Double-Gifting and Self-Interested Charity in *The Merchant of Venice*

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This essay analyzes the enacting of charity in *The Merchant of Venice*, with particular emphasis on moments of "double-gifting" in the plotlines of Portia and Antonio. Building on Henry Berger Jr.'s reading of the play in "Mercifixion in *The Merchant of Venice*," I argue that both Bassanio's wife and friend attempt to exert power over him by weaponizing unspoken obligations of reciprocity underlying their extravagant, repeated gifts of both self and property. Though Portia's success at winning Bassanio's fealty (as well as personal freedom for herself) contrasts sharply with Antonio's near-complete loss of influence, a close reading of the ring plot and merry bond reveals a similar strategy of manipulation via charity behind the actions of both characters. I conclude by connecting the essay's discussion of the play's altered gift exchanges to the reality of emergent mercantile capitalism in early modern England, suggesting that said exchanges can be read as instances of "purchasing" interpersonal goods in a manner less explicit than, though bearing resemblance to, Shylock's use of the money lending contract to obtain revenge on Antonio.

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Introduction

If you forget your wallet and your friend buys you lunch, you'd be grateful for their help. If it happens again, you might begin to feel guilty or indebted. If your friend never lets you return the favor, you might wonder if they enjoy some aspect of your (unspoken) indebtedness. You might start to ask if they are such a good friend after all.

In Harry Berger Jr.'s excellent essay, "Mercifixion in *The Merchant of Venice*," he identifies moments of embarrassing mercy or charity (that is, moments of mercifixion) as focal points of manipulation and dominance throughout Shakespeare's play. Closely linked is the idea of "negative usury," which "consists of giving more than you take in a manner that makes it possible for you to end up getting more than you gave."[1] Both concepts converge in Berger's analysis to articulate a mode of weaponized charity, where the giver's unrequited act of generosity is ultimately self-serving and may even attempt to enact a perpetual creditor-debtor relationship as a means of controlling the debtor/recipient. The text of the play amply supports this reading, which offers a deeper understanding of the Antonio-Bassanio-Portia love triangle, as well as key movements in the famous court scene. If we reflect further on the importance of un-altruistic self-sacrifice in *The Merchant of Venice*, however, we might find that we've opened up more questions (or caskets) than we anticipated: What distinguishes weaponized charity from the truly selfless variety the Venetian Christians constantly pay lip service to, but never seen to enact? In what way does charity-as-acted in *The Merchant* diverge from "normal" cycles of gift exchange? And what (if any) relation is there between weaponized charity and the market exchange-relations encoded in the play's plot, setting, and language?

In this essay, I will define a pattern of double-gifting as weaponized charity in *The Merchant*, which I will then apply to several critical scenes of "mercifixion" throughout the text. By "double-gifting," I mean the total inversion of the Maussian gift exchange, such that one party gives twice and the other only receives, but must in turn suffer the penalty of becoming socially and morally indebted to the giver. While this process reaches its apotheosis with Portia's second bestowal of her ring on Bassanio, it can be found complete-and-in-miniature with her offer to pay Antonio's three thousand ducat debt to Shylock: "Pay him six thousand, and deface the bond."[2] By tracking the two major instances of double-gifting in the play—Portia's ring and Antonio's excessive loans—we will not only come to a deeper understanding of the weaponization of charity in *The Merchant*, but also observe how the logic of the gift exchange can underwrite contracts that never invoke it directly, as well as how market attitudes toward people as bearers of commodities can revise even that fundamental logic. In Venice, the paradigm of the gift may surface where we least expect it, but not before taking on certain crucial qualities of the market exchange.

