



Eucharistic Love in The Merchant of Venice

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Article abstract

The article considers the ambiguous characterizations of The Merchant of Venice in light of Protestant and Catholic interpretations of the Eucharist, and raises implications for masculine gender construction in the opposition between Jewish and Christian cultural and theological perspectives. The argument focuses on the character of Antonio, whose masochistic self-sacrifice distorts Paul's theology of grace. The homoerotic element in Antonio's drive toward self-sacrifice is crucial in the play's disruption of orthodox theological positions, and the waning tradition of homoerotic amity evoked by the playwright is related to the connection between amity and Eucharistic theory suggested in the Catholic Thomas Wright's commentaries on the Sacrament, contemporaneous with the play. Shylock's independent masculinity, not his effeminacy, ultimately operates as the real source of anxiety for the play's Christian men, and the narrowing of Christian atonement to the romantic self-interest and masochism of the repressed Antonio contributes to The Merchant's key suggestion that masculine identity remains dependent on the necessary and rigorous self-discipline imposed by the "law"—theological, moral, and sexual. The play thus implicitly addresses challenges posed by a theology of grace to the process of masculine self-fashioning in the social context of the Reformation.

Eucharistic Love in *The Merchant of Venice*

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The article considers the ambiguous characterizations of The Merchant of Venice in light of Protestant and Catholic interpretations of the Eucharist, and raises implications for masculine gender construction in the opposition between Jewish and Christian cultural and theological perspectives. The argument focuses on the character of Antonio, whose masochistic self-sacrifice distorts Paul's theology of grace. The homoerotic element in Antonio's drive toward self-sacrifice is crucial in the play's disruption of orthodox theological positions, and the waning tradition of homoerotic amity evoked by the playwright is related to the connection between amity and Eucharistic theory suggested in the Catholic Thomas Wright's commentaries on the Sacrament, contemporaneous with the play. Shylock's independent masculinity, not his effeminacy, ultimately operates as the real source of anxiety for the play's Christian men, and the narrowing of Christian atonement to the romantic self-interest and masochism of the repressed Antonio contributes to The Merchant's key suggestion that masculine identity remains dependent on the necessary and rigorous self-discipline imposed by the "law"—theological, moral, and sexual. The play thus implicitly addresses challenges posed by a theology of grace to the process of masculine self-fashioning in the social context of the Reformation.

Cet article examine du Merchant of Venice du point de vue des interprétations protestantes et catholiques de l'Eucharistie, et soulève des questions au niveau de la construction du genre masculin dans l'opposition des perspectives culturelles et théologiques juives et chrétiennes. La discussion se penche en particulier sur le cas du personnage d'Antonio, dont l'auto-sacrifice masochiste offre une image déformée de la théologie de la grâce de saint Paul. L'élément homo-érotique de l'attraction d'Antonio pour ce sacrifice est central dans la rupture avec l'orthodoxie théologique de la pièce. On observe par ailleurs un lien entre la tradition déclinante de l'amitié homo-érotique évoquée par l'auteur de la pièce et le rapport proposé à la même époque entre l'amitié et la théorie eucharistique par le catholique Thomas Wright dans ses commentaires des sacrements. La masculinité indépendante de Shylock, et non son caractère efféminé, devient éventuellement la principale source d'angoisse chez les hommes chrétiens de la pièce. La réduction de l'expiation chrétienne à l'intérêt romantique pour lui-même et le masochisme qu'éprouve un Antonio renfermé contribue à ce que le message du Merchant est sans doute que l'identité masculine demeure dépendante d'une auto-discipline nécessaire et rigoureuse imposée par la « loi », théologique, morale et sexuelle. La pièce traite donc indirectement des défis que pose la théologie de la grâce au processus de l'identification masculine dans le contexte social de la Réforme.

The notoriety of *The Merchant of Venice* arises from a difficulty in distinguishing between what cultural and perhaps even racial prejudices an early

modern audience would have brought with them to a performance, and what may anachronistically be perceived by modern and postmodern readers and audiences who, it is often supposed, are certainly more troubled by this play.¹ I suggest that the play's ambiguous and disturbing characterizations need to be reconsidered not only in light of the traditional, specifically Pauline, opposition between Jewish law and Christian grace, but in the context of Protestant and Catholic interpretations of the Eucharist. My main focus will be on the character of Antonio, whose masculine self-sacrifice in a sense distorts Paul's theology of grace. This distortion, however, does not function—through its portrayal of an emotionally excessive or pathological response—simply as a confirmation of Christian orthodoxy; indeed, *The Merchant of Venice* explores the psychological challenges posed by a theology of grace, which provides an inadequate model of masculine assertion in the social context of the Reformation. Crucial in the disruption of orthodoxy in the play's evocation of both early modern Protestant and Catholic readings of the Eucharist is the homoerotic element in Antonio's drive toward self-sacrifice. The waning tradition of homoerotic amity evoked through this character mirrors the connection between amity and Eucharistic theory suggested in the Catholic Thomas Wright's commentaries on the Sacrament, closely contemporaneous with the play. I offer Wright as an illuminating context that serves to highlight particular psychological problems, related to early modern self-authorization, inherent in the historical transition from a theologically traditional to a more theologically radical, and indeed proto-secular, social organization.

The ideological and historical origins of the connection between the Eucharist and male bonding, suggested by Wright, probably lie in earlier traditions of amity consolidated by mutual participation in Holy Communion. Alan Bray in *The Friend* provides a wide-ranging, and to an extent highly persuasive, reading of the ritual of "sworn brotherhood," with its roots in pre-modern church practices: "in the churches of Catholic Europe from at least the end of the twelfth century until the beginning of the fifteenth, the mass provided a familiar culmination for the creation of ritual 'brothers,' a ritual completed in

1. For a good introduction to this critical question, see the remarks by editor Leah S. Marcus in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Merchant of Venice* (New York: Norton, 2006), ix–xi, and the subsequent collection of critical essays which "have been selected to highlight the diversity of frames within which the play can be interpreted, both in Shakespeare's time and more recently" (x).

their taking Holy Communion together.”² Bray argues that as “England passes into the sixteenth century, an apparently quite different kind of friendship becomes visible and is far more familiar: a noninstrumental friendship, based in affinity, that does not (and should not) obtrude on a wider world of public affairs.”³ Bray concludes here that “modernity seems to arrive,” although the rest of the study essentially qualifies that statement:

The appearance that friendship between men was shaped afresh in sixteenth-century England by the ideals of a newly rediscovered classical world is a tactful illusion, not a sudden break with the past: a new response to the long-familiar uncertainties of friendship between men that carried obligations that were frequently irksome and always dangerous.⁴

This reading comes with the clear warning that (post)modern readers not be misled:

The language of love between men that one sees in the English Renaissance is simply that: a language and a convention. It could be heartfelt, as it could be hollow; but wherever it lay on a spectrum between the two, such language between men always and necessarily signified in the public context of power and place that to modern eyes it seems to belie.⁵

One question this argument immediately raises is whether friendship (sexualized or not), even from our “modern” or current perspective, always necessarily and naively manifests as a completely private or “non-instrumental” interaction.⁶

2. Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 25.

