleman common in Elizabethan England. He admits to Antonio that his unbridled lifestyle has brought about his economic woes: "'Tis not unknown to you, Antonio, / how much I have disabled mine estate / By something showing a more swelling port / Than my faint means would grant continuance" (1.1.121-24).

Bassanio and his friends' troubled financial situations force them to form new alliances with those outside their class. As respresentatives of the aristocracy, "these gentry are no longer the lusty, confident figures they had been in the 14th and 15th century. Bassanio must lean upon the merchant, whom his own class had traditionally despised. Without Antonio, he is nothing" (Finkelstein, "Shakespeare's Shylock" 32). Not only must the elite depend upon Antonio for financial help, but also they must, like the impoverished nobles of Shakespeare's day, marry wealth in order to support themselves. Bassanio will sustain himself with Portia's bounty, as will Gratiano through his marriage with Portia's waiting woman, Nerissa. The gentleman Lorenzo also looks to Shylock's daughter Jessica for financial support, "willing to wed a daughter of the 'bourgeois,' and in this case, even a Jewish moneylender's daughter, provided that she becomes a Christian and also brings gold with her" (Finkelstein, "Shakespeare's Shylock" 32).

The world of Venice differs markedly from that of Belmont. W.H. Auden, in his essay "Brother and Others," writes, "The action of The Merchant of Venice takes place in two locations, Venice and Belmont, which are so different in character that to produce the play in a manner which will not blur this contrast and yet preserve a unity is very difficult"

(221). In contrast to the feudal world of Belmont, Venice is a "quintessentially capitalist society" which "represents the bourgeois way of life and the bourgeois concept of value" (Hatlen 97-98). Indeed, the play differs from most of Shakespeare's other comedies because of the prominent roles of merchants in the action and in its urban setting (Hatlen 97). As Portia embodies the ideology of Belmont, the character in The Merchant of Venice who clearly embodies Venetian ideology is Shylock, "the kingpin of Venice's capitalist society" (Hatlen 99).

It is a more complex task to situate the character of Antonio within a historical context, for he is the merchant of the title and at the same time enjoys the power and prestige of inclusion in the play's elite. Antonio reflects those members of Elizabethan society who had begun to blur the line between aristocrat and bourgeois. It is unclear whether he is a nobleman who is involved in trade, as Geza Hegudus determines in "The Merchant of Venice and Problems of Civil Law in the Renaissance" (35), or a bourgeois who has invaded the upper classes, as Sidney Finkelstein finds in Who Needs Shakespeare? (58). In either case, many critics, such as A.A. Smirnov in Shakespeare: A Marxist Interpretation, argue that it is simplistic to view the struggle between Antonio and Shylock as one representing that between the feudal aristocracy and the bourgeoisie: "The social structure of the play is more complex, more subtle." Smirnov sees Antonio as the "hard-working, efficient merchant who lived on a luxurious scale, spending his profits lavishly and head over heels in debt," who was a "typical figure of the Renaissance" (34). As an haute bourgeois merchant, often referred to as the "merchant prince," Antonio's battle with Shylock actually represents a struggle between two types of capitalists--merchants, which includes Antonio, and money lenders, which includes Shylock (Smirnov 35).

Several recent articles, such as Walter Cohen's "The Merchant of Venice and the

Possibilities of Historical Criticism," stress that this distinction--that the play's economic struggle is between warring capitalist factions--is significant. Whereas most Marxist critics believe that "Antonio represents the old philosophy; Shylock, the new" (Bronstein 7), that Antonio is part of a retrograde feudalism while Shylock is part of the advancing force of capitalism, Cohen argues that Shylock's "quasifeudal fiscalism" actually belongs to a reactionary medieval economic system (771). Hegudus concurs that Shylock's system is the outgoing one: Shylock, according to Hegudus, is a "medieval financier" who will be replaced by the "modern businessman" Antonio (37). Antonio personifies, these critics contend, a more modern merchant capitalism in which money will be borrowed and invested more freely than in medieval times.

Cohen and Hegudus argue that in light of this consideration of Antonio as a progressive economic force and Shylock as a regressive one, the Venetian setting of the play then becomes important. Venice was more advanced economically than was Elizabethan England (Cohen 769). Shakespeare, writes Cohen, hopes to calm his audience about the changes England was beginning to experience in the transformation from a feudal economy, which involved usurers, to a capitalist merchant economy. Shakespeare presents Venice, which had already been through such a struggle, as a reassuring model, and his portrayal of Antonio as a "positive" character and Shylock as a "negative" one reinforced his message. Cohen declares, "Briefly stated, in The Merchant of Venice English history evokes fears of capitalism, and Italian history allays those fears. One is the problem, the other the solution, toward which the play strives" (772).

Although Marxist critics continue to debate the fine points of the economic history which lie behind The Merchant of Venice, in any consideration of the play, Antonio stands firmly aligned with the economic elite. Antonio's friends are all aristocrats, not merchants. Antonio "supports them by gifts and loans, made possible by his merchant

ventures" (Finkelstein, Who Needs 33). Antonio can also be classed among the play's elite because of his aristocratic behavior, such as his indulgent melancholia, as well as his friendships with gentlefolk:

> Antonio is only formally a merchant: his business activities do not concern us, except in so far as (reported) they are indispensable to the plot; his obscure and mysterious melancholy, which he expressly states has nothing to do with his commercial ventures, is quite out of keeping with the ebullient optimism of the bourgeoisie; and by his manner, conversation, and friendship he is plainly one with Bassanio. (Pettet 24)

By the time of the Renaissance in Italy, a powerful Christian merchant like the play's Antonio would be accepted as part of society's elite, as "the merchant prince could rest secure in the conviction of the widespread social approval of his motives by society and church" (Nelson 121).

Since various Marxist interpretations of the play label Antonio as aristocrat and others label him as bourgeois, in order to simplify matters, I use the term "elite" to refer not only to Portia, Bassanio, and the other nobles, but also to Antonio. In contrast to Cohen and Hegudus, most Marxist critics consider the economic battle of the play not as one between two types of capitalism, but as one between feudal ideology, shared by Antonio and the elite, and bourgeois capitalist ideology, held by Shylock. I accept this simpler explanation of the play, supported by the bulk of Marxist criticism of The Merchant of Venice; although a merchant, Antonio's values are basically those of the feudal aristocracy, and Shylock's are those of a Renaissance capitalist bourgeois. Shakespeare primarily addresses in the play the English situation of his day, an economic conflict between the nobility and the middle class, and the English context is more important to a full understanding of the work than is the Venetian context in which capitalism was already

firmly established and bourgeois factions fought for economic power. As Beard writes in The History of Business, Shakespeare's play mirrors an economic battle not in Venice, where the noble/bourgeois struggle had been resolved centuries earlier, but in commercially backward Elizabethan England (115).

CHAPTER III

THE FICTIONS OF THE ELITE

The elite in The Merchant of Venice maintain their economic power through the use of fictions, myths they perpetuate in order to continue their dominance over the middle class. The myths are a fundamental part of their total *ideology*, or system of beliefs about the world. Their strategy is to use the fictions to control a changing economic situation; for, in the play's Venetian society, money "has ceased to be simply a convenient medium of exchange and has become a form of social power which can be gained or lost." This encroachment on their traditional social dominance, brought about by bourgeois emphasis on the contract, is a great threat to the elite:

> Since, in a mercantile society, social power is derived from money, the distribution of power within it is constantly changing, which has the effect of weakening reverence for the past; who one's distant ancestors were soon ceases to be of much social importance. The oath of lifelong loyalty is replaced by the contract. (Auden 220)

The elite are troubled by Shylock's financial gains, for he, along with his fellow Jew Tubal, has accumulated a great deal of capital. Shakespeare, writes Burton Hatlen, knows "the man who controls the flow of capital holds the reins of power" (99), and therefore portrays Shylock as a potent adversary for the Christians. Shakespeare fully reveals through Shylock the social might a bourgeois money lender could possibly obtain, and the elite only narrowly defeat the Jew in Act IV.

In The Merchant of Venice the impetus for the elite's anti-capitalist myth-making lies in their enormous sense of economic insecurity, as they are aware that "capital is the absolute lord" and their hold on economic power is diminishing. The fears of the Christians in the play reflect an attitude of panic which gripped the aristocracy of Elizabethan England,

frightened by a changing economy and the financial gains made by the middle class: "Behind this fear lay the transition to capitalism: the rise of banking; the increasing need for credit in industrial enterprises; and the growing indebtedness facing both aristocratic landords and, above all, small, independent producers, who could easily decline to working class status" (Cohen 768). In The Crisis of the Aristocracy, Stone states that sixteenth century English noblemen became defensive in the face of an ascendant bourgeoisie and responded with a reactionary but futile counter-attack (750). Since their true social power was declining, they resorted to a war of propaganda, using anti-capitalist fictions as their weapons.

Several critics claim that the elite in the play do not feel their social position at risk because they are ignorant of changing economic conditions. In "Shylock and the Social Order," Walter Poznar finds that what "we do not see in [Portia] or any of the other inhabitants of this gracious society is the slightest awareness of what lies beyond the rim" of their "magic world" (304). The members of the elite, in Poznar's view, neglect social responsibility and make no effort to understand Shylock because they are unaware of realities beyond the sphere of the socially privileged. However, Poznar has failed to penetrate one of the fictions advanced by the elite in the play, that their financial position is undoubtedly secure because of their place on a social hierarchy ordained by God. Indeed, the elite are vehemently opposed to Shylock *because* they know their social power is dissolving.

In The Merchant of Venice the financial strength of the elite is crumbling; Antonio is in debt to a Jewish money lender, and all the wealth Bassanio possesses, as he tells Portia, runs in his veins (3.2.253-54). The elite must disseminate their fictions as a way to retain economic might, for in the world of The Merchant of Venice, their dominance is no longer accepted without question. "The safety of position and wealth is continually embattled,

not given but achieved, and always requiring vigilant defense" in the world of the play (Whigham 95).

In spite of the refuge of their elaborate mystifications, many English aristocrats of the age of Shakespeare began to realize that the end of their economic hegemony was near (Stone 752). Many critics have advanced the argument that the most memorable characteristic of The Merchant of Venice's Antonio, his melancholy, is due to an unfulfilled homosexual attraction to Bassanio. However, the cause of his discouragement seems to be his recognition of the impending decline of his society's elite. Antonio's first words in the play are, "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad" (1.1.1). Antonio is a demoralized character, and of "all Shakespeare's major figures, he is the least a man of action; indeed, he is most disengaged from the currents of life around him" (Finkelstein, Who Needs 58). His depression is caused by his realization that the elite have actually converted to bourgeois ideology: "The intimation is that Antonio's detachment is due to Italy's decadence. And what the play makes clear is that this decadence, and particularly that of Venice, lies in its money-grubbing mentality, which pervades even the dignitaries themselves" (59).

In the trial scene, Antonio is most dejected when he faces the fact that he may be financially ruined. He is grateful that by death, Fortune will save him from the "lingering penance / Of such misery" (4.1.267-68) which is an old age of poverty. Using images of sterility, Antonio says that a man with the outdated ideology of the elite is weak and unfruitful in the changed world around him: "I am a tainted wether of the flock, / Meetest for death. The weakest kind of fruit / Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me" (4.1.114-16). In these speeches Antonio foresees his approaching personal ruin; but as the heart and soul of the elite, he speaks for his way of life which will not long withstand the onslaught of merciless bourgeois capitalism.

Antonio is preoccupied with thoughts of imminent economic misfortune, but he is not the only member of the elite to suffer from such worries. In the opening scene of the play, the aristocrat Salarino first describes Antonio's argosies as powerful and secure:

> . . . your argosies with portly sail
> Like signors and rich burghers on the flood,
> Or as it were the pageants of the sea,
> Do overpeer the petty traffickers
> That curtsey to them, do them reverence,
> As they fly by them with their woven wings. (1.1.9-14)

However, soon Salarino's mind runs to doubts about the ships' safety, which are symbolic of his class's economic well-being (Whigham 95):

> My mind cooling my broth
> Would blow me to such an ague when I thought,
> What a harm a wind too great might do at sea.
> I should not see the sandy hourglass run
> But I should think of shallows and flats,
> And see my wealthy Andrew docked in sand
> Vailing her high top lower than her ribs
> To kiss her burial. (1.1.23-30)

With these fears, Salarino invokes one of the main subjects of the play, "the invasion, usurpation, or loss of security and privilege" (Whigham 95). Salarino begins by praising Antonio's great ships, but then says he would worry, with every bowl of soup and every glance at an hourglass, about Antonio's economic well-being (Finkelstein 60). The play opens with the elite's expression of fears, among themselves, about their loss of economic

power. Throughout the rest of The Merchant of Venice, they disseminate fictions about their economic strength in order to disguise those fears.