Scholars have already remarked on Marcel Mauss' *Essai sur le don*, in relation to *The Merchant of Venice*,[3] but his detailed study of the gift exchange might nonetheless seem like a counterintuitive place to start our analysis of the play. For all the Christian characters' nods to giving, explicit acts of such are scarce to be found but instead appear disguised as lending (Antonio), pledging (Portia), and intercessing (Antonio again).[4] Even harder to locate are instances of exchange or giving-in-return, a problem which carries over even into the

[1] Berger, "Mercifixion," 11.
[2] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 3.2.298.
[3] See "Mercifixion in *The Merchant of Venice*," and "Portia's Ring."
[4] The main exception (mysteriously) being Bassanio 's gift of Portia's ring to Portia, disguised as the law doctor.

resolution of Shylock's merry bond, which is affirmed and discharged, but never paid back. *The Merchant*'s broken circuits of exchange are, however, precisely where some of Mauss' observations are most useful. He identifies a common archetype of gift exchange across a variety of societies where "in theory [gifts] are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily."[5] The original act of giving (which may itself be compulsory) presupposes a response-in-kind, because the position of being a non-reciprocating recipient is highly unfavorable. It is this basic idea—which to Mauss is still "hidden, below the surface"[6] in capitalist societies—to which we will principally attend. Our task will not only be to identify unreciprocated giftings when they appear in *The Merchant* but to investigate the extent to which their unreturnable nature is intentional and even born of hostility.

Before we turn to Portia, the most successful double-gifter of all in *The Merchant*, I will briefly mention that while Mauss conceives of the gift in non-market societies[7] as playing a key role in a wider system of exchange which is both economic and "spiritual,"[8] its presence in the play's decidedly market society is nothing of the kind. Rather, I wish to suggest that *The Merchant* has something to say about the recontextualization of the gift in emergent capitalism, where what was once a way of binding persons, tribal groups, and societies together becomes a means of "purchasing" a certain moral or social dominance vis-a-vis the recipient.

Portia: Patriarchal Marriage Transaction vs. The Gift

Berger marvels at Portia's "[conquest] of Bassanio by giving him herself and everything she owns,"[9] and her ultimate victory is made even more impressive by the entrapment she faces at the beginning of the play. She laments to Nerissa, "I may neither choose whom I would, nor refuse whom I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father."[10] While her unmarried state affords her a certain degree of freedom, the caskets promise that this will one day end with her marriage to a man she may not love and who will in all likelihood assume authority over her, consistent with the early modern gender hierarchy. A close examination of Portia's preference of Bassanio furthers the notion that her ultimate end throughout the play remains choice or at least her continued access to it. While her reasons for rejecting the Neapolitan prince, the County Palatine, Monsieur Le Bon, and the rest are superficially persuasive (though not always reflecting well on Portia's character), we are left to wonder why exactly Bassanio is singled out as "the best deserving a fair lady."[11]

Certainly, it cannot be for his wealth— he has already informed her that his "state was nothing."[12] Well then, perhaps it is for his poverty, which more than anything else seems to distinguish him from the other suitors. In her book chapter, "Portia's Ring," Karen Newman notes that while by English law a husband of lower wealth or social status would become "master of his wife and her goods, in practice contemporary sources suggest unequal

[5] Mauss, *The Gift*, 3.
[6] Mauss, *The Gift*, 5.
[7] Mauss himself conceives of all societies as "market," (*The Gift*, 5) but his notion of what that entails is necessarily quite broad, since he freely admits that many societies do not have money or exact measures of economic value. By "market society" here, I mean a society whose principle mode of exchange is that of the market, above all defined by the exact quantification of economic value via money.
[8] Mauss, *The Gift*, 18.
[9] Berger, "Mercifixion," 3.
[10] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 1.2.22-24.
[11] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 1.2.13-14.
[12] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 3.2.258.

marriages often resulted in domination by the wife."[13] If we keep in mind Bassanio's vulnerability (or, the potentiality for such) by virtue of his being broke, the latter half of Portia's self-bestowing speech takes on a less-than-abnegating edge:

> Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours
> Is now converted. But now, I was the lord
> Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
> Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,
> This house, these servants and this same myself
> Are yours, my lord's. I give them with this ring
> Which, when you part from, lose or give away,
> Let it presage the ruin of your love,
> And be my vantage to exclaim on you.[14]

While the speech appears to accept a patriarchal transfer of self and goods (indeed, self-as-goods), a close reading suggests that even now, but now, Portia is laying the groundwork for the authority over love and property which she will assume in act five.