3. Bray, 41.

4. Bray, 76.

5. Bray, 67.

6. As Amiens asserts in *As You Like It*, “Most friendship is feigning, most loving, mere folly” (2.7.182). Tom MacFaul begins his *Male Friendship in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) with an interesting meditation upon this passage, although he considers only the first half of the line. MacFaul argues that the “main effect” of “the Humanist ideal of true friendship” is “to create a self-assertive individuality coloured and limited by the failure of this ideal” (1).

My main reservations about Bray's analysis, however, concern primarily the latter stages of his argument, where he underestimates the psychological and political impact of the Reformation, and attempts to anchor even the reformers' concepts of friendship, social alliance, and (crucially) personal agency in the context of a "traditional society," which he tends to discuss in oddly idealized terms: "In the traditional society that the zealots of reform eyed with suspicion, Christian charity could never be detached from the actual bonds of friendship that permeated the social world about it."⁷ I am especially unconvinced by Bray's attempt to downplay the increased anxieties about masculinity at the time of the Reformation. This critical tendency is most evident in the chapter entitled "Friends and Enemies," where Bray professes to find completely mysterious and illogical the association of popery with sodomy in the anti-Catholic propaganda of the Reformation. William Perkins's argument, for example, that the Church of Rome "teacheth the sins of Sodom in making laws to inhibit lawful marriage in sundry sorts of men" is dismissed as "defy[ing] sense," when the logic concerning clerical celibacy seems clear enough. More mysterious may be Bray's own insistence on a distinction between what early modern (for example anti-theatrical) writers feared and what they *said* they feared.⁸ Bray does acknowledge that class disparity played a role in highlighting the possibility of sodomitical overtones emerging in the context of intimate male friendship. Yet he continues to overemphasize or idealize a sense of (universal) communion between men that underestimates increasing masculine competitiveness in the nascent capitalist context of early modern society. He also downplays anxiety about masculine agency and effeminacy, or reads such concerns as a simple homosocial displacement that facilitates a supposedly calm collusion among men in general, regardless of class differences or degrees of social empowerment, through their domination and oppression of women: "The domination and 'governance' of women provided [...] a ready basis on which men could cooperate and a thing on which they could truly unite."⁹ The rest of this discussion will assert a more individualized psychological dynamic of not only anxiety but desire that I believe Bray's analysis effectively occludes.

7. Bray, 95.

8. Bray, 181, 182.

9. Bray, 199.

My approach involves yet another challenge to recent historicist and theoretical orthodoxies (or hegemonies). I must clarify my critical position vis-à-vis the “traditional” reading of Pauline theology mentioned at the outset, due to what currently falls under the rubric of the “new perspective on Paul.” Julia Reinhard Lupton may be regarded as spear-heading the neo-Pauline movement in Shakespeare studies; she commends in particular Gregory Kneidel’s *Rethinking the Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Literature: The Poetics of All Believers*, which builds on the “classic” and indeed impressive study, *The Pauline Renaissance in England: Puritans and the Bible* by John S. Coolidge. Lupton in “Paul Shakespeare” significantly praises Coolidge as “[n]o historian of inwardness.”¹⁰ While investigations of this subject need to balance sociological and psychological concerns, the former may have begun to monopolize attention at the expense of the latter. Nearly all recent commentators recognize the complex and sometimes confusing nature of Pauline theology; Lupton admits that “Paul’s self-divided thought [...] continues to plague contemporary engagements.”¹¹ Nevertheless, certain critics now appear to over-simplify and in effect caricature the masculine reaction that I am intent on exploring. Ken Jackson and Arthur Marotti, for example, assert that “the deconstructive response to Enlightenment rationality has opened up religious culture and religious study to new (but perhaps also old?) forms of apprehension,” and warn that we “should not turn to religion in our studies [...] the way that [an] earlier and more naive generation of Whiggish ethnocentrists or Catholic apologists did.”¹² Commenting on Stephen Greenblatt’s *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Sarah Beckwith writes regretfully, “despite these aims and intentions [of taking the play’s medieval inheritance seriously], we seem to be left with a version of *Hamlet* and Shakespeare not so different from the Whiggish, individualist protagonist of modernity present even before

10. Gregory Kneidel, *Rethinking the Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Literature: The Poetics of All Believers* (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); John S. Coolidge, *The Pauline Renaissance in England: Puritanism and the Bible* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); Julia Reinhard Lupton, “Paul Shakespeare: Exegetical Exercises,” in *Religion and Drama in Early Modern England: The Performance of Religion on the Renaissance Stage*, ed. Jane Hwang Degenhardt and Elizabeth Williamson (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 214.

11. Lupton, 216.

12. Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti, “The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies,” *Criticism* 46.1 (2004): 182.

these investigations began.”¹³ Ironically, in spite of poststructuralist attacks on Enlightenment constructions of subjectivity, the very opportunity of our intellectual investigations of this particular history is in a sense the direct product of Enlightenment rationality. Obviously this complex question would take something like a book-length study to adequately address. For the purposes of this essay I wish to narrow the focus to the following crucial position. Lupton questionably concludes, “It is safe to say [...] that a Western literature founded on a Paul deprived of his layers [...] would not have delivered either a Shakespeare or a Milton,”¹⁴ where a progressive Shakespeare and Milton constitute the logical proof or guarantee of this liberalized, universalized Paul, in which the (fatal) polarity between faith and works, between divinity and humanity, has been dialectically disarmed. But I see Shakespeare and Milton’s social progressiveness as a necessary reaction *against* psychologically oppressive Pauline dualities, at least as they were conceived in the Protestant culture of early modern England. An overly sanguine reading of Pauline theology, and its role in the production of misogynistic and homophobic—not to mention anti-Semitic—dynamics in Western culture, is not, I contend, the most productive way to achieve an understanding either of our present cultural conflicts or of their possible resolutions.

For his part, Kneidel admits, “I am not arguing that the universalist interpretation of Paul that has come to the fore in recent years really did triumph in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, only that traces of it influenced the period’s scriptural poetics.”¹⁵ Lupton’s admonition to “use” Pauline epistles suggests something more aggressive.¹⁶ Among the many scholars and writers that Lupton cites in her construction of a “layered” and “inclusive” Paul is the Anglican author N. T. Wright, former Bishop of Durham, whose works have influentially and controversially promoted the “new perspective on Paul.” While the following rhetorical gesture probably constitutes an instance of a (heretical humanist) devil quoting (a proponent of) Scripture, I cite the reaction from a contemporary evangelical writer to one of N. T. Wright’s popular books: “it is

13. Sarah Beckwith, “Stephen Greenblatt’s *Hamlet* and the Forms of Oblivion,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33.2 (2003): 262.