A. THE FICTION OF THE NATURAL HIERARCHY

The most potent ideogical weapon the elite wield in The Merchant of Venice is the myth of the "natural hierarchy," the fiction that their social class is naturally superior to the other classes and entitled to wealth and power because of its position in a divinely sanctioned order. In A Marxist Study of Shakespeare's Comedies, Krieger argues that the "second world" in a Shakespearean comedy--the forest outside of Athens in A Midsummer Night's Dream, for example--objectifies a "strategy" developed by the play's protagonists for dealing with a difficult social situation in the "primary world"--the restrictive law of Athens, to extend the Dream example (2). The second world strategy entails the dissemination of an idea like the importance of harmony and concord, which *appears* to be a universal truth that would alleviate social difficulties for everyone in the primary world, but which is really a fiction designed to serve the needs of an elite (6). Krieger writes that the "second world strategy cannot lead to universal good: to the extent that the second world clarifies the subjective interests of the members of one social class, it is antagonistic to the interests of other classes" (5). The idea of the importance of harmony and concord is class-serving because "seen in terms of aristocratic needs, the abstractions harmony and concord become rephrased and translated into social policy: hierarchy and stability" (6).

The elite in The Merchant of Venice utilize fictions about harmony and concord as the basis of their second world strategy, and they have objectified Belmont as a place founded on these abstractions. In Act V the elite's praise of harmony as a universal truth receives its fullest expression (8). Lorenzo discusses the concord of the world in this way:

Here will we sit, and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears. Soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.
Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in this motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-ey'd cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it. (5.1.55-65)

Lorenzo expounds on what seems to be a universal truth: Harmony and concord are attributes of peaceful heavenly angels who have "immortal souls." However, harmony and concord are in the political interest of the elite in this play, who want to hold on to their precarious control of power in the primary world, Venice. Lorenzo goes on to explain that harmony can be used to calm any violent threat, such as a "wild and wanton herd" of horses. A man disrespectful of the concord of the universe, who threatens the economic order of the status quo as Shylock does, is to be distrusted as a subversive "fit for treasons":

For do but note a wild and wanton herd
Or race of youthful and unhandled colts,
Fetching mad bounds, bellowing and neighing loud--
Which is the hot condition of their blood,
If they but hear perchance a trumpet sound,
Or any air of music touch their ears,

You shall perceive them make a mutual stand,

Their savage eyes turn'd to modest gaze,

By the sweet power of music; Therefore the poet

Did feign that Orpheus drew trees, stones, and floods;

Since nought so stockish, hard, and full of rage,

But music for the time doth change his nature.

The man that hath no music in himself ,

Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,

Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils. (5.1.71-85)

The elite demonstrate in these lines that they use the "universal truth" of harmony to reinforce their interest in hierarchy:

> The music of the spheres binds together, within a hierarchy, all of nature, the whole chain of being: the angels (61), cherubins (62), the 'immortal souls' of human beings (63), animals (71 ff.), vegetables (80), and minerals (80). . . . Harmonic principles, in a sense, arrange and order the cosmos and they make each element within the cosmos content by nature with its determined position. Harmony gives natural sanction to the principle of hierarchy. (Krieger 9)

The Christians argue that harmony is the natural way of the universe, and the universe is harmonious because everything, from angels to minerals, is in its proper place. They employ this fiction to repress Shylock's threat to their authority: Even if a middle class Jew becomes wealthy, he cannot change his "true class status" because of his inferior position on the hierarchy, which is "true" and produces sweet concord. "By attributing the arrangement of the social structure to an immaterial force outside of human action and control," writes Krieger, "the belief in harmony articulates the fantasy that nature--or heaven--itself sanctions and determines the extant class structure" (10).

The elite operate under the assumption that they own by *right,* not by purchasing, because of their place on the natural hierarchy (16). For example, during his casket choice, "the archetypal aristocrat, Aragon, assumes that 'the merit of the wearer' should purchase 'clear honor' and thereby secure the social elevation and racial purity of his class" (15). Aragon believes that his hierarchichal position allows him to own by right, and he chooses the silver casket with the inscription, "Who chooseth me, shall get as much as he deserves" (2.9.50-51).

The Christians use the myth that they are entitled to wealth and power because of their superior position on the hierarchy as justification for plundering the wealth of others. Bassanio believes he is authorized for unlimited credit in the world, in contrast to Shylock who must gain financially by his "well-won thrift (1.3.42), and therefore Bassanio allows Antonio to risk his life in order to supply himself with capital. The elite wholeheartedly support Jessica's robbery of her father. "In such a night," one blessed with heavenly harmony, says Lorenzo, "Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew / And with an unthrift love did run from Venice / As far as Belmont" (5.1.14-17). The myth of the natural hierarchy undergirds the elite's actions in the trial scene, in which they take Shylock's wealth from him without compunction.

B. THE FICTION OF INTRINSIC VALUE

The idea of the natural hierarchy implies another fiction of the elite, the idea that their system of value is naturally sanctioned. The elite claim to operate under a system of determining value which is greatly different from that by which Shylock functions. Just as the elite believe that a human being's value is determined by his position on a divinely sanctioned hierarchy, the worth of objects is also *intrinsic*, or naturally ordained. Hatlen,

in "Feudal and Bourgeois Concepts of Value in The Merchant of Venice," presents the history of this concept, which he calls the feudal system of value:

> From this absolutist habit of thought there also issued medieval economic theory, with its concept of the just price (which assumes that the market price of a commodity should be determined by its presumed intrinsic value, a value established by God himself) and with its blanket condemnation of usury (on the grounds that usury permits money to function, not merely as the medium of exchange, but as a creator of wealth and so of value--at which point money threatens to usurp God's role as the *fons et origo* of value). Such an economic theory, I might add, is both natural to and reasonably adequate to the needs of an agrarian society. For in such a society use-value (both the obvious physical usefulness of the foods and fibers that sustain life, and the supposed usefulness of those spiritual 'goods' that claim to offer a means of access to supernatural powers) is an immediate and obvious phenomenon, whereas exchange-value seems to be an 'unnatural' form of value superimposed upon the use-values 'naturally' inherent in things. A conception of value as an objective phenomenon is thus the characteristic ideology of an agrarian society. Such a concept of value embodied itself in the hierarchical structure of European society during the Middle Ages and percolated through all areas of medieval thought, and both this hierarchically structured society and this absolutist habit of thought survived, although not without some modifications, into Shakespeare's time. (93)

In contrast, Shylock believes in a system in which value is *extrinsic*, or ascribed by the marketplace, which Hatlen calls the bourgeois conception of value. Shylock's system of value rests on pure monetary worth (99). Hatlen traces this newer concept of value from the beginning of the sixteenth century in England, when the power of the feudal

aristocracy was repeatedly challenged, to the growing Protestant repudiation of the ban on usury (94). Bourgeois Protestants, whom many critics believe Shylock actually represents in The Merchant of Venice, saw the concept of extrinsic value as a means to power. Writes Hatlen, "Protestantism . . . began to chart out an area of human conduct--specifically those activities that we now call 'business'--in which value was to be determined less by the will of God than by the operations of the market" (94).

The fiction of intrinsic value is useful to the elite of The Merchant of Venice. Through this myth they can retain power as the interpreters of "natural," intrinsic value, handed down by a Christian God who has ordained the value of all things. This fiction supports as natural their traditional agrarian ways of pursuing wealth and as unnatural Shylock's means of accumulating wealth by money lending.

Shylock's belief in extrinsic value, a bourgeois system, greatly distresses the elite, and throughout the play, Shylock confirms their worst fears. For Shylock, all things have an extrinsic monetary value determined by the marketplace. By manipulating extrinsic values through money lending, he is able to serve his self-interest, a fact which he continually and unashamedly announces, in contrast to the elite who disguise their desire to accumulate wealth. Shylock finds no disgrace in making money, for "thrift is a blessing if men steal it not" (1.3.82). To Shylock a good man is not one who necessarily possesses honor or virtue, but one who is wealthy, whose means are sufficient. He reveals his concept of a good man in this exchange with Bassanio:

> *Shylock.* Antonio is a good man--
>
> *Bassanio.* Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?
>
> *Shylock.* Ho no, no, no, no: my meaning in saying he is a good man, is to have you understand me that he is sufficient. (1.3.13-14)

Pettet writes that this scene allows great insight into the Shylock's capitalist mindset: "Those last few words of Shylock offer us the key to his values and to the values that were coming to the fore in Shakespeare's time. His 'good' and 'bad' have been simply emptied of any human or moral content: 'good' has become synonymous with 'sufficiency' (solid financial resources) and poverty is dangerously close to 'bad'" (25).

Shylock equates life with materialistic satisfaction; when the Duke passes the sentence that the Jew must forfeit his wealth, Shylock can see no reason to continue living: "You take away my life / When you take the means whereby I live" (4.1.375-76). Throughout the play Shylock demonstrates that he recognizes no higher goal than the accumulation of riches and the fulfillment of his all-consuming drive to possess. The most drastic expression of this mentality occurs in his stronger emotional response to the loss of his riches, after Jessica escapes him, than to the loss of his daughter:

> A diamond gone cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfort! . . . Two thousand ducats in that, and other precious, precious jewels. I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear: would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin! (3.1.67-71)

To Shylock the extrinsic, marketplace value of jewels is more significant than the intrinsic value of his child.

If Shylock is only concerned with marketplace value, it is puzzling that during the trial he refuses several times the amount of Antonio's debt in favor of "the highly unbourgeois pleasure of revenge" (Beard 119). "One may imagine a feudal knight ignoring business interests in his ungovernable wrath; it is difficult to visualize a Cinquecento Venetian, whether Jew or Christian, so chivalric in sentiment," writes Beard in The History of Business. "Antonio proposes the full discharge of the debt to Shylock, and Shylock, with romantic insistence, demands the measure of flesh instead" (119). Beard finds that

Shylock neglects his customary pursuit of money because he is a "psychiatric case," and Greenblatt, a more recent critic, also believes Shylock is mad. In any case, Shylock's desire for revenge is bizarre, because the "crisis of the play arises not from his insisitence on usury, but from his refusal of it" (Cohen 769).

Two solutions to this problem show that Shylock holds true to his self-interest as a bourgeois capitalist. First, as a businessman, Shylock's murder of Antonio will destroy his competition, the man who drives down the rate of usury in Venice with his interest-free lending. Although Cohen questions Shylock's rationality, he does admit that "Shylock's desire for revenge is both motivated by economics and possessed of a great deal of economic logic (e.g. I.iii.39-40; and III.i.49, and 117-18)" (769). Secondly, Shylock clearly realizes that the struggle between these economic factions will not be won by small victories. The battle is not for three thousand ducats; it is for economic power. In Shylock's view only complete annihilation of the elite, a violent resolution, will end the conflict. "In the preceding comedies," Smirnov writes, "reconciliation was possible, evil could become good. In The Merchant of Venice, however, this is not so; the war between the worlds is a war to the death" (33). Antonio symbolizes the value system that the elite hold dear, as he is the "one in whom the ancient Roman honor more appears / Than any that draws breath in Italy" (3.2.293-95). Shylock, as representative of the economic non-elite, bears "More than a lodged hate and a certian loathing" (4.1.60-61) against Antonio. He desires no less than the violent extraction of the Antonio's heart, the figurative seat of his elitist fictions.

Although Shylock asks for the "highly unbourgeois pleasure of revenge" in the trial scene, throughout the play he usually holds true to his belief in extrinsic value. A particular application of Shylock's system of extrinsic value is his usury, which menaces the elite's hold on economic power. Elizabethan England was greatly concerned about the

issue of usury. Aristocrats were worried about the wealth the middle class was assimilating by charging interest, and many were in serious debt to money lenders, even losing their estates in many instances (Pettet 20). Usury upset the traditional social hierarchy of the time of Shakespeare:

> Usury was a burning social issue of the day. Always excoriated, the moneylender was a man of increasing importance during this period of nascent capitalism, squeezing landowners impoverished by fixed rents at a time of rising prices and squeezing craftsmen no longer producing for a local market but for a complex commercial organization and in need of credit to maintain production. The moneylender appeared an arrant individualist, who for his own selfish purposes disrupted the traditional relationships of a hierarchical society founded upon the laws of man's nature. (Siegel 239)

C. THE FICTION OF MORAL OR RELIGIOUS OBJECTIONS TO THE TAKING OF INTEREST

To combat the economic advances of the middle class, the aristocracy in England perpetuated the fiction that they condemned money lending with interest not on economic grounds but as a moral or religious question (Stone 529). Although usury was legal in Shakespeare's time, many still advanced the argument that it was morally wrong, "religiously damnable" (Pettet 22). Pettet cites an Elizabethan pamphlet, Miles Mosse's Arraignment and Conviction of Usury, which appeared just a year before the probable date of The Merchant of Venice, as evidence of aristocratic moral disapproval of money lending. The Stationers' Company Register declared that the pamphlet contained "proof that it [usury] is manifestly forbidden by the Word of God, and sundry reasons alleged why it is justly and worthily condemned" and "Divers causes why usury should not be practised of a Christian, especially not of an Englishman" (qtd. in Pettet 22).