Her emphasis on "what is mine" reminds us (and perhaps Bassanio) of just how wealthy she is and that, insofar as her estate is now Bassanio's, it is all that is Bassanio's. While the increasingly passive voicing of the speech ("Myself…Is now converted") gestures to a seamless transfer of power and property, it is disrupted when Portia bestows the ring upon Bassanio. Her formal, "I give," reasserts her agency and introduces an element of authoritative choice where there might otherwise remain the ghost of her father's will. Furthermore, it allows Portia to segue into the potential for the ring's loss, phrased as something "dangerously between threat and prophecy."[15] Bassanio's subsequent comparison between Portia's oration and that of a "beloved prince"[16] does little to dispel this suggestion of doubt and instability, but it does respond to the speech's overtones of magnanimous gift-giving. Portia's invocation of the language of the gift, especially insofar as it is in tension with the patriarchal legal code, already clues us into her strategy for taking full possession of Bassanio's love while thwarting any threat he might pose, one which comes to fruition in the fifth act. For now, it's enough to notice that the one-directional gifting of the ring is not returned but does presuppose certain obligations on Bassanio's part (namely, to not lose it or give it away).

While Bassanio is now the *de jure* ruler of Belmont, Portia still seems to direct its affairs and (most importantly) its purse strings. He conditions his welcoming of Lorenzo and Salerio on her "leave,"[17] and once Antonio's plight is made known, appears to wait on Portia's verdict before making any action himself. She, by turn, commands, "First go with me to church and call me wife,"[18] before telling Bassanio that he "shall have gold / To pay the petty debt twenty times over"[19] and playfully referring to him as "dear bought."[20] Meanwhile, the letter from Antonio draws dramatic attention to Bassanio's outstanding debts to him, as well as the love between them. Once more, Bassanio's position as the gift/loan recipient is emphasized, though for the time being he is at least as much indebted to Antonio as he is to

[13] Newman, "Portia's Ring," 68.
[14] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 3.2.166-174.
[15] Berger, "Mercifixion," 26.
[16] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 3.2.179.
[17] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 3.2.221.
[18] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 3.2.302.
[19] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 3.2.305-6.
[20] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 3.2.312.

Portia. This potential for mixed loyalties and affections latent in Bassanio's "unquiet soul"[21] is unacceptable to the lady of Belmont. She—as Berger astutely observes—spins the "love"[22] in Antonio's letter as Bassanio's for her and spurs her husband into action: "O, love! Dispatch all business and be gone."[23]

We will return to the court scene in the following section, but its role in the development of the ring plot is, of course, crucial. While Bassanio's gratitude for the assistance of disguised-Portia does not at first suffice to lose him the ring, Antonio's addition of his "love withal"[24] does. Connected as it is to Portia's condition in act three, Bassanio's giving away the ring both "affirms homosocial bonds" and "[seems] paradoxically to lose the male privileges the exchange of women and the [ring] ensured."[25] The consequences of the loss, which might also be seen as the chickens of one-directional giving coming home to roost, are made abundantly and excruciatingly clear in act five. Upon "learning" that her husband has given away the marriage ring, she swears, "By heaven, I will ne'er come in your bed / Until I see the ring."[26] Prefiguring the second gifting (which Portia seems intent on forestalling as long as she can), she returns Bassanio's "If you did know for whom I gave the ring" with "If you had known…half her worthiness that gave the ring."[27] If Antonio is worth a ring, then Portia intends to double him.