14. Lupton, 218.

15. Kneidel, 8.

16. Lupton, 232.

my strong conviction that the position Wright lays out in *What St. Paul Really Said* [Oxford: Lion Books, 2003] is [...] a faulty and dangerous reinterpretation of Paul and it misunderstands Scripture in a way that fatally undermines the doctrine of justification by faith and the principle of sola fide.¹⁷ While not a subtle response, I also believe it to be an unsurprising one by an ideological heir to Reformation Protestantism, and an important reminder for postmodern readers that such ideology is potent enough, and persuasive enough for some, to have survived from the sixteenth into the twenty-first century. To consider a more historicized commentary, I also think it suggestive of the highly problematic nature of Pauline theology, as it was understood by early modern writers, and inherited by them from the late medieval period, when R. N. Swanson considers “the problem of religion as [an increasingly intense] battleground between the genders [...] in the fifteenth century,” and offers, as one of two main reasons, “the shift in emphasis from a Christianity of the Gospels, whose dominant features were the life and death of Christ, to a theological and exegetical Christianity based on Pauline texts.”¹⁸ While I find (to state a literary cliché) the work of Shakespeare and Milton astonishing, I am not persuaded that we can attribute the kind of perspicacity to them which would have fully anticipated the postmodern “new perspective on Paul.”¹⁹

Let me turn now to Thomas Wright’s commentaries on the Sacrament, which constitute not a close homology for the specific action of *The Merchant of Venice* but nevertheless conceivably acted as a catalyst for the play’s association of amity with Eucharistic themes; these commentaries may have, from Shakespeare’s perspective, contributed—more directly than the archival sources and funeral monuments considered in *The Friend*—to the “visible [if narrowing] track”²⁰ of such an association that Bray traces as he moves from fifteenth to sixteenth and seventeenth century contexts. In 1596, close to the

17. Phil Johnson, “What’s Wrong with Wright: Examining the New Perspective on Paul,” Ligonier Ministries, *The Teaching Fellowship of R. C. Sproul*, accessed 11 May 2013, <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/whats-wrong-wright-examining-new-perspective-paul/>.

18. R. N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c. 1215–c. 1515* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 308.

19. For one example, nevertheless, of what I consider Shakespeare’s remarkable insight with respect to contexts established or clarified by Coolidge, see the discussion of Pauline justification, below.

20. Bray, 87.

presumed composition of *The Merchant*,²¹ Wright published *A Treatise [in 42 parts] Shewing the possibilitie, and conveniencie of the reall presence of our Saviour in the blessed Sacrament: The former is declared by similitudes and examples: the latter by the causes of the same*. According to Peter Milward in the new edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Thomas Wright was a “Roman Catholic Priest and religious controversialist” born in York into a “strongly recusant family that gave two sons, himself and his younger brother, William Wright, to the Society of Jesus.” He left England in 1577 to train at colleges in Douai and Rome, and later taught at Jesuit colleges in Genoa, Milan, and Rome, but

was able to return to England in 1595 under the protection of the earl of Essex [...]. On reaching London he approached Essex’s secretary, Anthony Bacon, and so came to meet the earl, whom he supplied with useful intelligence concerning [King Philip of Spain’s] plans to invade England again in 1596.²²

Interestingly, Thomas Wright may also have been the priest who converted Ben Jonson to Catholicism during that playwright’s imprisonment in 1598 for the murder of Gabriel Spenser.²³ Shakespeare’s own fairly close personal connections to recusant political activity, explored by Richard Wilson in *Secret Shakespeare*,²⁴ might make his familiarity with Wright’s writings a distinct possibility, but the likelihood is increased by Wright’s connections with the Earl of Essex. Peter Thomson speaks generally of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men’s “known, or suspected, affiliation to the Essex party.”²⁵ Blair Worden’s attempt to cast doubt on the long-held belief that the play subsidized by Essex’s followers on

21. See Jay Halio’s introduction to *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Jay Halio, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 27–29. All quotations of the play are from this edition.

22. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. J. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 60:492.

23. See Robert S. Miola, “Ben Jonson, Catholic Poet,” *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* 25 (2001): 101 and n. 2.

24. Richard Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in Theatre, Religion, and Resistance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

25. Peter Thomson, *Shakespeare’s Professional Career* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 134.

the eve of their rebellion against the queen in 1601 was, after all, Shakespeare's *Richard II* has now been, not surprisingly, decisively resisted, if not refuted.²⁶ Some connection to the Essex faction seems certain via Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton, who idolized Essex, becoming his General of the Horse in Ireland and taking part in the ill-fated rebellion himself. Wilson comments that Southampton's "papist sympathies have always been downplayed by Shakespeareans, but by 1592 the nineteen-year-old Earl had replaced Philip Howard, the imprisoned Earl of Arundel, as the great hope of Catholic resistance."²⁷ Moreover, as Park Honan observes, the Earl of Essex, "[r]ailing at the Burghley-Cecil faction in government and quietly scheming for James VI's succession [...] was drawing Puritan and Catholic followers alike."²⁸

As Wright and Shakespeare possibly experienced similar social pressures in the patronage system of the 1590s, we in a sense move, ideologically and psychologically, into the more uncertain and potentially coercive social context involving socially disparate men, which tends to challenge or at least disturb what Bray characterizes as early modern culture's "unwillingness to take seriously the ambiguous borderland between the 'sodomite' and the shared beds and bonding of its male companionship."²⁹ Indeed, while the male bonds of *The Merchant of Venice* are in some ways consonant with the Renaissance humanist revival of *amicitia*, there is little of the more safely isolated, bookish variety which "tactfully detached the exercise of friendship between men from the [medieval] past and placed it in the study, in the 'closet' of two scholarly friends, among their books."³⁰ Instead, Christian theological aspects of friendship here come to the fore, with some disturbing social and psychological consequences. Notable in the development of the argument in Wright's treatise is the sudden but significant segue from an analysis of the theological meaning of the

26. Blair Worden, "Shakespeare in Life and Art: Biography and *Richard II*," in *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: New Directions in Biography*, ed. Takashi Kozuka and J. R. Mulryne (Aldershot: Ashgate: 2006), 23–42. For refutations, see for example Paul E. J. Hammer, "Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the Play of 7 February 1601, and the Essex Rising," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59 (2008): 1–35, and James P. Bednarz, *Shakespeare and the Truth of Love: The Mystery of 'The Phoenix and Turtle'* (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 58–60.

27. Wilson, 134.

28. Park Honan, *Shakespeare: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 192.

29. Bray, 197.

30. Bray, 73.

Eucharistic sacrament into an extended treatment of the nature of (human) love, as a mirror of the “infallible love of God”:

[...] therefore let it be lawful for me to call this Sacrament a mirrour, a mappe, a flame, a life of love, & interpret *Eucharistia bona gratia*, good grace, a singular favour, a superexcellent love. Moreover, whosoever wil runne over the effects of love, and therby discover the origen and fountaine of this vaine of life, he shall finde them most lively in this little world of al pure love depaynted. The fruits of love be these, union, zeale, extasie, bountifulnes.