In England the debate about the taking of interest was in actuality an attempt by the aristocracy to prohibit the merchant class, and especially the Puritans, from accumulating more economic power. Puritan thinkers did not discourage money lending. In Calvinist thought, writes R.W. Tawney, "capital and credit are indispensable; the financier is not a pariah, but a useful member of society; and lending at interest, provided that the rate is reasonable and that loans are freely made to the poor is not *per se* more extortionate than any other of the economic transactions without which human affairs cannot be carried on" is acceptable (qtd. in Finkelstein, Who Needs 64).

The myth about moral objections to usury is voiced by the elite in The Merchant of Venice. They obscure their real quarrel with Shylock's usury, that they believe it will erode their economic position, and instead attack it as a moral or religious question. The strategy of transforming economic conflicts into religious ones was used often in Renaissance Europe. In Italy, for instance, Christian Lombard bankers used these tactics in order to take over money lending practices which had earlier been relegated to non-Christians: "Wherever financial competition made its appearance in the psychological disguise of religious prejudice and succeeded in ousting the Jews and Moslems, banking transactions fell into the hands of the Lombard financiers" (Hegadus 37).

The moral distaste the elite expresses for Shylock, writes Hatlen, is actually a disguise for their inability to accept changing economic conditions and the fact "they need him so much: merchant and banker, gentile and Jew are bound together in a symbiotic relationship" (98). Hatlen believes the elite's supposed moral qualms come from their discomfort at needing the help of a usurer Jew, who is necessary if they want to maintain their way of life:

> The lending of money at interest was, in the sixteenth century, still regarded as a morally dubious enterprise, yet the rapid development of capitalism had, by

Shakespeare's time, made the moneylender an essential figure within society. Few entrepreneurs of the period could finance their ventures out of their own pockets and so even Bassanio must turn to the moneylender for the capital to finance his quest for the golden fleece. (98)

Antonio claims that he objects to Shylock's money lending because it is unnatural. In the loan scene at the end of Act I, Antonio advances to Shylock "the commonplace Christian argument (based upon Aristotle) that to take interest is to 'breed' barren metal, which is unnatural" (Lewalski 40). Shylock contends that taking interest *is* natural, and he refers to Genesis 30 to make his case. Shylock relates the account in which Jacob watches his uncle Laban's sheep; Laban agrees that Jacob may take in payment all of the "parti-coloured" lambs born under his supervision. Jacob thrives by means of a trick "which was based on the belief that offspring resemble whatever the mother sees at their conception" (Mahood 74). Shylock relates the tale of Jacob's ingenuity to Antonio:

Mark what Jacob did;
When Laban and himself were compromised
That all the eanlings which were streaked and pied
Should fall as Jacob's hire, the ewes being rank
In end of autumn turned to the rams,
And when the work of generation was
Between those woolly breeders in the act,
The skillfull shepherd pilled me certain wands
And in the doing of the deed of kind
He struck them up before the fulsome ewes,
Who then conceiving, did in eaning time
Fall parti-coloured lambs, and those were Jacob's.

This was a way to thrive, and he was blest;

And thrift is a blessing if men steal it not. (1.3.69-82)

Shylock admires Jacob for amassing a flock through ethically dubious but inventive means, placing spotted twigs in front of the ewes during breeding so that they would produce "parti-coloured lambs." In "The Wether and the Ewe," Marc Shell explains Shylock's and Antonio's disagreement over this Biblical narrative:

> Shylock argues that, as Jacob's management of the sexual generation of lambs by Laban's 'ewes' is natural, so too is the generation of 'use' by money. [Shell finds a pun in ewes/use.] He compares '(sexual) generation' with monetary generation or usury. 'Ewes' and 'rams,' he implies, are like monetary principals, and 'lambs' are like monetary 'interest' or 'use. . . .' Antonio tries to argue against Shylock's position by suggesting that 'gold and silver' differ from 'ewes and rams.' (67)

Antonio argues that the multiplication of the sheep is a natural act, but that to breed money is an unnatural one not blessed by God:

This was a venture, sir, that Jacob served for,

A thing not in his power to bring to pass,

But swayed and fashioned by the hand of heaven.

Was this inserted to make interest good?

Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams? (1.3.83-87)

Although Antonio seems to be opposed to the taking of interest on religious grounds, an unnatural act not "swayed and fashioned by the hand of heaven," his position is merely another mystification the elite uses to disarm Shylock. Christian hypocrisy about usury had existed for centuries by the time of Shakespeare. In the Middle Ages usury was forbidden by church doctrine, but, "If forbidden in theory, moneylending of course

became a widespread Christian practice in Europe" (Finkelstein, Who Needs 63). Usury was officially permitted in Shakespeare's England, legalized a few years before the appearance of The Merchant of Venice, but even before that time, the ban on usury was broken by many Christians (Hegudus 37).

Even though he is not actually a usurer, Antonio's objections to Shylock's taking of interest are hypocritical, for Antonio's "venturing" and Shylock's usury are nearly the same thing:

> When Antonio says:
>
> I neither lend nor borrow
>
> By taking or by giving of excess
>
> he does not mean that, if he goes into partnership with another merchant contributing, say, a thousand ducats to their venture, and the venture makes a profit, he only asks for a thousand ducats back. He is a merchant and the Aristotelian argument that money is barren and cannot breed money, which he advances to Shylock, is invalid in his own case. (Auden 226)

Antonio "breeds" money through his investments. He appears even more like a usurer when one considers that the commodities he deals in--silks and spices according to Salarino's account of Antonio's vessels--are "not necessities but luxury goods, the consumption of which is governed not by physical need but by psychological values like social prestige, so there can be no question of a Just Price" (Auden 233). By dealing in luxury goods, Antonio undoubtedly charges what the market will bear, the extrinsic value, rather than an intrinsic "Just Price."

Antonio's mystification lies in his attempt to make his elitist "venturing," seem natural and Shylock's money lending seem unnatural, even though both activities are extremely similar. In the loan scene at the end of Act I, "The merchant [Antonio] claims that he earns

his profits because of the risks he takes; the moneylender claims that the interest he gets is compensation for his thrift" (Finkelstein, Who Needs 64). Finkelstein writes that Marx found neither type of capitalism to be natural: "Only productive human labor creates values, transforming the materials of nature into things of use. Neither merchant nor moneylender creates them. But in the network of economic relations of rising capitalism in the feudal world the merchant's profit appears to be 'natural,' while the moneylender's is 'unnatural'" (64). Antonio and the other members of the elite try to reinforce this illusion.

In spite of the elite's efforts to portray, through their fictions, their fight with Shylock as a noble religious crusade, the religious or racial difference is not the fundamental issue in the battle between the two groups, for "what Shakespeare analyzes most keenly in Shylock is the money-haunted mind, more than real or fancied Jewishness" (Finkelstein, Who Needs 58). This is not to deny that anti-Semitic sentiment was prevalent in Elizabethan England, in spite of the fact that Jews were virtually unknown, officially banned from the country from the year 1287 to the time of Cromwell (Hegudus 37).

However, the attacks on Shylock's religion allow the elite to maintain a lofty moral position and conceal the real economic basis of the conflict. This mystification of the elite, in which they color an economic conflict with anti-Semitism, is similar to a rhetorical strategy Stephen Greenblatt discovers operating in Marlowe's The Jew of Malta and Marx's "On the Jewish Question." Greenblatt finds that both Marlowe and Marx use "the figure of the perfidious Jew" as a trope:

> Marlowe and Marx seize upon the Jew as a kind of powerful rhetorical device, a way of marshalling deep popular hatred and clarifying its object. The Jew is not charged with racial deviance or religious impiety but with economic and social crime, crime that is committed not only *against* the dominant Christian society but,

> in less 'pure' form, by that society. Both writers hope to focus attention upon activity that is seen as at once alien and yet central to the life of the community and to direct against that activity the anti-Semitic feeling of the audience. It is this privileged access to mass psychology by means of a semimythical figure linked in the popular imagination with usury, sharp dealing, and ruthless cunning that attracts both the sixteenth-century playwright and the nineteenth-century polemicist. (292-93)

In The Merchant of Venice, however, the strategy is reversed; Shylock is attacked overtly on moral or religious grounds and covertly on economic grounds. However, the elite in Shakespeare's play use the trope of the Jewish stereotype in much the same way Greenblatt finds Marlowe and Marx employ it. Antonio and the elite are actually opposed to Shylock on economic grounds, but they use the strategy of directing anti-Semitic feeling, religious and racial overtones, to conceal their motives and to add power to their argument.

During the trial scene, the Duke betrays the fiction that the elite's conflict with Shylock is primarily based on the differences of religion and race and not on the differences between economically competing factions. He demands that Shylock uphold the Christian value of pity: "We all expect a *gentle* answer, Jew" (4.1.34). With the pun on gentile/gentle, the Duke equates religion/race (Christian, gentile) with class (gentle, or aristocrat). (Barbara Lewalski, in "Biblical Allusion and Allegory in The Merchant of Venice," among other critics, notices the recurring gentile/gentle puns.) Therefore, the Duke reveals that he sees the elite's battle with Shylock as a class conflict between gentlefolk and bourgeois money lenders, as well as a fight based on religious differences.

D. THE FICTION OF EXCLUSION

In Elizabethan England, aristocrats who recognized the economic power the middle class was gaining were troubled by the dilution of their ranks as members of the bourgeoisie ascended the social scale. Stone demonstrates that the upper class in Shakespeare's England still preserved class distinctions in the face of their declining economic power. The question of identity became a tremendous concern for them; as Stone writes, the aristocrats had to distinguish themselves from the other classes because of the extensive social mobility of the time. He argues that the aristocrats

> present a picture of a fully integrated society in which stratification by title, power, wealth, talent and culture are all in absolute harmony, and in which social mobility is consequently both undesirable and unthinkable. Reality, however, is always somewhat different.
>
> This ideological pattern and . . . measures designed to freeze the social structure and emphasize the cleavages between one class and another were introduced or reinforced at a time when in fact families were moving up and down in the social and ecomomic scale at a faster rate than at any time before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed it was just this mobility which stimulated such intensive propoganda efforts. (36)

The elite in The Merchant of Venice also believe that "social mobility is . . . both undesirable and unthinkable." They advance a fiction of exclusion as a propaganda effort intended to distinguish the members of the elite from Shylock; their distinctions are a mystification because in the reality of Venice, the lines between the elite and the bourgeoisie are already blurred.

The Christians use this fiction of exclusion as another tool of economic repression. Although Antonio is involved in the practice of venturing capital much in the same way

Shylock is, the characters in the play who are allied to him by social status uphold the fiction that Antonio's business activities are greatly different from Shylock's. Throughout The Merchant of Venice the elite perpetuate the fantasy that their business ventures are of a more noble nature than those of bourgeois capitalists. The Duke, for example, the highest-ranking nobleman in Venice and symbol of aristocratic order, excludes Shylock from the company of his respectable citizens but praises Antonio as a "royal merchant" (4.1.29). As noted earlier, in the opening scene Salarino describes Antonio's ships in glowing terms, likening them to powerful men and colorful pageants:

> Your mind is tossing on the ocean,
> There where your argosies with portly sail
> Like signiors and rich burghers on the flood,
> Or as it were the pageants of the sea,
> Do overpeer the petty traffickers
> That curtsey to them, do them reverence,
> As they fly by them with their woven wings. (1.1.8-14)

Such overblown rhetoric as Salarino's serves to include Antonio, and to reassert class superiority (Whigham 94).