After having the security of his position vis-a-vis Portia fall out from under him, Bassanio is reduced to begging. Portia repeatedly refuses to forgive him, and claims her right to "become as liberal as [him]."[28] She continues to guilt and berate the groveling Bassanio across nearly a hundred lines, with their dialogue briefly interrupted by the echoes of Gratiano and Nerissa, as well as the interjection of Antonio, who attempts to re-center himself as "subject of these quarrels."[29] Antonio's competition may well be the only thing left to challenge Portia, so she dismisses him ("welcome notwithstanding"[30]) and only moves on to re-gifting the ring when he directly threatens to interpose himself between her and Bassanio, wagering "[his] soul upon"[31] her husband's future good behavior. Not to be out done (or allow Antonio to fabricate leverage where he has none), she makes the merchant her intermediary and collateral as she bestows the ring on Bassanio for the second time. By the end of the fifth act, the ring is still "synecdoche"[32] for Portia and her estate, but it has also attracted a host of other meanings, including Bassanio's past unfaithfulness, Antonio's love for Bassanio, and Portia's proficiency in the male-dominated spheres of law and oratory. Most importantly, it signifies Portia's freedom and self-sufficiency, which is at once personal, sexual, and economic: "For by this ring the doctor lay with me."[33]

By completing her three-acts-long strategy of double-gifting, Portia makes good on her original longing for freedom from father and suitors. Along the way, she manages to fully separate Bassanio and Antonio, finalized when she provides the latter with news of his safe ships, lest the two men be bound again under reverse roles in the creditor-debtor relationship.

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[21] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 3.2.305.
[22] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 3.2.319.
[23] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 3.2.321.
[24] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 4.1.446.
[25] Newman, "Portia's Ring," 73.
[26] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 5.1.190-191.
[27] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 194, 199-200.
[28] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 5.1.226.
[29] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 5.1.238.
[30] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 5.1.239.
[31] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 5.1.252.
[32] Newman, "The Ring," 70.
[33] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 5.1.259.

Not only are her husband's affections entirely hers, but Portia has even managed to reverse the patriarchal power structure at the center of their marriage, making herself the self-possessing head and Bassanio the non-essential auxiliary (this despite his brief two-line attempt to regain control of the situation at the end of the play). While the first gift of the ring introduced certain moral obligations on Bassanio's part to Portia, it is this second which puts him finally, irrevocably in her debt. As long as he holds the ring (viz. as long as he is married to Portia), he admits to his past promise-breaking in contrast with his wife's shining generosity, which he can no more erase or pay back than he can give her a Belmont.

Antonio: Beyond the Realm of Sound Investment

In the face of Portia's successful double-gifting, Antonio's attempt at the same extravagant self-serving charity is a catastrophic failure. By the end of the play, he may have regained his livelihood, but he has lost all connection to and power over Bassanio. To explain these diverging outcomes, we must trace Antonio's plot from its beginning up through the climatic trial scene, and that means starting with his melancholy. Antonio's sadness bears a degree of similarity with Portia's love of Bassanio: it's inexplicable and certain plausible explanations surrounding it seem to hold less water upon further scrutiny. Drew Daniels argues in "Melancholy Epistemology and Masochistic Fantasy in *The Merchant of Venice*" that Antonio's melancholy behaves like a self-contained cipher, which could (but never definitely does) represent a merchant's concern for his ships, a masochist's desire for martyrdom, or a homosexual's yearnings for requited love. Daniels further claims that, far from attempting to assist Salarino and Salanio in unraveling his own psyche, Antonio is content to let his melancholy sit like "bait,"[34] inviting interpretation but distracting from his own pursuit of self-knowledge, which is at once genuine and self-defeating. Certainly, the danger of ruling definitively on the source of Antonio's sadness is granted, but if we truly think of his performance of melancholy as bait, then it might be wondered what it lures us toward or distracts us from.