In spite of the transcendent, mystical idealism of the assertions, the “love” in question rapidly takes on aspects of culturally specific human behaviour and emotion, intimating the social alienation, and xenophobia, evident in Shakespeare’s Venice:

All perfect love requireth a certaine union of substance [...] but for that amongst men this was unpossible without the destruction of one or both, therefore they procured all these unions, which honesty & puritie of love affect, and these are to be of the same judgements and opinions, the same wills, desires, and affections, the same table and diet, the same place and presence, the like garments and attire, and finally, to expresse one another in all things as neere as they can.

The human love which primarily engages Wright certainly achieves expression through the tradition of amity, the idealized same-sex friendships which have been the focus of so much recent, and controversial, critical attention:

Zeale after two manners proceedeth from love. First, zealous friends cannot tollerate any injuries offered to their friends, but procure with greater, or as great diligence to defend them, their credit, goods, life, or what else appertaineth unto them as their owne. Secondly, zeale cannot suffer consorts in love. [...]

Extasie likewise abstracteth, or haleth a lover from himself, and causeth him rather to live there where he loveth, then indeede where he liveth, for the force of love transporteth excessively his minde, cogitations,

and affections, from his owne affaires, and enforceth him to attende and procure whatsoever concerneth his friend: sometimes also it leadeth the soule so farre, that it is almost abstracted from the bodie. [...]

Bountiffulness waiteth upon love, as a most faithful servant, for friendes cannot but communicate their goods one with another, who before by friendship had communicated their hearts, & therefore they present one another with gifts, as signes of that good will they carrie in their minds, and to remonstrate unto them, that as they have taken possession of their harts, so also they may command them in their goods, for *amicorum omnia sunt communia*, among friends al things are common, and he that hath given the greater, will not sticke to impart the lesser.³¹

Even allowing for the Elizabethan familiarity with the tradition of amity, and the doubtless proverbial nature of some of Wright's observations here, readers will I think readily acknowledge the unusual appropriateness of many of these remarks to the Antonio-Bassanio relationship: their (supposed) essential equality—"in companions [...] Whose souls do bear an equal yoke of love, / There must be needs a like proportion / Of lineaments, of manners, and of spirit" (3.4.11–15); the concern to defend a friend's credit; the idea of loving to distraction, "almost abstracted from the bodie"—"I think he only loves the world for him" (2.8.50); the absolute desire to be "command[ed] in their goods"—"And out of doubt you do me now more wrong / In making question of my uttermost / Than if you had made waste of all I have" (1.1.155–57). The main irony that emerges in this last parallel, however, is that the flow of goods and possessions in Shakespeare appears to be unreciprocated, all Antonio to Bassanio.

Steve Patterson notes that "the customary emphasis in friendship literature on exact similitude," although theoretically asserted in the exchange between Portia and Lorenzo (3.4.1–18), "is noticeably absent" in a play that focuses on the "loving friendship between men of different social status—a merchant and a gentleman"; thus "the merchant who lends gratis in the spirit of friendship does not automatically signal a noble character, as does the gentle exemplar of gift-giving in a tale of amity, but seems, instead, foolhardy or impetuous."³²

31. Thomas Wright, *A Treatise ... of the reall presence of our Saviour in the blessed Sacrament* (London: Valentine Sims, 1596), sig. L8r, L8v, L8v-M1v; STC 26043.5.

32. See Patterson, "The Bankruptcy of Homoerotic Amity in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50 (1999): 13–15.

One other instance of potential inequality or incongruity indirectly raised through Thomas Wright's musings on amity within the context of Eucharistic commentary occurs in his treatise *The Disposition or Garnishment of the Soule To receive worthily the blessed Sacrament*. Here Wright again makes a logical connection between divine love (expressed in the sacraments) and human love, "for that grace perfecteth the nature, and the true beames of natural reason, serve as preambles unto grace." He praises the Romans, "in whom naturall reason shewed greatly the beames of her light," and notes, among their many statues, "the Image of frendshippe [...] This Statua, was a yonge man in the pryme of yeares, bare headed, cloathed with a torne mantle, pointing with his finger to his harte." The image here recalls Antonio, with bared breast, preparing to sacrifice himself for Bassanio, although the youth of the figure perhaps underlines the poignant misplacement of Antonio's passion, since the merchant, like the speaker of the Sonnets, is generally conceived as past the "floure of yeares."³³

The failure of true love to tolerate a "consort" in Wright's *A Treatise [...] of the reall presence* is also intriguing, since Wright here temporarily interrupts his cataloguing of the virtues of friendship to include an example from heterosexual love: "and therefore experience teacheth us, what grief it is for the husband to have a conceit of a rivall" (sig. L8v–M1r). The comment nicely intimates the rivalry between Antonio and Portia for the presumably pretty, but penurious, Bassanio, in what emerges ironically as a kind of mercantile competition: "My *purse*, my person, my extremest means, / Lie all unlocked to your occasions" (1.1.138–39, my emphasis), exclaims Antonio, who unconsciously *wants* Bassanio in his debt; "Since you are dear *bought*, I will love you dear" (3.2.311, my emphasis), counters Portia. Crucially, Shakespeare's play, reflecting an emergent Protestant emphasis on the sanctity of married chastity, implies subtle but intensifying competition between homoerotic amity and heterosexual marriage, whereas Wright's commentary suggests simple co-existence, or separate existence, of the two forms of love.

Finally, the recurrence of a certain casual, complacent anti-Semitism, while in some form common in the theological writings of the period, has a special relevance for Wright's construction of idealized "love," as part of the textual and cultural inheritance that influenced Shakespeare. Other early

33. Wright, *The Disposition or Garnishment of the Soule To receive worthily the blessed Sacrament* (English secret press, 1596), sig. L2r and L2v; STC 26038.8.

modern treatments of amity, such as Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Book Named The Governor*, certainly make the general case for the importance of shared virtue and "similitude" or similarity between friends, and Elyot further emphasizes, as Laurie Shannon notes, that friendship "requireth that they be of semblable or moche like maners."³⁴ But the contingency of such bonds on the wholly natural manifestation of prejudice towards those excluded from the tenets of a true Christianity intensifies the ideological parallel between Wright's treatise and Shakespeare's Venice:

Nature hath printed in the heart of every sensible creature, of most necessary instinct for their preservation, that is, not onely to love themselves in procuring good, but also in avoiding those evils which may impeach their health or convenient being [...]. Amity the cosin germaine, or rather, brother of this natural inclination, in like sort affecteth, not only the good of the beloved, but also protecteth & defendeth them, invading those, who either molest or injury [sic] his friends [...] Yea our savior Christ touched with this zeale (for so the scripture calleth this effect of love) seeing the temple of his father ordained for prayer & sacrifice, by the sacrilegious Jewes prophaned with theft and marchandize, mooved with indignation against them [...]. The like zeale [...] boyled in that sacred breast when hee instituted this sacrament: for although he eternaly did foresee, that most sacrilegiously this sacred foode of Angels shuld be blasphemed by infidels, troden under foot by heretikes, mangled and crucified by Jewes, harbored in most ugly and polluted soules, by wicked christians, yet for the zeale of those good catholikes he knew were devoutly & religiously to receive him, weyed nothing, injuries, blasphemies, dishonors, treading or trampling, cutting, slicing, burning, or baking, so that he might unite his elected unto him, indue their soules with grace, bring them to the joyes of heaven.³⁵

Thus Wright's logic carries us from the naturalness of self-preservation to the naturalness of Christ's justification of his own faithful souls. The easy demonization, or perhaps more accurately the *dehumanization* of everyone outside this

34. Laurie Shannon, *Sovereign Amity: Figures of Friendship in Shakespearean Contexts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 42.

35. Wright, *A Treatise ... of the reall Presence*, sig. M5r–M6r.

Christian (specifically Catholic) theological vision—in particular the Jews—seems very close to the attitudes assumed by the Christian characters of *The Merchant of Venice*.³⁶

While Shakespeare portrays the prejudices of a Christian society, his depiction of Venice introduces an ideological buffer for the predominantly Protestant audiences of London in the 1590s. James O'Rourke notes that "The words 'Christian' and 'Christians' appear twenty-seven times in *The Merchant*, which constitutes over a third of all their appearances in Shakespeare's works," but argues that the "identification of the Tudor audience with the Venetian Catholic Antonio could only be equivocal at best." One reason is that the "suggestiveness" of Antonio's metaphor to Bassanio—"my person [...] lie[s] all unlocked to your occasions" (1.1.138–39)—reinforces "English stereotypes of the sexual behavior of Italians."³⁷ O'Rourke's ellipsis here obscures the fact that the baldness of "person" or *body* is somewhat diluted in this passage through its combination with "purse" and "extremest means." Shakespeare shifts the context of amity as constructed by Wright by placing the source of Antonio's melancholy (and subsequent desperation) distinctly in the unconscious—"In sooth I know not why I am so sad"—and thus subtly eroticizes the desire that Antonio feels for Bassanio. That is, Shakespeare's portrayal of amity artistically assumes *the need for repression*. Robert Stretter observes that "theorists of *amicitia perfecta* linked friendship's supremacy as a form of love to its innocence and purity, to its denial of allegedly base carnality," but admits that "the possibility of friendship mingling with illicit sexuality both intrigued and worried many Renaissance writers."³⁸ Such "intrigue" and "worry" amount to an early modern concern with the reality of an

36. Again, I am not suggesting that the general Christian prejudice expressed here is unique. David Coleman considers a tract by the early modern Protestant Thomas Cooper, who claims "that the faithful reception of the eucharist necessitates the admission that 'I detest the religion of Jewes, Turkes, Infidels, Heretiques, and all other that denie saluation to come by the death of Christ'" (*Drama and the Sacraments in Sixteenth-Century England: Indelible Characters* [Basington, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007], 106). But Wright's peculiar combination of amity and Eucharistic motifs, and the specific, completely naturalized displacement of spiritually inspired love into a similarly inspired hatred, with the drive for self-preservation, are I think significant.

37. James O'Rourke, "Racism and Homophobia in *The Merchant of Venice*," *ELH* 70 (2003): 376–77.

38. Robert Stretter, "Cicero on Stage: *Damon and Pithias* and the Fate of Classical Friendship in English Renaissance Drama," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 47 (2005): 354.

erotic desire that is not adequately addressed in current scholarly discourse that pronounces as anachronistic any reference to a personally embedded or predominant homoeroticism. One recent treatment of the “epistemological mystery” raised by Antonio’s melancholy gently admonishes the naïveté of those readers who wish to connect this character’s emotional suffering to a clearly identifiable source: “Biting at the melancholy bait, countless critics and audience members have responded by proposing various definitive answers to the question of Antonio’s sadness, thereby entering the circle of comforters and would-be eulogizers that his melancholy suffering and contractual doom call forth.” This particular reading of the “masochistic fantasy” in question appears generally to underestimate—although it acknowledges in passing³⁹—the personal anxiety potentially generated by the socially and theologically “illicit” nature of homoerotic desire in the Renaissance.

I would in fact identify one of the readers here dismissed, Steve Patterson, as offering a notably persuasive treatment of the sexual themes of Shakespeare’s play. Acknowledging that “Antonio’s love is a frustrated sexual desire for Bassanio,” and recognizing that the merchant’s “passionate love falls into an early modern tradition of homoerotic friendship, or amity,” Patterson also observes that such a tradition was losing its ideological potency in the later Renaissance. Thus the play “raises provocative questions about virtue, rank, wealth, gender and desire which earlier friendship literature downplayed or idealized” and “dramatizes the travails of the ideal friend in a society that is re-evaluating its definitions of love and its virtues—a shift so disruptive that Antonio as amorous lover seems sadly outmoded, himself a kind of anachronism.”⁴⁰ While Patterson does not consider a specific religious context for this re-evaluation, he does note the striking prescience

39. Drew Daniel, “Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will: Melancholy Epistemology and Masochistic Fantasy in *The Merchant of Venice*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61 (2010): 215, 208.

40. Patterson, 10, 14. See also Alan Stewart’s discussion in *Close Readers: Humanism and Sodomy in Early Modern England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), especially chapter 4, “The Proof of Friends.” While noting Alan Bray’s warning “against the anachronistic identification of homosexuality in depictions of Renaissance friendship,” Stewart suggests “that modern gay appropriations [...] may not be totally anachronistic, and that our differing modern interpretations of male friendship were in fact present [in early modern English culture] in a highly charged and dangerous contemporary debate on the subject” (123–24). Such “danger” is I think underestimated by Tom MacFaul, when he asserts that “we must learn to treat [Renaissance homoeroticism] casually, avoiding the modern hysteria about sexuality” (*Male Friendship in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 18).

of Shakespeare, whose version of homoerotic amity “anticipates the modern convergence of homoerotic desire with secrecy—wishes made in the dark—and with betrayal.” In the play’s “final, comic moments, even *fantasies* of male friendship trigger anxiety.”⁴¹ Antonio’s paralyzed eroticism may explain the fact that he seems even more rabidly anti-Semitic than any of the other Venetians. O’Rourke cites Seymour Kleinburg’s description of “the conflict between Antonio the Christian and Antonio the homosexual as internal to the character,” suggesting “that Antonio projects his self-loathing onto the stigmatized figure of the Jew ‘in a classic pattern of psychological scapegoating.’”⁴² This displacement results in a psychological dynamic different from, although not unrelatable to, Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta*. While Marlowe presents us with a Jewish merchant protagonist with (unconscious) homoerotic leanings,⁴³ Shakespeare splits this character between a Jewish usurer and a Christian merchant with (again unconscious) homoerotic leanings.