In contrast to the elite's assertions which include Antonio as one of their elite, their treatment of Shylock castigates him as an outsider, or "inhuman wretch," in the words of the Duke (4.1.4). As in all battles of propaganda, warfare between these representatives of economic groups is dehumanizing. The elite use the fiction of exclusion in order to treat Shylock in a reductive way, as a non-person, and the ideology behind this mystification is simplistic, made of "a thousand stratagems for evading the irresolvable paradoxes that beset man" (Poznar 307). Employing black-and-white distinctions between their set and other members of society, the elite can exclude Shylock by branding him "a

Jew, a usurer, a madman, an animal, a ludicrously comic figure, a bloodless creature who takes no delight in eating and drinking and carousing" (307).

Shylock, however, as well as the elite practices this reductive rhetoric of exclusion (Whigham 103). Both factions, for instance, use animal imagery in order to exclude and to express their hatred for each other. Shylock says he would be rid of Antonio like one exterminates a rat, a "gaping pig," or a cat which displeases him (4.1.44-8). At one point Shylock thinks Antonio is not even worth as much as an animal (Hatlen 99) when he says, "A pound of flesh taken from a man / Is not so estimable, profitable neither / As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats" (1.3.158-160).

The elite also avail themselves of animal imagery to exclude Shylock from their company. Gratiano curses Shylock as an "inexecrable dog" and continues to claim Shylock has the very soul of a man-killing wolf:

> Thou almost mak'st me waver in my faith,
> To hold opinion with Pythagoras
> That souls of animals do infuse themselves
> Into the trunks of men. Thy currish spirit
> Governed a wolf who, hanged for human slaughter,
> Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
> And whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed dam
> Infused itself in thee. (4.1.130-37)

Antonio also compares the Jew to a wolf in the trial scene. He goes farther than Gratiano in his dehumanizing exclusion of Shylock by equating him with inanimate objects, as the Duke similarly refers to Shylock as a "stony adversary" (4.1.4). Antonio likens argument with Shylock to impossible discussion with the sea or mountain pines (4.1.75). In like manner, Shylock treats Antonio as a bothersome "woollen bagpipe" which "sings in the

nose" (4.1.56). In addition to using a strategy of dehumanization, the elite stigmatize Shylock as a barbarian. If he is a man at all, they believe, he can be excluded as a man of a foreign, inferior race. In the trial scene the Duke says:

> Forgive a moiety of the principal,
> Glancing an eye of pity on his losses,
> That have of late so huddled on his back,
> Enow to press a royal merchant down
> And pluck commiseration of his state
> From brassy bosoms and rough hearts of flint,
> From stubborn Turks, and Tartars never trained
> To offices of tender courtesy. (4.1.26-33)

The Duke implies that by nature Shylock is one with all non-Christians, such as "stubborn Turks and Tartars." Elizabethan Christians classed Jews with infidels, and one Good Friday collect asked for the conversion of "all Jews, Turks, Infidels, and Heretics" (Mahood 136). The elite in the play can further exclude Shylock by classifying him not with the respectable members of Venetian society but with other unfamiliar aliens.

The "ring episode" in the play, in which Portia gives her ring to Bassanio as a seal of their union, tricks him into giving it to her as a fee for her services as judge, and then returns it to him in Act V, has been interpreted as a game used by the elite to strengthen the identity of their group--to include and to exclude. For Whigham the final act of the play is ironic in tone :

> The comic decorum of Act V is achieved with many of the same tools of poetic assertion which make the endings of happier plays glow with warmth and love, but their earlier use for gain, and to maim Shylock, render their full credibility suspect

in this play. The mythic glow of the final circle's inclusiveness is founded upon the suppressed factional benefit of its exclusions. (113)

In other words, Whigham believes the audience cannot fully accept the "mythic glow" of comic inclusion in the final act because one is aware that this inclusion came about by the elite's determined and devious exclusion of their economic rivals.

Whigham reads much of the play as about the elite's attempts to reaffirm their identity, and he interprets the ring episode as a strategy the elite use to this end. The ring episode "echoes the trial in a comic key." It parallels the trial scene as a threat to the community of the elite, their identity, which is eventually made ludicrous. With Portia's ring trick, "the social fabric is intentionally torn and then re-established by the revelation of the threat's ludic status. The strategy is similar to the use made of Shylock: the threat is made ludicrous (as Gratiano's graceless laughter shows) and the shared joke again confirms the group's identity" (114). The elite can control infringements upon their identity by belittling all challenges to their exclusive status. Krieger also notes how serious challenges to the elite's authority in the first world, Venice, are transformed into harmless, comforting games in the second world of Belmont. He writes:

> In the second world, the protagonists transform hazarding all into a sport, in order to free themselves from the consequences of the hazardry: the casket lottery, although it threatens loss, feels like a game, whereas the Venetian contracts, which threaten material loss, feel ominous and deadly serious. (27)

E. THE FICTION OF SUPERIORITY TO CAPITALISM

Another mystification the elite employ is to claim that they are morally superior to the active pursuit of economic power and that, in fact, they are not even involved in capitalism. This mystification necessitates the translation of class control of wealth into a

conflict of values. In addition to their condemnation of usury on moral grounds, the elite claim to cherish a group of lofty ideals which are above the taint of capitalism and which stand in opposition to Shylock's values based on self-interest.

In his introduction to the play, Kenneth Myrick writes, "The world of Bassanio and Antonio is not ours. Its values are chiefly those of a governing class--courage, justice, a high sense of honor, courtesy, learning, a love of beauty, compassion, and humility" (xxv). Antonio especially has faith in these aristocratic virtues, and he adopts a stance of moral superiority in the face of Shylock and his "envy's reach": "I do oppose / My patience to his fury, and am armed / To suffer with a quietness of spirit / The very tyranny and rage of his" (4.1.10-13).

Friendship is one of the gentlemanly ideals the elite praises throughout the play. Antonio is willing to die in order to pay Bassanio's debt: "Repent but you that you shall lose your friend / And he repents not that he pays your debt" (4.1.274-75). Bassanio likewise offers to sacrifice himself for Antonio:

> But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
> Are not with me esteemed above thy life.
> I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
> Here to this devil, to deliver you. (4.1.280-83)

Mercy is another aristocratic principle which the elite claim to treasure in The Merchant of Venice. In the trial scene the Duke berates Shylock for being "Uncapable of pity, void and empty / From any dram of mercy" and urges Shylock to have pity on Antonio's losses (4.1.5-6). In this scene Portia delivers the most eloquent expression of the quality of mercy in all of Shakespeare:

> The quality of mercy is not strained,
> It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven

Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:

It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.

'Tis mighty in the mightiest, it becomes

The throned monarch better than his crown.

His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,

The attribute to awe and majesty,

Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;

But mercy is above this scepter'd sway,

It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,

It is an attribute to God himself,

And earthly power doth show likest God's

When mercy seasons justice. (4.1.180-93)

In spite of their eloquent praise of an aristocratic code of behavior, of friendship and mercy, the elite follow the code only when it is in their economic interest. However, throughout the play they deny that their behavior is determined by economics and maintain the fiction that they are morally above the active pursuit of wealth and its grubby contamination. The elite's professed value system entails a disdainful attitude toward the work of accumulating money. The circle of young aristocrats are careful to differentiate between Antonio's trade, which they laud as a noble endeavor, and Shylock's money lending, which they despise. Portia and Bassanio are the most skilled at this type of rhetoric which denounces concern for making money. In the trial scene Portia, disguised as the judge, refuses Bassanio's offer of the ducats as a reward. She says:

He is well paid that is well satisfied;

And I delivering you am satisfied

And therein do account myself well paid;

My mind was never yet more mercenary. (4.1.411-14)

Although the economic strength of the elite has just been gravely threatened by a bourgeois usurer, Portia here implies that her class may sustain itself with satisfaction in its moral superiority. She pretends that to be satisfied is sufficient, even "mercenary."

Bassanio best employs this mystification during his choice of the caskets. Bassanio's selection of the leaden casket demonstrates a belief in a natural hierarchy, that people and objects have intrinsic value unrelated to external, marketplace value (Hatlen 97). Although he has lowered himself to borrowing from a cursed money lender with his friend's life for security, in his speech over the caskets he raises himself above the need to accumulate wealth. He chooses pale lead over "gaudy gold / Hard food for Midas" (3.2.101-02) and silver, the "common drudge / 'Tween man and man" (3.2.103-04). These lines are strongly ironic coming from such an adventurer as Bassanio (Whigham 101). Bassanio realizes the importance of rhetorically denying that he is interested in money. In his speech he therefore demonstrates "stylistc class affinities" with Portia--that he holds the same elitist disregard for money--and wins her hand (Whigham 100). Bassanio understands that he must deny he desires money at the same time he pursues it; he is masterfully aware of "the world of the play, where appearances govern reality, money governs appearances, and class expectations and mystifications govern the use of money" (Whigham 95). In Power on Display, Leonard Tennenhouse also views Bassanio's casket choice as a dramatic performance, as "the riddle of the caskets acknowledges the reciprocal relationship between those who were entitled to power by blood and those who would woo and pursue such power by devising various rhetorical performances as testimony to the value of noble birth" (55). Bassanio enriches himself by claiming that he despises the pursuit of riches. In a superficial analysis of The Merchant of Venice,

man who is generous and sincerely unconcerned with material wealth. However, such an interpretation would be based on the elite's deceptive mystifications. Bassanio is able to appear uninterested in riches only because he believes in the myth of the natural hierarchy, and that his superior position on it assures him material wealth. "Bassanio's generosity, then," as Krieger writes, "derives from his aristocratic assumption that wealth does not depend on current material possessions, or, put another way, that his social position assures him unlimited credit" (24). The gallant aristocrat pretends that he is morally superior to money grubbing, but he, and the rest of the elite, need the wealth which comes from capitalist activity. Bassanio, for instance, benefits from Antonio's investments; Lorenzo benefits from Shylock's money lending by his enriching marriage to Jessica. The elite can proclaim their aristocratic value system, which they believe is superior to capitalist self-interest, only because they reap the benefits of capitalism: The "bourgeois material conditions that create the fluctuations of fortune in Venice guarantee--we might say 'underwrite'--the stable abundance of Belmont and thereby enable the protagonists to abandon temporarily the everyday world, enable them to assert that inner, spiritual qualities determine one's true worth" (Krieger 27).

F. THE FICTION OF JUSTICE AND A DEMOCRATIC LAW

The elite assert that justice is another of their timelessly true values, but in actuality this idea is but another useful, class-serving fiction. Their mystifications affirm that justice reigns in Venice, and that Venetian society operates by democratic law, a law that would protect the rights of a bourgeois like Shylock.

Throughout the play the elite act as if they respect an unbiased law in Venice. When Antonio secures the loan from Shylock in Act I, scene iii, Bassanio seems to fear the terms of their contract, which would be legally binding. He tells Antonio, "You shall not seal to

of their contract, which would be legally binding. He tells Antonio, "You shall not seal to such a bond for me; / I'll rather dwell in my necessity" (1.3.147-48). In the trial scene the elite elaborately protest that this democratic law has begun to restrict their absolute power. Bassanio begs the disguised Portia to forego the Venetian legal system in order to defeat Shylock: "Wrest once the law to your authority; / To do a great right, do a little wrong, / And curb this cruel devil of his will" (4.1.211-213). However, Portia replies, "It must not be; there is no power in Venice / Can alter a decree established" (4.1.214-15).

However, in spite of their declamations, their democratic law is a fiction. Portia's speech is a clever performance she intends Shylock to hear: True control of justice still lies in the hands of Portia and the Duke. The Duke says, "Upon my power I may dismiss this court" (4.1.104), and Portia, possessed of her aristocratic biases and love for Bassanio, will be the final judge of Shylock's fate. Although they pay homage to a fictional democratic law, the legal system of Venice is always in the elite's control: "When [Portia] finds no mention of a jot of blood, she reveals the language of the law as infinitely interpretable, as the ongoing creation of its native speakers, who maintain their power precisely by 'ad libbing' with it. Portia discovers the necessary escape clause in the white spaces between the lines, where no strict construction is possible" (Whigham 110). Portia's verdict against Shylock demonstrates that the elite always serve their own interests in administering the law.