Daniels' explanation of the first scene, for all its psychoanalytic depth, amounts in its conclusion to little more than "Antonio is melancholic because he's melancholic." If we take seriously the suggestion that it is both performative and genuine, however, we are forced to hazard a guess about the intent of the former quality, and the source of the latter. Insofar as the play lends credit to any interpretation, it is the reading that presumes a melancholic longing for Bassanio which wins out. While Salarino's suggestion that Antonio's "mind is tossing on the ocean"[35] with his fleet is met with thorough, rational rebuttal, Salanio's "Why then, you are in love"[36] earns only the exclamatory "Fie, fie."[37] Antonio's repeated professions of love (of an undisclosed nature) for Bassanio throughout the play may also be telling, as well as the fact that his friend had already informed him of his desire to court a woman before his bout of melancholy. Berger proposes (all too briefly) that the mercantile brooding and lovesick yearning explanations in fact converge. Salarino's figurative allusion to a "wealthy *Andrew* docked in sand"[38] might be giving the game away (English 'Andrew' is traceable to the ancient Greek *aner*, meaning 'man'), and Antonio's treatment of Bassanio, viz. as a risky investment, is not so different from the way he treats his ships.

[34] Daniels, "Melancholy Epistemology," 215.
[35] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 1.1.7.
[36] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 1.1.45.
[37] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 1.1.46. Note that the extant manuscripts suggest a metrical pause (transcription errors notwithstanding), which lends further credit to the idea that this guess has come much nearer the mark than its predecessor, see Drakakis' footnote to the line in Arden.
[38] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 1.1.26.

Bassanio is the only one of Antonio's companions with whom he actually seems to enjoy speaking, but his reasons for conversing with the merchant are fully self-serving. If one thing remains true throughout *The Merchant*, it's that no one likes being on the receiving end of charity, and so Bassanio is at great pains to disguise his empty-handed request for the money needed to pursue Portia. As the king of almost-but-not-quite-candid discourse, he announces his intentions "To unburden all [his] plots and purposes / How to get clear of all the debts [he owes]."[39] Antonio, meanwhile, returns to the language of bountiful generosity: "My person, my purse, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions."[40] As with Portia's original ring-giving, there are two ways to understand the situation: as hazardous but potentially profitable investment and as generous gift to a friend/lover. Bassanio's further attempts to obfuscate confirm that he would prefer the former, even though he admits that his past profligacy makes his reasoning "pure innocence."[41] Antonio responds by framing Bassanio's assurances as "doubt" and surfacing in the dialogue the until-now unspoken, foreshadowing possibility that he will "[make] waste of all [Antonio] [has]."[42] If Bassanio is to take the second loan, it must be on Antonio's terms—the terms of the double-gift.

Here, we must pause to note that Antonio in act one has seemingly already completed the process that we have just described in acts three through five for Portia. By offering Bassanio a second loan, Antonio emphasizes the existence of a giver-recipient relationship which extends well beyond the bounds of good mercantile practice. Double-gifting extravagance again (or, rather, for the first time) shines brightly in comparison with Bassanio's complete inability to return even the first loan/gift, placing him in moral as well as financial debt to the giver. There are, however, problems, most immediately that Bassanio may in fact use Portia's wealth to pay Antonio back. One might even wonder why—assuming Antonio is in love with Bassanio—he would agree to award the latter a loan which might merely serve to engage him to a romantic competitor, but we must remember that Antonio agrees to it before learning what Bassanio intends to use his money for. In any case, Antonio may see the double-gift as the only way to ensure a degree of control over Bassanio in the face of his imminent courtship of…someone. There is even the possibility that, after he learns about Portia, Antonio hopes his contribution to the courtship will undermine Bassanio's future marriage, which will (theoretically) be underwritten by his own generosity.[43]

The full details of the merry bond flesh out (so to speak) the tragic undertones of Antonio's gift to Bassanio. The merchant uses the occasion of his own uncustomary borrowing at interest "to supply the ripe wants of my friend"[44] as further opportunity to highlight his own generous service to Bassanio, but Shylock sees his own opening to berate Antonio for his hypocrisy. After an extended and progressively heated argument, Antonio urges Shylock to lend him money out of enmity:

> 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,
> Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face

[39] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 1.1.133-34.
[40] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 1.1.138-9.
[41] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 1.1.145.
[42] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 1.1.155, 157.
[43] A possibility Portia repeatedly negates (and so perhaps is threatened by) in acts four and five.
[44] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 1.3.59.