Now the very image of the merchant in early modern drama has given rise to widely different interpretations with respect to its inherent “manliness,” not surprisingly due to its deeply ambiguous status within the collective early modern consciousness. Bruce Smith in *Shakespeare and Masculinity* identifies the “Merchant Prince” as one of five ideal types of masculinity in the period; the “princely” status here appears to derive from Robert Cleaver’s assertion that “A household is [...] a little commonwealth [...] by the good government whereof, God’s glory may be advanced, and the Commonwealth which standest of several Families benefitted; and all that live in that Family receive much comfort and commodity.”⁴⁴ The man who does not, like the pampered aristocrat, live off the labours of others is a kind of “prince,” a benevolent provider to his family members and social subordinates. S. P. Cerasano quotes one early modern preacher, Daniel Price, who, basing a sermon on Christ’s parable of the pearl of great price, asserts that “the action of [the] marchant is not for anie smal, but for great gaine, not for anie carnal, but for spirituall glorie.” Yet Cerasano also notes that “merchants were [...] suspected by the clergy for the ease with

41. Patterson, 28.

42. O’Rourke, 380; citing Kleinburg, “*The Merchant of Venice*: The Homosexual as Anti-Semite in Nascent Capitalism,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 8 (Spring/Summer 1983): 120.

43. See Ian McAdam, *The Irony of Identity: Self and Imagination in the Drama of Christopher Marlowe* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 153–58.

44. Bruce R. Smith, *Shakespeare and Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 51.

which they seemed to earn their substantial livings,”⁴⁵ and, when portrayed in Shakespearean drama, this type, as Smith points out, carries ironical undertones. The “merchant prince,” whose commendable “shrewdness” was often undercut by his pettiness or his crass ambitions, was, even in his more comic literary appearances, to a significant extent distrusted in the cultural mindset of Renaissance England, which potentially lends credence to Debora Shuger’s general historical reading of the early modern city as a social context that erodes traditional masculine roles. The “urban apocalypses” Shuger considers “imply a conceptual link between economic prosperity and the decomposition of manhood into effeminacy or brutality.”⁴⁶

The effeminacy discernible in Marlowe’s Barabas⁴⁷ appears in a more complex configuration in Shakespeare’s Shylock and Antonio, and the competitive tension between them. The potential effeminacy of the merchant lifestyle here would logically accrue to Antonio, as the homoerotic undertone certainly does, while the moneylender Shylock’s Jewishness in this case seems hardly to resonate with the implication. This is not to say, however, that commentators on Shakespeare’s play have ignored the tendency in Western culture to connect Jewishness and effeminacy. James Shapiro observes the myth of *foetor judaicus*, which was explained by the idea that Jewish men menstruated,⁴⁸ although it is Marlowe, not Shakespeare, who appears to allude to this belief, in a wonderfully ironic inversion, when Barabas tells Lodowick he must walk around to purge himself after talking with Gentiles.⁴⁹ Shapiro in fact raises cultural beliefs that render the figure of the Jewish male highly ambiguous with respect to supposed masculinity or femininity. He quotes one early modern writer who asserts that “the Jewish complexion is so prodigiously timid as cannot be capable of arms,” which couples their “continual cheating and malice among

45. S. P. Cerasano, ed., *William Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 39, 40.

46. Debora Kuller Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 126.

47. See McAdam, 154–55. I take up some of these points in a related context in “*The Jew of Malta and The Merchant of Venice: A Reconsideration of Influence*,” *The Jew of Malta: A Critical Reader*, ed. Robert A. Logan (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 107–27.

48. James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 36–37.

49. Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, ed. N. W. Bawcutt (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 2.3.44–48.

themselves” with their lack of martial prowess as reasons for their failure to “cement into a temporal government of their own.” Yet the critic conversely notes a myth, current into the seventeenth century, “that depicted the Jews as a military threat capable of invading and overthrowing Christendom.”⁵⁰ Thus, in spite of Shapiro’s assertion that “by the late sixteenth century the widespread medieval identification of Jews and the devil had virtually disappeared in England,”⁵¹ we may need to look here to Matthew Biberman’s reading of the images of the Jew-Devil and the Jew-Sissy in tension throughout the early modern period, with the Jew-Devil carrying a sense of hyper-masculine assertiveness.⁵²

Shylock can be characterized, initially at least, by his remarkable emotional self-sufficiency rather than by a secret and desperate longing for communion with the rest of humankind, which casts some doubt on Chris Hassel’s suggestion that “the play’s repeated references to eating and starving [...] relate to the human communion which Shylock desperately needs and will never experience and the mystical communion he does not understand.”⁵³ Hassel’s reading is admittedly supported by Shylock’s exclamation, “I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you [...] but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you” (1.3.33–35). But Shylock, I suggest, disturbs the Christian community of Venice *because of* this fierce independence. The play’s sense of “frustrated communion,” while conveying Christian rather than Jewish anxiety, may unconsciously be linked to myths concerning Jews who abduct Christian children (an ironic reversal of the elopement of Jessica) and cannibalistically use their blood “for a range of mysterious purposes” in an ideological inversion of Christian communion, as Shapiro suggests.⁵⁴ Biberman, nevertheless, wants to emphasize Shylock’s reduction of agency and power relative to Barabas, identifying in Shakespeare the emergence of the Jew-Sissy: “By dramatizing this transformation, Shakespeare appropriates Marlowe’s Devil and domesticates him, with the clear intent of dispelling the horrific and terrifying

50. Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, 176, 95.

51. Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, 33.

52. Matthew Biberman, *Masculinity, Anti-Semitism and Early Modern English Literature: From the Satanic to the Effeminate Jew* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

53. R. Chris Hassel, “Frustrated Communion in the Merchant of Venice,” *Cithara: Essays in the Judeo-Christian Tradition* 13.2 (1974): 28–29.

54. Shapiro, “Shakespeare and the Jews,” in *The Merchant of Venice: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Coyle (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 78–79.

power of the Jew-Devil.”⁵⁵ Yet Shylock, unlike Barabas, never seeks out alliances (for example, with Ithamore and with Ferneze) whose ostensibly ruthless rationales do in fact seem underwritten by unacknowledged emotional needs; and the fact that Shylock needs to be symbolically castrated over the course of the play, as for example in Salarino’s cruelly comic exclamation ridiculing Shylock’s losses, “Why, all the boys in Venice follow him, / Crying, “His stones [with a pun on testicles], his daughter, and his ducats!” (2.8.23–24), underlines the Jew’s initially frightening masculine power.