CHAPTER IV

SHYLOCK'S DEMYSTIFICATION

In order to control the changing economic situation of their society, the elite depend continuously on a set of complex mystifications. In marked contrast, their enemy Shylock is a man of brutal honesty, a man who above all dislikes deception (Whigham 112). When Lancelot Gobbo informs the Jew in Act II that the Christians have planned a masque, Shylock cannot bear the thought of them walking the streets in their gay, yet deceptive, costumes. He warns Jessica to be wary of "Christian fools with varnished faces":

> What, are there masques? Hear you me, Jessica,
> Lock up my doors, and when you hear the drum
> And the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife,
> Clamber not you up to the casements then
> Nor thrust your head into the public street
> To gaze on Christian fools with varnished faces. (2.5.27-32)

Although Shylock is twice defeated by characters in disguise--Jessica when she elopes with Lorenzo and Portia when she acts as judge--he remains always suspicious of deceivers (Whigham 112). Shylock recognizes that the Christians, when in the "public street," or public realm, parade in varnished faces both literally and figuratively (Moody 104). In spite of their myth-making, which alleges that the elite are concerned with self-denying Christian values and unconcerned with money and power, Shylock knows that the "characteristic quality of the Venice-Belmont set is their worldliness. This makes it odd that their claims to represent the Christian virtues should be accepted at face value. With the exception of a few set pieces on the themes of mercy, love and harmony--and of

Antonio's partial representation of these qualities--their minds are never raised above the gaieties and good things of the world" (Moody 101). The masque in Act II is an attractive metaphor for the behavior of the Christians, who are fully interested in celebrating their economic prestige but only from behind masks of deception.

Shylock is keenly aware of the deceitful fictions the elite disseminate, and his great talent is the ability "to demystify their power and prestige, to strip to essences what is romantically obscured." In opposition to the fiction-producing strategies of the Christians, *demystification*--calling the elite's myths into question--is the strategy Shylock utilizes in the battle for economic power in Venice (Whigham 104).

Shylock can demystify all of the fictions of the elite--of the natural hierarchy, of their belief in intrinsic value, of their moral or religious objections to the taking of interest, of exclusion, of their superiority to capitalism, of their belief in a democratic law--if he can show that the elite actually operate from the same motives and in the same ways as he does. He attempts to demonstrate, then, that the Christians behave in their economic self-interest, and aggressively pursue wealth, without true concern for higher moral principles.

The Jew will not accept the elite's fictions because he knows that they are as heavily involved in cut-throat capitalism as he is. Therefore, in Shylock's eyes, Antonio is not a "royal merchant," as the Duke describes him, but a common "bankrupt" (4.1.122). Antonio is deeply in debt, and by calling him a bankrupt, Shylock demystifies the romantic language the elite use to discuss Antonio's venturing. Shylock employs the strategy of demystification throughout the play, tearing down the elite's lofty rhetoric with harsh realism. At the opening of the play, Salarino glories in describing Antonio's "argosies with portly sail" which majestically cut through the waters like the "pageants of the sea" (1.1.9,11). Yet Shylock offers a more realistic interpretation of Antonio's ships:

> Yet his means are in supposition: he hath an argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies; I understand moreover upon the Rialto he hath a third at Mexico, a fourth bound for England, and other ventures he hath squandered abroad. But ships are boards, sailors but men; there be land rats, and water rats, water thieves and land thieves--I mean pirates--and then there is peril of waters, winds and rocks. (1.3.14-21)

For Shylock, ships are only boards, plagued by rats and possibly by pirates; they are not the wondrous "pageants of the sea" which the elite envision. He demystifies the activity of commerce, which is about making money by means of wood and men, not about flying through the sea on "woven wings" as a beautiful and noble activity in itself.

In contrast to the elite's elevated rhetoric about human values, the money lender knows that the dehumanizing force of capitalism has already invaded the upper classes. During the trial scene, Shylock confronts them with the one of the ugliest aspects of their buying and selling, their ownership of slaves:

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

Whigham calls this speech "an arresting moment in Elizabethan literature" because Shylock "demystifies the universal harmony of the dominant ideology" (109). The elite attack Shylock for being so inhumane as to believe he could purchase another human being, and Shylock shows that the Christians are already guilty of that very offense. He does not contend that owning other human beings is immoral, but he does reveal that the elite have power over subordinates on the social hierarchy not because of a divine plan, but because of their economic might. They have many a "purchased slave," some of whom they literally own and some, like Shylock, whom they control by their economic privilege.

The elite assert that they are morally superior to capitalism, that they despise "gaudy gold / Hard food for Midas" (3.2.101-02), and silver, "the common drudge / 'Tween man and man" (3.2.103-04). Shylock perceives this is a mystification, for everything in Venice, as he knows, is for sale--even human beings. As Georg Lukacs says of the society of Balzac's Illusions perdues, people have become commodities that one may purchase (49).

Although the elite in the play claim they recognize God-given, intrinsic value, The Merchant of Venice reproduces a change in the conception of value in Elizabethan England from a feudal one which saw value as intrinsic, to one beginning in the sixteenth century "which tended to see value as an ascribed rather than inherent quality" (Hatlen 93). In the face of the elite's rhetoric about intrinsic value, Shylock knows that capitalism, with its system of extrinsic worth, is firmly in place in Venice, and under "capitalism, the value of anything--even, as Hobbes suggests, of a human being--is the price that people will pay" (Hatlen 94).

The powerful symbolism of the pound of flesh provides evidence that bourgeois capitalism, which reduces everything "to so much dead, meaningless mattler, devoid of

any form of value except the monetary value ascribed to it by the market," is fully in control of human relations in Venice (Hatlen 99). The relationship of Shylock and Antonio is not that of feudal loyalty, or Christian friendship, but that of capitalism's financial deal or "cash nexus" (99). Such a relationship is devoid of human values:

> The cash nexus reduces the worker to the status of a 'hand,' and it reduces human beings to mere 'meat on the hoof'--commodities to be bought and sold. Thus Antonio, who had heretofore thought of himself as a free and responsible creature, finds himself suddenly become merely so many pounds of meat. (Hatlen 99)

The elite pretend that their attitudes have remained insulated from the economic transformations in Venice, dehumanizing changes in which economic predators look to buy and sell their competitors, but the Christians constantly betray this fiction of superiority to capitalism. They reveal their interest in economic power through the imagery of buying, selling, and money in their speech. "The language of the play as a whole," writes Moody, "is drawn quite consistently from that world [of profit and risk], so that the action is firmly placed in a context of worldly preoccupations and values. Venice and Belmont emerge as gay, splendid and rich, and not very near to heaven; their end is profit and pleasure, not perfection" (102). Although Shylock's overt greed at times overshadows the same quality in the Christians, through language the elite expose their concern with worldly profit: "Careful investigation shows that everyone in the play who has any significant dialogue is interested in money. Shylock's avarice, it seems, often hides the great greed of all the Venetians" (Nathan 31).

Bassanio, whose rhetorical performances most strongly deny that he is touched by money love, also most clearly reveals his true concern with wealth. When he first tells Antonio of the woman he would like to court, he concentrates on an association of Portia with gold:

In Belmont is a lady richly left;
And she is fair, and--fairer than that word--
Of wondrous virtues. Sometimes from her eyes
I did receive fair speechless messages.
Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued
To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia.
Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth;
For the four winds blow in from every coast
Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strond
And many Jasons come in quest of her. (1.1.160-71)

Bassanio wraps his undignified request for a loan, capital with which to pursue a woman for her money, in the mystifying comparison of his plan and the mythical quest for the Golden Fleece. Bassanio tries to disguise the humble content of his request through the use of an ornate style (Whigham 95):

> The comparison of [Bassanio's] 'project' of obtaining Portia's hand to Jason's search for the Golden Fleece makes his plan a quest, magnificent and dangerous (and more deserving of underwriting). The parallel with Jason has a shady side, however, since Jason and Medea were both associated with untruth and deception, and since the Golden Fleece image was frequently used to signify the goal of commercial enterprise, monetary profit. . . . Bassanio romanticizes in heroic terms the pragmatic web of technique, effort, and self-interest which baser men work with more openly. (96)

Bassanio, however, does not work openly, and throughout the play discloses his

avaricious motives in his "specifically commercial vocabulary," employing the terms "rate," "owe," "undervalu'd," "worth," "thrift," and others usually associated with financial matters (Whigham 96). Bronstein (8), Moody (102), and others also note the irony of Bassanio's commercial vocabulary--he is indeed extremely concerned with money--a vocabulary which is remarkably similar to Shylock's in its use of terms from the world of business.

Portia also uses the language of buying and selling. She tells Bassanio, "Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear" (3.2.312). "The indelicacy of Portia telling Bassanio that he is costing her a lot of money," writes Mahood, "has troubled critics" (125). Her employment of a commercial vocabulary contrasts with the Portia the Christians admire as defender of many of their highest values.

In Act III, Portia offers herself to her future husband as a commodity, a sum which she hopes will stand high in his account:

> You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,
> Such as I am. Though for myself alone
> I would not be ambitious in my wish
> To wish myself much better, yet for you
> I would be trebled twenty times myself,
> A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times
> More rich, that only to stand high in your account
> I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends,
> Exceed account. (3.2.149-57)

Portia, who seems to be the least likely member of the elite to fall prey to the mindset of capitalism, isolated as she is in feudal Belmont, shows that she sees her union with Bassanio as a transaction which could be analyzed on accounting balance sheets. Here she

also speaks paradoxically, deceptively, as Portia overstates the case that she has little to offer a husband. She is fully aware of her enormous material worth and desires to make the fact of her economic power clear to Bassanio:

> Portia, chosen rightly, proceeds to wish herself, her beauty, and her money arithemetically multipled, that 'only to stand high in (his) account, / She might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends, / Exceed account.' (III,ii,155-57) The elaboration of this quantitative imagery belies the 'unlesson'd . . . unschool'd, unpractised' girl, whose modesty is an art of ostentation. Her surrender of self emphasizes her own value and its accompanying material benefits. (Whigham 102)

Throughout the play Portia does not seem to be worried by the fact that Bassanio sought her out primarily for her wealth; instead she finds it normal, an indication that her attitudes are as capitalized as those of the other characters. Norman Nathan states:

> Even in the last scene of the play, Antonio says, asking Portia to forgive Bassanio's giving away of her ring, 'I once did lend my body for his wealth.' (V,i,249) It is hardly flattering to Portia to be told that Antonio lent money to Bassanio so that he could marry a rich woman. . . . But apparently no one in the play would be disturbed by Antonio's remark. (33)

Less prominent members of the elite, such as Gratiano, also reveal through language their inner fixation with making money: "When Jessica is in the very act of stealing her father's money, the so-called Christian, Gratiano, says admiringly that she is a Gentile and not a Jew" (Bronstein 8). Apparently Gratiano believes that it is the business of Christians, not only Shylock, to make--or take--money. "Even Lancelot Gobbo, the clown of the play," Bronstein states, "parodies this Christian concern for gain when he complains [after Jessica has escaped her father] that too many Jewish converts to Christianity would raise the price of pork" (8).

Since Shylock can penetrate the elite's fiction that they are not concerned with money, he is able then to demystify all of their moral principles which they claim are above the taint of capitalism. Shylock realizes that the elite's values are actually as self-interested and based on financial gain as his are; "the cruelty of the gentle Venetians, no less than Shylock's cruelty, seems to result from a tendency to confuse monetary values with human values, for everyone in the city is obsessed with money" (Hatlen 100). Shylock therefore detects hypocrisy when the elite continue to proclaim haughtily their code of Christian principles. He separates the elite's actual beliefs and behavior from their fictions and exposes the absence of their values. Moody bases his interpretation of the play upon this demystification:

> I would argue that the play is about the manner in which the Christians succeed in the world not by practicing their ideals of love and mercy; that it is about their exploitation of an assumed unworldliness to gain the worldly advantage over Shylock; and that, finally, it is about the essential likeness of Shylock and his judges, whose triumph is even more a matter of mercenary justice than his would have been. In this view the play does not celebrate that Christian virtues so much as expose their absence. (101)

Shylock demystifies the elite's fiction that they object to the taking of interest on moral or religious grounds. He best states that the struggle between the two groups is truly about the control of wealth, and not basically a question of moral or religious differences in a speech from Act I, scene iii . He says of Antonio:

> I hate him for he is a Christian;
> But more, for that in low simplicitiy
> He lends out money gratis, and brings down
> The rate of usuance with us in Venice. (1.3.34-37)

Shylock does hate Antonio because he is a Christian; however, Shylock is also aware of his own motives for his hatred, that he abhors Antonio more because he lowers the interest rate with his free loans than because of Antonio's religion. As Hegudus points out, Shylock knows Antonio loans money without interest not out of altruism, but because it benefits him to do so:

> Seen from the merchant's [Antonio's] point of view, business consists not in the lending of one's money, but in obtaining a loan to be used for investments that will serve to raise the stock. The lower the rates of interest, the better it is for the merchant. . . . So whenever Antonio disposes of ready capital, he is acting directly in his own good, with a view to future loans required for his own business transactions, when he grants free loans that would bring about a general fall in the rate of interest on the money market. (35)