Exact the penalty.[45]

While Shylock himself will immediately take Antonio up on the proposal and even do him one better with a money-for-vengeance loan that makes their mutual hatred contractually explicit, it is worth asking whether Antonio has not hypocritically invited Shylock to do what he himself has already done. He has not lent to Bassanio out of a desire to profit (though Bassanio would prefer that to be the case) but worse, counts on "exacting the penalty" of domination and moral indebtedness. The merry bond is not after all the play's first example of leveraging money to obtain otherwise inaccessible interpersonal goods. When Shylock finally does offer the "kindness" of a usury-free bond whose collateral is a pound of Antonio's "fair flesh,"[46] it presages his astute supposition that the Christians' "own hard dealings teaches them suspect / The thoughts of others."[47]

That said, we must still take seriously the fact that Antonio has just wagered his life for Bassanio, with all the defeatist, masochistic psychological undertones that entails. Daniels correctly identifies "a shift from melancholy to masochism"[48] that transpires with the signing of the merry bond, but he once more makes the mistake of over-mystifying Antonio's psyche. He also creates an artificial division between Antonio's desire for martyrdom at the hands of Shylock and his desire for Bassanio when they are really two sides of the same coin. The hypocrisy inherent in the contract (one which Shylock identifies) is that Antonio is all too willing to set aside his supposed righteous indignation at usury if it means instrumentalizing Shylock for his own ends. Those ends may not exclusively be the execution of a fantasy of bodily penetration at the hands of Bassanio, mediated via Shylock, but are also the continued manipulation of his friend and the imposed finality of his moral debtorship. Why I have already referred to Antonio's situation as tragic is because he, unlike Portia, faces his own death as the only way to make permanent the dynamic he establishes in the first scene. If Shylock kills him, he will not live on to further possess Bassanio, but he will not lose him to Portia either, having made a sacrifice with which she cannot possibly hope to compete. If he lives, Portia takes all.

Before his ultimate self-(interested)-sacrifice can be completed—or ruined by Portia—Antonio intends to draw out as much of Bassanio's homage and affection as he possibly can. The aforementioned letter is Antonio's first attempt to leverage Bassanio's debt to his own purposes: "[I]t is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared between you and if I might but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your pleasure; if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter."[49] Antonio manages to simultaneously invoke Bassanio's literal as well as moral debt to him and maintain his guise of charity. He also conspicuously pushes the envelope on Bassanio's (ever dubious) love for him: Bassanio will go to see Antonio because of all the merchant has done for him, but in so doing he will confirm his love, as Antonio's assistance was a free gift to begin with. The letter is thus one of the most transparent moments where the qualities of the gift exchange surface through a superficially anonymous market transaction; it is only by resting on the social obligations of the gift recipient to the giver that Antonio can pull off the transmutation of financial debt into a cause for granting an unrelated personal request.

Much has been made—not least by the Christian characters in *The Merchant*—of the contrast between Shylock's "I stand for judgement"[50] and the non-Jews' insistence on

[45] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 1.3.127-32.
[46] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 1.3.139, 46.
[47] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 1.3.157-58.
[48] Daniels, "Melancholy Epistemology," 218.
[49] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 3.2.316-20.
[50] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 4.1.102.

charity, but Antonio is just as dedicated to the preservation of the law as his would-be assailant. In act three, he upholds the legal necessity of his death:

> 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.[51]

The laws of Venice are essential to its own prosperity and the health of the mercantile economy that it supports. Not only is Antonio's occupation directly tied to that same mercantile economy, but his entire attempt to win Bassanio for himself hinges on the unshakable nature of the commercial contract. Because the laws of Venice are upheld, Antonio must die, and because he must die, Bassanio's debt to him must go both affirmed and unpaid, giving him vantage to exclaim, "Pray God Bassanio come / To see me pay his debt."[52]