To return to those anti-Semitic fantasies that continue to haunt the early modern imagination in spite of their supposed obsolescence, Shapiro’s retelling of medieval myths of ritual murder by Jews, in which the Jews “took the knife to Christians, circumcising, and in some cases, castrating, their Christian foes,”⁵⁶ suggests not Jewish emasculation but their frightening emasculating power. Such aggression carries over nicely into the early modern image of the Jew as rapacious usurer, since “exorbitant moneylending was often referred to as ‘bitting’ usury, and the elision of Jews as economic exploiters and literal devourers of Christian flesh was easily made.”⁵⁷ Shapiro is not surprised when his students assume an intention to castrate Antonio with Shylock’s request, as a condition of the bond, for “an equal pound / Of your fair flesh to be cut off and taken / In what part of your body pleaseth me” (1.3.146–48). I think Shapiro’s students are correct, but I would question this scholar’s assertion that “it is not until the trial scene in Act IV that this riddle is solved and we learn that Shylock intends to cut Antonio’s ‘breast’ near his heart,” for this complicates rather than solves the “riddle.”⁵⁸ If Shylock’s initial intention is to suggest, in a blackly humorous fashion, at least symbolic castration, I assume it is Antonio himself, when he and Shylock go not so merrily off to the notary’s to seal the bond, who suggests the phrase “nearest the [...] heart” (4.1.230).

Therefore, to the “theo-sexual matrix” (Biberman’s term) created by Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta* Shakespeare adds two crucial strands: he heightens and concretizes the anxiety-inducing threat of the castrating, insidiously powerful Jew through the bond between Shylock and Antonio, and he introduces a

55. Biberman, 33.

56. Shapiro, “Shakespeare and the Jews,” 80.

57. Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, 110.

58. Shapiro, “Shakespeare and the Jews,” 80–81.

level of Eucharistic meaning, one aspect of which is raised obliquely by evoking medieval myths of Jewish host desecration. Shapiro notes that “One legend that had virtually died out by the end of the sixteenth century,” in part due to Reformation debates concerning the validity of transubstantiation,

describes how Jews would surreptitiously obtain the eucharistic host, and would “prick it, burn it, and very basely and scornfully abuse it, because they heard Christians call it the body of Christ.” Inevitably, Christ’s blood would pour forth from the host, and the terrified Jews would either convert or be punished for their wickedness.⁵⁹

In Shakespeare, Shylock receives his punishment and conversion ironically through the prevention of the pouring forth of a Christ-figure’s blood. Yet Antonio, by reassigning the “wound” from genitals to heart, also gestures towards, or desires to effect, a “circumcision of the heart” (Romans 2:29) in order to recall a bodily sacrifice which parodies the Christian communion.

It may be objected that Paul’s idea of the circumcised heart relates to notions of justice perceived directly from God rather than from external law, and that it is not a figure expressing sacrifice *per se*: “But he is a Jewe which is one within, & the circumcision of the heart, in the spirit, not in [the] letter, whose praise is not of men, but of God.” Yet Romans 3:23–24 goes on to emphasize that “all have sinned, and are deprived of the glorie of God, and are justified frely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,”⁶⁰ which certainly implies a Eucharistic function. Paul suggests the sacrifice of carnal desire on the part of the faithful as a *symbolic* reflection of the literal sacrifice of Christ. Wright apparently alludes to the willing sacrifice of Christ through the Pauline metaphor of the circumcision of the heart in his treatise on the Eucharist: “Christ imparteth the best bloud in his breast, and besides, all his substance. [...] O sweete saviour thou art the only pellicane, thou launchest [lancet?] thy heart to feed thy flocke, thou diddest die to nourish thy children with this bloud of life.”⁶¹ Yet in Shakespeare the obvious difference in motives between Christ and Antonio is difficult to ignore. It is, after all, Antonio’s desire

59. Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, 93

60. Geneva Bible, A facsimile of the 1560 edition (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

61. Wright, *A Treatise ... of the reall presence*, sig. Q3r.

to literalize his deep, “heart-felt” longing for Bassanio through a horrifically masochistic gesture which will serve to uncover the bodily truth of this inner or secret love; such a gesture would seem the only way to establish his passion as a physical reality, or claim for it some kind of physical expression.

Paradoxically, Antonio’s public self-sacrifice—he does after all in a sense seek the “praise of men” that Paul condemns in Romans—will also be a way of immortalizing and memorializing his love for Bassanio, as Antonio himself argues:

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.
You cannot better be employed, Bassanio,
Than to live still and write mine epitaph. (4.1.113–17)

Antonio intimates an unconscious need to be punished for this “taint”—the fact that he is, as Janet Adelman observes, “unmanned by his desire.”⁶² Interestingly, the presumed source of Paul’s metaphor of the circumcised heart in the Old Testament—Deuteronomy 10:16 (“Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and harden your necks no more”)—contains this gloss in the Geneva Bible: “Cut of[f] all your evil affections.” Yet in spite of his masochism, Antonio proposes a way to “possess” Bassanio, to have him live “still,” to have him live “eternally” in a sense by mourning and commemorating Antonio in a discourse that will inscribe, in this form at least, the love that otherwise dare not speak its name. Thus Antonio will both literalize the secret sufferings of his heart by shedding this pound of flesh, and turn his erotic passion into a metaphor, the unceasing, discursively continuous “epitaph” of Bassanio’s mourning, regret, and loss. Many commentators have noted the Christ-like nature of Antonio’s stance here, quoting John 15:13: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (King James Version). I am, however, in agreement with Hassel’s suggestion that the Renaissance Christian “might have been more likely than today’s audience to find Antonio’s Christ-likeness somewhat ironic” since the “play’s use of controversial doctrine and liturgy

62. Janet Adelman, *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 121.

could have led him [or her] to understand that Antonio's attempt to 'stand for sacrifice' was doomed to [...] failure."⁶³ Yet an interesting problem arises from this reading, since while Antonio certainly does seem to "stand for sacrifice," the phrase is in fact uttered in the play, not by him but by Portia, as Bassanio goes to the casket test.

In what sense can Portia be said to "stand for sacrifice"? Hassel argues that Portia introduces two key Pauline allusions in the play. The first involves "the breach between precept and practice"—"If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches and poor men's cottages princes' palaces" (1.2.12–14)—whose source is Romans 7:18–19, the crux of which is Paul's assertion: "for to wil is present with me: but I finde no meanes to performe that which is good" (Geneva Bible). (Portia's version oddly implies incipient materialism, cottages to palaces, in spiritual "practice.") The second Pauline allusion is her reference to standing for sacrifice before Bassanio's casket test, which for Hassel "echoes both the communion service and its source in Romans 12:1. The liturgy reads: 'And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and lively sacrifice unto thee.'"⁶⁴ But the Eucharistic suggestion in Portia's case is complicated, even undermined, by her allusion to the "young Alcides, when he did redeem / The virgin tribute paid by howling Troy / To the sea-monster" (3.2.55–57). In the Ovidian version of this myth, Alcides or Hercules rescues Hesione from *becoming* a sacrifice to sea-monsters, sent by the gods as retribution for the sins of her father, and as a reward demands not the maiden but Laomedon's famous horses—the hero's desires are fulfilled not by (romantic) love but by coveted possessions. The potentially Eucharistic meaning in Portia's case is heavily ironized, although in a way highly appropriate not only to Bassanio's mercenary interests in the marriage but to the supposed gesture of Portia's marital self-sacrifice which, by the play's conclusion, really becomes a form of self-assertion and marital control. The theological implications of Eucharistic self-sacrifice are therefore displaced with greater intensity on to Antonio's devotion to Bassanio, with its climax in the courtroom scene.