At one point in the play Antonio reveals that it is a fiction that his conflict with Shylock is over religious differences. Immediately before the trial scene, when Antonio begins to suffer from dejection, he acknowledges that Shylock hates him not because he is a Christian, but because he has taken economic power from the Jew (Pettet 28). Antonio says:

> He seeks my life; his reason well I know.
> I oft deliver'd him from his forfeitures
> Many that have at times made moan to me;
> Therefore he hates me. (3.3.21-24)

Since Shylock demystifies the real reason--economic power--for the battle between the elite and himself, the money lender is able to penetrate the other fictions of his enemies. Shylock understands that the elite's idea of friendship, for instance, does not extend to those beyond their select group. Antonio does not allow the possibility of friendship with

a bourgeois Jew; as he says to Shylock during his loan request, a member of the elite and a money lender must remain enemies:

> If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
> As to thy friends, for when did friendship take
> A breed for barren metal of his friend?
> But lend it rather to thine enemy. (1.3.124-27)

Shylock knows that the elite's concept of friendship serves their economic interests. In his essay on the play, Pettet praises Portia for rescuing Antonio, whom she does not know. Pettet admires Portia for her "disinterested friendship":

> Antonio (whom Portia has never seen) is Bassanio's friend, a gentleman of the same class, therefore, 'being the bosom lover of my Lord, Must needs be like my Lord'; and she is as uncalculating of her purse and energies to save him as Antonio was to help Bassanio in the beginning. Nothing could contrast more sharply with the inhuman self-interest of Shylock than this instinctive, almost blind sense of friendship, self-sacrifice, and class-loyalty. (29)

Pettet, it seems, has fallen for the elite's fiction about friendship. They appear to proclaim self-denying friendship as a universal good, but Portia's rescuing of Antonio is far from "disinterested"; it arises from the self-centered class-loyalty Pettet mentions. By helping Antonio, a member of the elite, Portia strengthens her class--which must band together to disarm bourgeois challenges to their power--and helps herself. The elite believe in friendship only with other members of their economic faction. Shylock states that he knows the elite's idea of friendship does not extend to all human beings. When he says, "You have among you many a purchased slave," Shylock "points out that those who preach mercy and brotherhood as universal obligations limit them in practice and are prepared to treat certain classes of human beings as things" (Auden 228).

In contrast, Shylock does not uphold friendship as a general principle and has no illusions about its impossibility between the warring economic groups. He tells Bassanio, "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you" (1.3.28-30).

As the Jew recognizes falseness in the elite's practice of friendship, he knows their concept of mercy does not apply in matters concerning the control of wealth. Antonio is not merciful when he greets Shylock with insults and spits upon his Jewish gabardine. Shylock claims that by their example the elite actually believe in revenge, not forgiveness:

> If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge! If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should be his sufferance by Christian example? Why revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute and it shall go hard by the instruction. (3.1.53-57)

In situations where the Christians seem to be merciful, Shylock understands their mercy is paternalistic, and like their idea of friendship, it reinforces the strength of their elite group. "Portia's speech on mercy," Whigham writes, "functions precisely as an ideological weapon" (110); her idea of mercy is class-serving because it maintains that the power to forgive rests with the ruling classes. According to Portia's description, mercy is "mighty in the mightiest; it becomes / The throned monarch better than his crown." Mercy, in other words, belongs primarily to the socially powerful. In William Shakespeare, Terry Eagleton writes that it is only the elite in the play who can afford to be merciful: "Those who wield power can afford to dispense with exact justice from time to time, since they, after all, control the rules of the game. It is less easy or intelligent for outcasts like Shylock, whose sole protection lies in the law, to conjure it away so cavalierly" (41).

Krieger examines Portia's rhetorical strategies in the mercy speech, which appears in

the trial scene. I have already quoted the majority of these lines on pp. 36-37, and now add more of her speech:

> Therefore, Jew,
> Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
> That in the course of justice, none of us
> Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
> And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
> The deeds of mercy. (4.1.193-98)

Krieger finds that Portia first claims that mercy is natural, the natural way of God and the universe, and then tries to deceive Shylock by offering him temporary advancement in the natural hierarchy so that he will render mercy to Antonio. Portia's speech first "incorporates mercy into natural processes and places it above an earthly temporality" (Krieger 31): Mercy falls like rain from the heavens. Portia then claims that mercy is "an attribute to God himself" (31), and that for Shylock to render mercy would be for him to elevate his actions "'above the sceptred sway' of time and earthly power," transcending concern for vengeance, time, and money (32).

However, the idea of mercy Portia asks Shylock to accept is not in his economic interest. His livelihood as a money lender requires that he not be merciful: "The charge that one 'must' forgive one's debtors develops as a challenge to the bourgeois economy from within the aristocratic fantasy of superfluous and organic wealth, wealth in the veins" (32). Portia, like Bassanio who can "hazard all," can uphold mercy as a principle because she believes she will always control wealth due to her aristocratic birth. However, it is in Shylock's interest for justice to be a general principle, not mercy. He must try to secure his material goods with strong legal ties, whereas Portia, a member of the elite, believes

that wealth should be freely available to her. She desires to weaken the ties of justice which bind money to those outside of the elite.

"By introducing mercy," says Krieger, "Portia turns the bourgeois moral system upside down; Portia isolates Shylock from the rest of bourgeois society, making him in fact an alien, and allows the other Venetians to transform their material dependence into its opposite, moral superiority to wealth. Mercy enables the bourgeoisie to become aristocratic" (33). In spite of the fact that their economic system is not based on mercy, Portia convinces the rest of the Venetians to uphold mercy as a general principle:

> Ordinarily, the bourgeois morality of Venice, the dependence on material acquisition, would be incompatible with the idealist system of the second world, the faith that wealth, by its nature, correlates with one's fixed class status. During the trial, mercy becomes a gesture toward such a system, and as such draws the bourgeoisie and the Belmont aristocracy together within one unified attitude. The bourgeois society [which includes Antonio according to Krieger's terms] can believe that its acquisitive actions, the legal seizure of Shylock's propoerty, in effect show mercy and hence distributive generosity; further, the bourgeoisie can believe that the Venetian legal and economic institutions are earthly manifestations of a higher, more perfect order of things. The trial scene introduces Christian morality into The Merchant of Venice so as to allow the bourgeoisie access to aristocratic fantasies of independence from material conditions and of participation in the heavenly system of natural harmony. (33-34)

Portia tries to trick Shylock into accepting the "aristocratic fantasies of independence from material conditions." To render mercy "enables the bourgeoisie to become aristocratic," and Shylock could emulate his social superiors, and show his disdain for money, by forgiving Antonio (Krieger 33). Of course, Shylock would only emulate the elite, not

actually advance up the social hierarchy. Portia only offers him a momentary chance to render mercy like the Christians, not any of the permanent privileges which belong to that group: "Portia . . . offers Shylock apparent membership in the class establishment in return for his assent to a vocabulary that would wash away the foundation of his power" (Whigham 109). Portia's scheme is an elaborate trick which assumes that Shylock's pride would make him want to be like the elite, to participate in mercy since it is "enthroned in the hearts of kings." However, Shylock demystifies her speech, and refuses her idea of mercy, aware that it is ruinous to him. He prefers a world governed by strict law, and is willing to be judged himself in a world without mercy: "What judgement shall I dread, doing no wrong?" (4.1.89). He denies mercy to Antonio until he is threatened with his very life.

In his article establishing parallels between Shylock and Elizabethan Puritans, Siegel demonstrates that the play's conflict between the opposed ideals of mercy and justice reflects a battle between the Puritans and the aristocrats of Elizabethan England. The Puritans of Shakespeare's day sought to dissolve the Queen's powers of mercy. Anglican clergy, particularly a Bishop Whitgift to whom Siegel refers, argued against a strict Mosaic law and defended the Queen's ability to be merciful, which was "really a defense of the powers of the Queen in general" (248). Siegel explains that

> behind the religious dispute lay the question of political power, toward which the advanced Puritan section of the bourgeoisie was groping. Shylock, in his stubborn insistence ('I stand here for law'), is dramatizing the doctrinal inflexibility of the Puritans, which, Whitgift charged, would infringe upon the Queen's power and deprive her of the means to exercise the mercy for which Portia pleads. (248)

The Queen's powers of mercy harmed the Puritans, who, like Shylock, tried to gain power over an elite through strict economic justice.

After rendering a verdict against the Jew and stripping him of his power to control wealth, the elite patronize Shylock with a superficial gesture of mercy. Siegel points out that the Elizabethan audience saw the forced conversion as merciful (253), but he goes on to reflect about the use of such power when viewed from a modern perspective: "But when we ponder this enforced conversion, not in terms of the play but of history, we can only reflect ruefully on the mercies of authoritarian regimes convinced that they possess the sole truth" (254).

The elite's destruction of Shylock, under the appearance of being merciful, is the clearest evidence that they use the idea of mercy as a fiction, not as a Christian principle to be followed. Under the threat of death, the Christians force conversion on Shylock, and bestow half of his wealth upon his enemy Antonio. Antonio will use the money to enrich Lorenzo and Jessica, whom Shylock has cursed, and Antonio also demands that Shylock bequeath all of his possessions, upon the Jew's death, to his daughter and her husband. Under the pretense of mercy, the elite cripple Shylock after they have used him for their benefit, and before he can gain a true share of economic power: "Thus, in the play, Shylock the money lender is needed to provide a stake for Bassanio's marriage venture. But having done this, not only does he not get his money back, he also loses half his estate and must will away the other half. And all this is done to him with a virtuous air of having defeated a villain. The 'right' people all come out of it very profitably" (Finkelstein, Who Needs 71). The irony of the verdict, in which the elite enrich themselves while claiming to be self-denying, is overwhelming. "Spiritual generosity to Shylock," states Whigham, "is in fact a guise for material generosity to Antonio, the state, and Lorenzo and Jessica. The dissonance of this ironic windfall of goods with the traditional schematic access of joy and riches in comic resolution suggests that Shakespeare began earlier than is usually thought to test the implications of genre (and the

awareness of his audiences) as he later did in the 'problem comedies'" (111). The irony of the trial's outcome has remained a puzzle throughout criticism of the play.

Shylock perceives that they have ruined him, not saved him, and demystifies their "merciful" verdict. He tells the Duke that they have not been generous; taking his economic power, and his control of his daughter, is equal to killing him: "Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that: / You take away my house when you do take the prop / That doth sustain my house; you take my life / When you do take the means whereby I live" (4.1.370-374). Shylock finally accepts, when forced by an alternative of death, the decision of the court. However, the resignation of his final lines, "I am content" (4.1.389), and "I pray you give me leave from hence; / I am not well. Send the deed after me / And I will sign it" (4.1.391-93), shows that he has demystified their act of "mercy." Shylock struggles against their verdict no longer because he is aware he has been defeated in an economic conflict by more powerful rivals.

In contrast to his skill at demystifying the other fictions of the elite, the myth which Shylock seemingly fails to penetrate is that of justice and a democratic law. In spite of the prejudices against him, Shylock appears confident in his right to call upon a law which protects the rights of the non-elite in order to help himself. Shylock arrogantly threatens the Duke, "If you deny it (Shylock's suit), let the danger light / Upon your charter and your city's freedom!" (4.1.38-39). Although the idea of an egalitarian law is a mystification of the elite in the play, during the Renaissance the aristocracy's absolute control over the law was eroding due to the pressures of bourgeois capitalists' desire to protect their right to property. Antonio knows that commercial interests, especially foreign traders, demand a law which affords equal protection to all. He says:

> The Duke cannot deny the course of law;
>
> For the commodity that strangers have

With us in Venice, if it be denied,

Will much impeach the justice of the state,

Since that the trade and profit of the city

Consisteth of all nations. (3.4.26-31)

The change in Venetian interpretation of law, in which middle class interests began to receive equal consideration as those of the economic elite, mirrors similar changes in Elizabethan England. Pettet writes of the above speech by Antonio that "what was true of Venice . . . was becoming increasingly true of London; while if the overt reference is to the privileges of foreign merchants, the implication is that 'trade and profit' lie now somewhere near the heart of the law" (32).