Once the court scene has finally begun, Antonio preempts Shylock's famous insistence on judgement with his own, "Let me have judgement, and the Jew his will!"[53] Not forty lines later, however, we find another clue as to why Antonio might be so intent on his own destruction. He implores his friend, "You cannot better be employed, Bassanio, / Than to live still and write mine epitaph!"[54] Again, Antonio's continued hold on Bassanio depends on the exact fulfillment of the merry bond, and while he still lives, far from being resigned "To suffer with a quietness of spirit,"[55] he takes every opportunity to glory in his own generosity and Bassanio's adulation:

> I am armed and well prepared.
> Give me your hand, Bassanio. Fare you well,
> Grieve not that I am fall'n to this for you:
> …
> Commend me to your honorable wife;
> Tell her the process of Antonio's end,
> Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death,
> And, when the tale is told, bid her be judge
> Whether Bassanio had not once a love.
> Repent but you that you shall lose your friend
> And he repents not that he pays your debt.
> For if the Jew do cut but deep enough
> I'll pay it instantly with all my heart.[56]

Bassanio responds:

> Antonio, I am married to a wife
> Which is as dear to me as life itself;

[51] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 3.3.26-31.
[52] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 3.4.35-36.
[53] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 4.1.82.
[54] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 4.1.116-17.
[55] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 4.1.11.
[56] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 4.1.260-62, 269-277.

> 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.[57]

As before, Antonio's gesture to his own self-sacrifice is expressed through nods to Bassanio's unpayable debt. Antonio makes of himself a Christ-figure but does not hesitate to invoke return obligations for his extravagant self-giving, most notably that Bassanio make Antonio's lasting hold over him as his own personal martyr abundantly clear to Portia. Bassanio, for his part, says exactly what Antonio must be hoping for: it is he who is valued above all others in Bassanio's life, even (or especially) Portia.

Bassanio's pledge of ultimate loyalty to Antonio (remarked on dryly by Portia) is the nearest the merchant will come to the fulfillment of his own longings and is the high-water mark of his influence over his friend. From here on out, Portia directs the show, negotiating the dissolution of the bond without negating its legal validity. Antonio is no longer indebted to Shylock—instead becoming caretaker of half his fortune—but neither is he a creditor to Bassanio.[58] We have already briefly mentioned Antonio's attempts to interpose himself between Portia and Bassanio in act five, but these are easily parried by Portia, who instead uses the occasion to display her authority over who is and is not "welcome" at Belmont. When the dust settles, Antonio's strategy of double-gifting is revealed to be a failure, at least with respect to the permanent dominance and superiority he aspires to in act four and despite holding the upper hand over both Bassanio and Portia until the end of the trial scene.

Conclusion: What Can You Buy with a Gift?

Having just meandered our way through Portia and Antonio's double-gifting plotlines, we should pause to reflect on what they say about the play as a whole. What have we learned about weaponized charity in *The Merchant of Venice*, and to what extent do those conclusions reach outside the play as observations about early modern England or life under capitalism more broadly? As I have already remarked, no one seems to like being on the receiving end of charity in *The Merchant*, but we have also seen that self-serving acts of generosity in the play are not synonymous with generosity itself. One can envision a world (or play) where Antonio refuses Bassanio a second loan or where Portia forswears her love of Bassanio after his blatant untrustworthiness without negating the magnanimity of the first giving. In order to exploit charity for utilitarian ends, one has to go above and beyond, placing the recipient in a position of moral debtorship rather than that of a delayed reciprocator. It's not just the fact that the receiver hasn't yet returned the favor, it's that they *can't* that makes them vulnerable to manipulation or domination by the giver. In *Merchant*, this self-interested overabundance is expressed through the pattern of double-gifting: the first something akin to simple charity and the second the mark of pre-strategized moral superiority.

In the introduction, we discussed the dangers of using the language of the gift in analyzing a play with very little formal giving. For both Portia and Antonio, the return moral obligations and extra-commercial abundance of the gift are invoked overtop of or in tension with an established ritual or contract with official standing in Venetian society. Portia uses the explicit "I give" to insert herself in a legally required pledging of self and property to her new husband; because of her skilled oratory, force of will, and relative wealth in comparison

[57] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 4.1.278-83.

[58] Except perhaps by way of the original loan mentioned in act one, though presumably it can be easily paid off with money from Belmont.

with Bassanio, her action of gifting immediately begins to overshadow the homosocial exchange between patriarch and husband established by her father's will. With respect to Antonio, it might be argued that he does nothing other than engage in two very inadvisable lending contracts, but to do so would be to ignore how carefully he sets them up as acts of generosity prompted by his friendship with Bassanio. Antonio effectively de-anonymizes an otherwise impersonal market transaction (not least through his extraordinary participation in the merry bond), though as with Portia more is at work in this transformation than verbal spin. Thus, the instances of giving that we have encountered throughout *Merchant* are almost always mediated by a culturally consecrated transactive form, which is then co-opted by "hidden, below the surface" Maussian giver-recipient relations.

Merchant does not, however, stop where Mauss does. The logical conclusions of unreciprocated gifts are guilt, indignation, and ultimately conflict, not the complexly devious forms of domination and objectification we find in *Merchant*. Antonio's coy nods to Bassanio's indebtedness, willful attempts to disrupt his and Portia's relationship and performative (though perhaps also genuine) disregard for the worth of his own life are manipulative in the extreme. Portia's treatment of Bassanio, meanwhile, borders on cruelty, especially given that she is the secret architect of his loss of the ring in act four. Worse, Portia and Antonio have both put Bassanio beneath them intentionally; the consequences he suffers in acts four and five are not mere byproducts of a gift-exchange-gone-wrong, but the end goal of the double-gifting charity enacted by his two "generous" benefactors. Bassanio, for his part, is perhaps the least sympathetic character of all, but his willingness to let Antonio stake his life "to feed [his] means"[59] and mercantile attitude toward Portia in scene one only serve to validate Shylock's suspicion that the Christians' treatment of him is a violent, bitterly unrestrained outgrowth of the way they treat each other.

A full treatment of the merry bond would merit a whole separate essay, but with respect to the patterns we have identified here it serves as a stark contrast to the Christians' actions in its straightforwardness, while also sharing certain similarities. Shylock, like Antonio and Portia, uses his wealth to obtain an intangible good that would ordinarily seem located outside the market sphere: revenge. The Christians are definitely quieter, more interested in disguising themselves, but their goals of interpersonal domination and sexual possession are no less selfish. If we take a step back and ask what has been sacrificed (money, property) in the two instances of double-gifting and what has been gained (power, moral superiority), they begin to look less like gift exchanges and more like purchases—purchases where desired forms of interpersonal relation are the commodities. Despite the persistence of the gift exchange as a morally binding pattern of social and economic interaction in Venice, its appearance in *The Merchant* is warped and defined by an ever-expanding market that threatens to cannibalize the laws and where everything is for sale.

Mauss argues in his *Essai* for a renewed recognition of the gift exchange as a fundamental paradigm of the way societies are constructed. For him, politics in modern societies should move away from utilitarian approaches to the use of their resources associated with anglophone capitalism and toward policies of allocation and exchange responsive to giver-recipient relations. If *The Merchant of Venice* has anything to say in return, however, it is that this recommendation fails to appreciate how the mechanisms of gift exchange become integrated into the wider fabric of economic exchange relations under capitalism. Rather than occlusion and opposition, we have seen that the relation between gift and market exchanges is more closely expressed as absorption of the former by the latter. The rhythms, rituals, and obligations of the gift have not died in Shakespeare's Venice but transformed to fit the conditions of early modern capitalism. Along the way, they become

[59] Shakespeare, *The Merchant*, 3.2.262.

harnessed as a mechanism not for promoting social cohesion—quite the opposite, in the case of the merry bond—but drawing otherwise non-fungible goods and services into the market sphere. Perhaps Shakespeare's point in *The Merchant of Venice* is not that charity is better than justice, or that generosity is preferable to the exact contract, but rather that under capitalism all social relations become manipulative and all material exchanges usurious.

Note of Authorship

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