However, in actuality the elite of The Merchant of Venice remain in firm control of the law during Shylock's trial, all the while simultaneously expressing the fiction that their legal system impartially upholds the rights of all. Many critics find that the cause of Shylock's downfall lies in the fact that he accepts "the law's claim to universality," oblivious to the fact that "the law is itself an ideological expression of the imperatives of the elite" (Whigham 107). According to these critics, Shylock sincerely believes he will win his case and is blind to the possiblilty that Portia will ultimately find a loophole to preserve the status quo. In this interpretation of the play, Shylock genuinely admires the young doctor--Portia in disguise--and seriously trusts he will be victorious, addressing Portia as "O wise and upright judge" (4.1.246) and "A Daniel come to judgement!" (4.1.219). Finkelstein, among others, writes that Shylock remains unaware that in spite of the fact that the "bourgeois state must uphold bourgeois contracts," the economic elite will always find a loophole to protect its interests (Who Needs 69). He continues to say that it is the nature of an economic elite, whether in Renaissance Venice, Elizabethan England, or twentieth-century America, to bend the law to its own purposes: "When

property rights are threatened in the lives of the dispossessed, the exploited, or of an oppressed people like the Black people in the United States, in the attempt to make the law operate in their favor, a loophole generally turns up" (Who Needs 70).

However, Shylock does see through the elite's fictions about justice and the law, and his behavior in the trial scene is his ultimate demystification of the elite's oppressive myths. Terry Eagleton is one critic who favors this interpretation. Using the terminology of structural linguists, Eagleton writes that the *parole* of law, its particular, individual occurrence, is often quite different from the *langue* of law, the ideal of law. Although the elite deny this fact--that their individual interpretations of law, in their particular occurrences, vary from the ideal--Eagleton writes, "Yet the law, like language, 'lives' only in specific human contexts, all of which are unique" (36). For a particular application of law, a *parole*, the *langue* of law must be interpreted by humans. In The Merchant of Venice the interpreters are the Christian elite. Shylock does see through the elite's mystifications about the nature of the law, and through his suit he attempts to discredit the "unbiased" law of Venice:

> Indeed it is tempting to speculate that Shylock never really expected to win in the first place; he is hardly well placed to do so, as a solitary, despised outsider confronting a powerful, clubbish ruling class. One can imagine him waiting with a certain academic interest to see what dodge the Christian will devise to let one of their own kind off the hook. Perhaps he throws the audience a knowing wink when Portia produces her knockdown argument. Shylock's curious reluctance to specify his motive in pursuing his suit, the oddly gratuitous quality of his vengeance, might be construed as evidence for this. . . . It is almost as though Shylock is defying the court to deny him in order to expose its own hollowness. Either way he will win: by killing Antonio, or by unmasking Christian justice as a

> mockery. If the decrees of Venice were shown to be worthless, troubling political consequences might be in store for the state. To catch the Christians out in a *particular* judicial shuffle is of course to discredit the law in general, just as to lend out money gratis *a la* Antonio is to affect the general rate of exchange in the city. What is at stake in the courtroom, then, is less Shylock's personal desire to carve up Antonio than the law of Venice itself: will it maintain its proper indifference to individuals, penalize one of its own wealthy adherents at the behest of an odious Jew? The answer, of course, is that it will not; but in order to avoid doing so it must risk deconstructing itself, deploying exactly the kind of subjective paltering it exists to spurn. To protect itself the law is forced into a hermeneutical errancy, the final consequence of which might be political anarchy. Shylock thus induces the Venetian law partly to undo itself, entering that alien system from the inside and operating its rules in a style which presses them towards self-contradiction. He takes 'for real' the dramatic charade of a system in which he has little faith, in order to uncover the genuine illusions at its heart. (Eagleton 37-38)

Shylock, therefore, realizes that the Christians will judge against him when he challenges a member of their group, yet he perseveres in order to force their fiction about justice to reveal itself. Eagleton is unique among Marxist critics in this interpretation, but he offers an attractive answer to the problem that Shylock appears to penetrate all of the elite's fictions about their moral superiority and lack of concern for wealth, yet seems to surrender to their mystifications about the law. Shylock's most powerful demystification occurs when the elite destroy him, demonstrating that their idea of justice is a biased mockery, their idea of mercy an economic weapon.

CHAPTER V

SHAKESPEARE'S MESSAGE

Throughout the history of criticism of The Merchant of Venice, critics have tried to determine Shakespeare's attitude toward the two ideological groups in the play, to identify his sympathies, in order to determine his message about the competing economic systems of his day. As I have stated in the introduction, the play has resisted such judgements. Marxist interpretations of The Merchant of Venice have fallen into three camps, those which view the play as an attack on bourgeois capitalism, those which consider it a diatribe against aristocratic economics, and those which interpret the play as a balanced dialectic which supports neither system.

Perhaps the fundamental issue in the criticism of The Merchant of Venice has been Shakespeare's treatment of Shylock. The majority of Marxist critics look to Shylock as the symbol of capitalism in the play and find Shakespeare's portrayal of the Jew has much to reveal regarding his attitude about emerging capitalism in Elizabethan England.

Many critics find that Shylock is best understood as a negative character criticized by Shakespeare for his bourgeois capitalist values. Siegel writes, "Shylock, despite his possessing characteristics of the Jew of medieval legend, is not *merely* a fairy-tale monster due to Shakespeare's having breathed life into the stereotype by giving him the spirit of the contemporary *homo economicus*" (252). Siegel painstakingly attempts to demonstrate that Shylock is representative of the Elizabethan Puritan bourgeoisie, who adhered to austere Old Testament principles and attempted to improve their financial status. He continues to say that Shakespeare disparages, through Shylock's self-centered avarice, the new Elizabethan capitalist:

> I suggest that, accurately understood, [Shylock] is both comic and frightening because he portrays the worst side of the new capitalist individualism born in

> Shakespeare's time. He is the spirit of that economic self-seeking which is indifferent to the welfare of others, stultifying those whom it possesses and oppressing the rest of humanity. Jewishness, Puritanism, usury are only incidental; this spirit is what is universal in him. (249)

Shakespeare's portrayal of the Jew, Siegel finds, is overwhelmingly negative in spite of many critics' attempts to explain away this fact. Shylock, according to Siegel, is not only violently hateful, but also hypocritical and self-abusing. Yet for this critic, Shakespeare primarily ridicules Shylock for the "mechanization of personality" which accompanies bourgeois capitalism, attacking the Jew as a type of businessman automaton which is prevalent in twentieth-century comedy (249). Shakespeare's goal is to denounce an economic system which fosters such rigid personalities that react only to financial concerns. Similarly, Pettet sees the play as an attack on capitalist values; quoting a line from Wilson's Discourse upon Usury, he says Shakespeare was critical that "Hardness of heart hath now gotten place" (19), and it is Shylock's hardness of heart which Shakespeare emphasizes in The Merchant of Venice.

Siegel is typical of a great number of critics who find that Shakespeare strongly deprecates capitalism in this play through his harsh portrayal of Shylock. However, a nearly equal number of critics concentrate on Shakespeare's ironic characterization of the Christian elite, and even Siegel notes that "the identification of aristocratic largess with Christian charity produces ironies for us now" (252). Auden, for instance, takes the position that "what is called in question is the claim of Belmont to be the Great Good Place, the Earthly Paradise" (221). He believes the play is actually an attack on the elite and the audience's sympathies for their ideology: "Watching The Merchant of Venice . . . we are compelled to acknowledge that the attraction which we naturally feel towards Belmont is highly questionable. On that account, I think The Merchant of Venice must be

classed among Shakespeare's 'Unpleasant Plays'" (221). Auden does not stand alone in his viewpoint which finds the play criticizes the elite.

Another similar interpretation is R. Chris Hassel, Jr.'s "Antonio and the Ironic Festivity of The Merchant of Venice." Hassel finds the play darkly satirical, dissimilar to many of Shakespeare's comedies, and finds the irony revealed in Antonio's character. He believes Antonio recognizes the shortcomings of the Christians and their questionable behavior; Antonio is therefore melancholy because of that realization. "His sadness remains as ambiguous as the morality of the Christian society, and it becomes a symbol of that society," writes Hassel (70). Antonio cannot take full part in the festivities of Act V because of his feelings of guilt and doubt:

> Shakespeare seems to have reverted to the Roman comedy's technique of having festivity signify only the superficial overthrow of the comic usurper, Shylock. Educations have not occurred, and the one Christian character with recognized psychological obstructions, Antonio, seems to have been forgotten amidst the festive celebration. But Antonio's unexplained and unresolved sadness and the lack of educative festivity are in fact both essential to our proper understanding of the play. Antonio's ill-defined sadness suggests a moral dissatisfaction with the Christian society in which he is both a participant and a critic. . . . His awkwardness reminds us that Shylock was a victim as well as a villain, and that Belmont is as flawed as Venice. Most important, because Belmont's inhabitants are oblivious to their flaws, their festivity is artificial, ambiguous, and highly ironic. (68)

Hassel finds that Shakespeare expresses his misgivings about the elite's way of life through his ironic treatment of Portia, Bassanio, and the other members of their set; the audience should be morally dissatisfied with the elite's economic oppression.

In addition to Shakespeare's ironic portrayal of the Christians and their dubious behavior, which would seem to indicate he was critical of the Elizabethan economic elite, many critics have demonstrated that Shakespeare's characterization of Shylock, and therefore his attitude towards bourgeois capitalist values, is not wholly negative. Auden writes:

> Had Shakespeare wished to show Shylock the usurer in the most unfavorable light possible, he could have placed him in a medieval agricultural society, where men become debtors through misfortunes, like a bad harvest or sickness for which they are not responsible, but he places him in a mercantile society, where the role played by money is a very different one. (225)

Auden believes, then, that the Christians are responsible, and not Shylock, for their financial troubles. Finkelstein also finds that Shakespeare softened his Jewish character in order to make him the object of his sympathies for the oppressed. Finkelstein discusses Shakespeare's "humanization" of Shylock throughout the play, and offers examples such as Shylock's touching reaction to Tubal's tale of Jessica's trading away Shylock's ring (Who Needs 67): "Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turquoise. I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor" (3.1.95-96). Shylock's speech, "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, passions?" (3.1.46-57), is often cited as another example of Shakespeare's sympathy for the oppressed Jew.

However, several critics believe that Shakespeare's criticism of the elite in the play, and his sometimes sympathetic rendering of Shylock, do not signify that Shakespeare endorsed the bourgeois capitalism of his time. Smirnov and Bronstein, for example, find that Shakespeare questions the dubious behavior of the elite in the play not to compromise the aristocracy's position in Elizabethan life, but in order to *strengthen* a nobility which was losing position to bourgeois capitalism. Smirnov, who finds that Shakespeare, in his

total oeuvre, is primarily a subversive whose plays include "militant, revolutionary protests against feudal forms, conceptions, and institutions," also writes that the plays of Shakespeare's first period of work, to 1601, are more conservative than his later plays. In the England of Shakespeare's early period, states Smirnov, "there occurred the coalescence of all the foremost forces of the country: upper middle-class, the monarchy, the gentry, and even part of the landed nobility. This process is reflected by the joyous optimism of Shakespeare's early work, which is filled with a bold and happy affirmation of life, and with obviously aristocratic elements" (26). Therefore, in The Merchant of Venice, Smirnov finds a cautious Shakespeare who "criticizes certain failings in the ruling class, hoping thus to strengthen its position" (35). Shakespeare hopes, believes Smirnov, to correct gently some of the Elizabethan elite's most offensively imperious behavior in order to make it less vulnerable to the challenging middle class.

For Bronstein the message of the play is generally Christian and anti-capitalist, a message "enforced by the three-caskets motif, seemingly so far removed from the other issues of the drama. For its purpose is to reject the aim of gain-seeking (more than you deserve, the golden casket), and rigorous justice (just what you deserve, the silver casket) in behalf of unconditional giving (the leaden casket for which one must give and hazard all)" (10). If Bronstein is correct in his assessment of the theme of the play, Shakespeare's message is therefore reactionary, calling for a Christian code in a world in which Christian values have been replaced by capitalist ones. "There is abundant evidence that Shakespeare feared the motive of material gain so important in the rapidly expanding development of commercial capitalism, lest it should subvert the values of loyalty for its own sake, friendship, and custom-forged and time-honored allegiances, all based on the structure of medieval feudalism," states Bronstein (7). He writes that Shakespeare's negative portrayal of the elite in the play is designed to make an Elizabethan aware of his

own greed brought on by the new capitalism, to make the "audience uncomfortable with its hypocritical sterotypes which allow it so easily to project its own guilt for greed onto the Jew. Underlying glittering Venice and fabulous Belmont is the increasingly universal passion for gain" (8). Bronstein does not find that the Christians have higher principles and act in a more noble manner than does Shylock, but he finds Shakespeare, in denouncing them--and their Elizabethan counterparts by implication--believes they *should* abandon their present course for a pre-capitalist code of Christian ethics.

Cohen offers another interpretation of Shakespeare's message in The Merchant of Venice. He writes that Shakespeare approves of capitalism in general: "But not only do Shakespeare's other plays of the 1590's show few signs of hostility to capitalism, The Merchant of Venice itself is quite obviously procapitalist, at least as far as commerce is concerned. It would be more accurate to say that Shakespeare is criticizing merely the worst aspects of an emerging economic system, rather than the system itself" (768). However, according to Cohen, Shakespeare approves of Antonio's brand of capitalism, one in which the aristocracy would retain control. This critic argues against an ironic interpretation of the play, writing that the fantasy of Belmont is a vision which is meant to be positive, a kind of Utopia in "which human relationships are not exploitative" (776). Belmont, "the great country house," must be taken seriously as a symbol of aristocratically directed capitalism, for Shakespeare is trying to form a vision in which the Elizabethan aristocracy would master, with social responsibility, the new economic changes before it:

> Shakespeare's goal is thus, once again, to rebind what had been torn asunder into a new unity, under aristocratic leadership. The symbolic repository of value is the great country house, home not of reactionary seigneurial barons but, especially in England, of a rising class increasingly dependent for its revenues on capitalist agriculture and soon to align itself against the monarchy. (777)

Another answer to the question of Shakespeare's attitude towards aristocratic economics and bourgeois capitalism lies with those critics who find that Shakespeare upholds neither system, but instead maintains a delicate balance between the two in The Merchant of Venice. Hatlen, for instance, finds that the elite's beliefs, such as in the natural hierarchy and in intrinsic value, and Shylock's beliefs in social mobility and extrinsic, monetary value are both voiced in the play. Shakespeare, according to this critic, does not necessarily argue dogmatically for the aristocratic ideology or bourgeois capitalist ideology; he instead uses those ideas dialectically for aesthetic balance (102). Hatlen states that neither side receives Shakespeare's full sympathy: "At first glance, the line between 'good guys' and 'bad guys' would seem to be sharp: Shylock, the supreme exemplar of the capitalist mentality, is the villain, while the aristocratic Portia . . . embodies the *summun bonum* . . . . Yet the more we reflect on the play, the less adequate this neat good-guys-versus-bad-guys interpretation seems to be" (100). As I noted in the introduction, Moody agrees that an audience watching The Merchant of Venice does not identify with either the elite or Shylock: "It [the play] compels an intensely sympathetic insight into Shylock's tragically corrupt nature, yet we are unlikely to identify with him. It reveals in the Christians a complacent inhumanity, and yet we are likely to find them attractive in their fashion. No account of the play which offers to see it in terms of simple good and evil can hope to satisfy. It is too subtle and exploratory for that" (101).

Hatlen declares that Shylock's negative characteristics are balanced by the sympathy Shakespeare creates for him and by his bourgeois ideals such as "equality before the law"; similarly, the aristocrats' positive characterisitics, such as friendship and loyalty, are balanced by their cruelty and equal obsession with money (101). Shakespeare presents aristocratic and bourgeois ideologies without committing himself dogmatically to either side (102). Shakespeare, Hatlen argues, seriously criticizes both economic systems, but

remains "less concerned with advocating one set of ideas than with dramatizing the interplay between various ways of explaining human existence" (102).

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The interpretation of The Merchant of Venice which asserts that the weight of Shakespeare's sympathy in the play falls on neither the side of the elite nor that of Shylock, that the work maintains an aesthetically pleasing balance between the conflicting economic factions, is essentially a formalist one. Although Hatlen basically maintains this idea, he does deride formalist critics who struggle too hard to find an evenly balanced, harmonious dichotomy in the play, those who see "Shakespeare's dialectical dance occurriing in a vacuum" (102). For these critics, Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice avoids a meaningful statement about either aristocratic or bourgeois economics in Elizabethan England because the play equalizes the two forces, presenting the shortcomings and strengths of both ideologies. One could say that the form of such a play--"dialectical transcendance"--renders it not at all neutral in its ideology, but in fact makes it reactionary, as some readers find "in the sense of closure or wholeness sometimes produced by a work of art an analogue to reactionary corporatist ideologies designed to suppress awareness of class conflict" (Cohen 775). The workings of the form of the play for balanced unity, in other words, may in fact be evidence that Shakespeare upholds the Elizabethan status quo in the face of middle class economic challenges.

However, Northrop Frye, among others, states that this balance which some find in the play is at best an extremely fragile one: "The Merchant of Venice seems almost an experiment in coming as close as possible to upsetting the comic balance. If the dramatic role of Shylock is ever so slightly exaggerated, as it generally is when the leading actor of the company takes the part, it is upset, and the play becomes the tragedy of the Jew of Venice with a comic epilogue" (165).

A Marxist interpretation of The Merchant of Venice, when not colored by the formalist

penchant for detecting resolved contradictory elements in a work of literature, reveals that such an aesthetic balance between the elite and Shylock does not exist. In the play Shakespeare forcefully sides with the energy and honesty of Shylock's brand of middle class capitalism. In contrast to Krieger's belief that the elite's myth-making processes and Shylock's myth-destroying powers form a neutral dialectic, the play actually affirms the Jew's demystification of the Christians' fictions. Shakespeare demonstrates that the elite form their myths out of hypocrisy and desperation; Shylock subverts them out of unflinching honesty and confidence in the strength of his economic system.

Critics such as Max Plowman in "Money and The Merchant" hold that Shakespeare contrasts the "life-value" of the elite--a belief in a world of love, justice, and mercy untouched by the degradation of money--with the "money value" of Shylock, "the forbidding aspect, the dark principle, the shadow in the sun, the grim necessity" (79). However, Marxist interpretation exposes the failure of the Christians, in spite of their glorious and continual praise of "life-value," to live up to their principles. In fact, these precepts help them to obscure the fact that they are overwhelmingly concerned with making money and the battle to maintain their social privileges. Shylock knows that Antonio's goals are based on financial gain, to drive "down / The rate of usuance" (1.3.37) in Venice, and that the Christians, far from working for the humanization of their society, have among them "many a purchased slave" (4.1.90). The elite also claim, through the myths of the natural hierarchy and of exclusion, that God has ordained their faction as the secure rulers of society. In spite of this, Shylock demonstrates that the elite actually struggle, through worldly trickery and economic privilege, to maintain their "God-given" position. He questions, for example, Antonio's moral quibbling about the taking of interest when both men actually believe that "thrift is a blessing if men steal it not" (1.3.82). When the Jew doubts that Antonio's means are sufficient., he also strips

away the myth that the Christians' governing social status is forever safe and inevitable. In Shylock's view Antonio is not a "royal merchant," but "a bankrupt, a prodigal, who dare scarce show his head on the Rialto, a beggar that used to come so smart upon the mart" (3.1.35-37).

Shakespeare does not portray Shylock as wholly admirable; the Jew is avaricious, ruthless, and egotistical, and these unpleasant aspects of his character have led many critics to believe the sympathy of the play must fall on the Christian elite. Yet in a Marxist interpretation of the play, in which the elite's behavior is discovered to have a self-serving economic basis, the Christians also possess these negative qualities. Shakespeare presents only one great contrast between the Jewish money lender and his adversaries; that is, Shylock is truthful about his agenda, to enrich himself and even destroy his main economic competitor if he can, while the elite propogate many deceptive myths to obscure their mercenary interests in making money and maintaining their economic power. If the Christians superficially appear to be more likable and more charitable, one must keep in mind that one of the main themes of the play, reinforced by the casket plot, is, as Antonio ironically states, "what a goodly outside falsehood hath" (1.3.94).

Shakespeare proffers one other marked difference between the Jew and the elite. If Shylock is not to be admired for his greed, he is to be respected for his energy, the intensity he manifests throughout his conflict. While Shakespeare portrays Bassanio and Lorenzo as decadents, desiring not "hard-earned thrift" but the easy resources which come from borrowing and stealing, and Antonio as a melancholic, defeated man who calls himself the "tainted wether of the flock / Meetest for death" (4.1.114-115), Shylock abhors self-pity for the vigorous competition of economic conflict. When one would naturally expect him to suffer from Antonio's kind of self-absorbed depression, such as after Jessica has escaped with his jewels, the Jew lashes out with fierce anger, refusing to

surrender to debilitating melancholy. Shylock maintains his belligerent stance until the last moment of the trial scene, when he realizes that even if he insists upon cutting the pound of flesh from Antonio, the elite will not let him have his vengeance.

Many critics who find sympathy in The Merchant of Venice for the Jew's integrity and the force of his personality have been puzzled by Shakespeare's destruction of Shylock in the fourth act. Does Shakespeare, many wonder, reveal the honesty and power of Shylock's bourgeois capitalism only to retreat ultimately from the direction of his play and uphold the existing order? In fact, it is during the trial scene's demolition of Shylock that Shakespeare's message coalesces. During the trial, Shylock is shown at his most brutally truthful, proclaiming his violent hatred for Antonio, his bourgeois reverence for property, and his egotisitical rejection of the principle of mercy. The Jew is in control of all of his considerable energy, vigorously challenging the elite's fictions--"You have among you many a purchased slave" (4.1.90)--and proudly declaring his power--"What judgement shall I dread, doing no wrong?" (4.1.89). He overtly denounces the authority of the Duke of Venice, the mightiest member of Venetian society, saying, "If you deny it [his suit], let the danger light / Upon your charter and your city's freedom!" (4.1.38-39).

In dramatic contrast, Shakespeare presents the elite at their most hypocritical and least powerful in the trial scene. A Marxist interpretation of the play shows that the Christians work for their own economic good throughout the play, but their dissembling is most blatant during the trial: Portia speaks of Venice's democratic law and delivers the famed speech on mercy, and then she renders a biased verdict which devastates the Jew. However, Shakespeare's revelation of the Christians' economic weakness is more subtle. The elite seems to be unshakably mighty, fully in control of the city's legal system, and at the end of the scene, free of the immediate challenge to their economic superiority. However, both audience and reader must be struck by the sheer number of the elite

necessary to defeat the Jew. Their social strength appears to be diminishing when one considers that nearly all of their set--the Duke, the magnificoes, Antonio, Bassanio, Salerio, Gratiano--must gather to conquer the challenge of one despised Jew. Throughout the play the monetary wealth and corresponding social power, of Antonio, Bassanio, and Lorenzo have been questioned, but Portia's social standing has remained unchallenged; however, she considers Shylock's suit such a potent threat that she must travel from Belmont in order to protect her future husband and the elite's ruling position. Although Portia is able to pay Shylock several times the amount of the debt, she is not able to vanquish him by truly unbiased legal means. She must resort to a loophole in order to claim victory for the elite, an action which demonstrates the desperation with which the elite put down rising economic challenges. Shylock questions their authority, and the elite must unite and assemble all of their force in order to subdue him. The effect of this scene is to endow Shylock with still more sympathy. In any piece of literature the result of a group attack upon an individual is to produce compassion for the isolated figure--the same sympathetic effect Frye says one feels watching a "stag pulled down by wolves" (219).

After Shakespeare reveals the falseness and vulnerability of the elite, the final act of the play, in which the Christians again give voice to all of their mystifications, is highly ironic. Significantly, they do not celebrate their victory in Venice, where their continued prestige has been gravely threatened, but instead escape to isolated Belmont, taking symbolic refuge in that green world as they take refuge in their fictions about their values and divinely sanctioned social power. Act V of The Merchant of Venice reinforces all of the irony of the play as the elite discuss the harmony of the universe, their privileged place in it, and the love and moral virtues which they hold dear; however, the shadow of the Jew they have recently destroyed, and his spirit of resolute honesty and defiant energy, continues to demystify their fictions even in his absence from the stage.

Marxist criticism largely ignores important aspects of The Merchant of Venice, such as Portia's struggle against patriarchal constraints and the play's typically comic concern for the business of heterosexual love--the romantic negotiations of young men and women on their progession towards marriage. However, the Marxist approach concentrates on the play's fundamental issue, which is ideological conflict between competing economic factions. The Marxist critic discovers the myths by which the Christian elite hold power and the process of demystification by which the bourgeois Jew challenges that authority. The myths of Belmont, writes Auden, would have us "believe that men and women are either good or bad by nature, but Shylock and Antonio remind us that this is an illusion: in the real world, no hatred is totally without justification, no love totally innocent" (235). After the elite's fictions have been revealed and their economic interests exposed, the Marxist approach demonstrates that Shakespeare, in spite of his seeming attraction to the Christians' aristocratic ideals and his misgivings about Shylock's ruthless nature, upholds the honesty and energy of bourgeois capitalism and "realistically shows the old order being pushed off the stage of history" (Finkelstein, Who Needs 60).

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