As suggested above, Antonio's gesture can be construed as both radical literalization and an attempt at memorialization, interpretations homologous

63. Hassel, 20.

64. Hassel, 21–23.

to Catholic and Protestant readings of the Eucharist, respectively. Eucharistic motifs are elsewhere subtly and often ironically underlined on various occasions in the play. In his appeal to the harmonies of heaven in the final act, the romantic (but mercenary) Lorenzo describes for Jessica the starry night as “thick inlaid with patens [Eucharistic dishes] of bright gold” (5.1.59), a subtle instance of a recurring motif in the play, the materialization of the Christian heaven, as in Jessica’s assertion that Bassanio has found “a blessing” and “the joys of heaven here on earth” (3.5.70–71) through his marriage to the wealthy Portia. Lorenzo’s subsequent exclamation, “Fair ladies, you drop manna in the way / Of starvèd people” (5.1.294–95), strengthens the allusion, as Barbara Lewalski notes,⁶⁵ since manna was often read as a type, or foreshadowing, of the bread in holy communion—although such “manna” serves here as a metaphor for worldly gain. Another ironic allusion to Eucharistic theory comes from the newly betrothed in act 3, through the bet proposed by the vulgar Graziano: “We’ll play with them [Portia and Bassanio] the first boy for a thousand ducats” (3.2.213). Not only does this, like so much else in the play, reduce human life to a monetary amount; the evocation of “first-born boys,” and of their (hopeful) survival—at a possibly poignant moment in Shakespeare’s career, since the playwright’s son Hamnet died in 1596—alludes to the institution of the Passover in Exodus, which is seen by commentators as the crucial type of the Eucharist, “a memoriall,” in the words of one writer, “of a great deliverance past [but also] a most lively Type, and figure of the true Passeover that was to come, wherein the bloud of that most innocent Lambe of God, that tooke away the sinnes of the world, was in love, shed for the Redemption of us all.”⁶⁶ Wright in fact concludes his treatise on the Eucharist by noting that manna and the Paschal lamb are the two most significant types or “simbolicall figures” for this sacrament in the Old Testament.⁶⁷

But the clearest association of the Eucharist with Antonio’s sacrifice occurs when Bassanio informs Portia:

65. Barbara Lewalski, “Biblical Allusion and Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*,” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 54.

66. Christopher Sutton, *Godly meditations upon the most holy Sacrament of the Lords Supper* (London: W. Jaggard for Nicholas Bourne, 1616), sig. A6r; STC 23493.

67. Wright, *A Treatise ... of the reall presence*, sig. Q3v–Q4v.

Here is a letter, lady,
 The paper as the body of my friend,
 And every word in it a gaping wound
 Issuing life-blood. (3.2.261–64)

This image of the word becoming flesh (and blood) clearly inverts Paul's dictum on the deadness of the letter. The "spirit" is transcribed literally into the "letter"; the words of Antonio's appeal are imaginatively transubstantiated into real blood, as if he possessed directly the power of the priestly "Hoc est enim corpus meum" (this is indeed my body). Yet Antonio's "standing for sacrifice" is ultimately futile since the very human love he asserts becomes questionable, to revert to Wright's key assertion, as a mirror of the "infallible love of God." As Hassel argues, Antonio's "enactment of the 'sacrifice,' his act of 'greater love,' cannot be offered selflessly,"⁶⁸ and it could even be described, fairly persuasively in my opinion, as a kind of passive-aggressive manipulation of Bassanio. Nevertheless, in the face of the (questionable) Protestant critique of transubstantiation rendering the Eucharist so "easy," and leading to early modern speculations about what kind of spiritual efficacy a wicked person or even a cat or a dog would receive, should they happen to eat the consecrated host, it must be acknowledged that the sacrifice that Antonio proposes for himself would be anything but *easy*. What Antonio proposes to assert is really the validity of his own subjectivity, the value of his own inner self made public through death. It is precisely this humanist, rather than spiritual, integrity that Protestant writers apparently deny through their insistence on Christ as the only valid priest or mediator, or as George Gifford remarks, "Christ, who alone is a Priest in truth."⁶⁹

It is true that the theology of Protestantism exalts the individual—Gifford admits that in general the title of priest can be given "unto all the faithful, that being washed and sanctified in the bloud of Christ, they be made Kings and Priests unto God"⁷⁰—but only in the sense of their rejuvenation in Christ, through the loss of their carnal humanity, as is emphasized by Philippe de Mornay when he asserts that the original Lord's Supper, properly practised, "stirred up" the

68. Hassel, 25.

69. George Gifford, *A Briefe Treatise Against the Priesthood and Sacrifice of the Church of Rome* (London: W. Jones for Andrew Kembe, 1635), sig. B2r; STC 11495.

70. Gifford, sig. B3v.

people “to renounce and forsake themselves, to give themselves unto God, to die unto their lusts and concupiscences, to live unto Christ.”⁷¹ Antonio’s desperate attempt at (carnal) literalization fails, linking him with Shylock, who, demanding the literal terms of the bond, is decisively defeated by Portia when she “triumphantly out-literalizes Shylock’s literalism,” as Harold Bloom puts it, “since flesh cannot be separated from blood,” although Bloom regards this as the play’s “most dubious” irony.⁷² In this sense Shylock at least gets what he asks for, an excessive literalization, and the failure of both Antonio and Shylock suggests a Protestant denunciation of both Catholic and Jew as excessively dependent on external signs and symbols, and lacking in perceptiveness and sensitivity to the truly spiritual essence of things—although Antonio, ironically, is certainly at pains to communicate the “essence” of his emotional life. While the logical trick is present in Shakespeare’s source—Giovanni Fiorentino’s collection of tales, *Il pecorone*, which predates the Reformation—Portia’s insistence on the impossibility of Shylock’s receiving “flesh” without “blood” in this context conceivably evokes the Protestant position on the Eucharist, which insisted on communion in both kinds (bread and wine) and denounced the eventual historical exclusion of the cup from Catholic forms of worship. The female agency of Portia, then, prevents a more “Protestant” form of communion.⁷³ Mornay in fact cites various earlier authorities to suggest that communion in both kinds is necessary to signify the redemption of the faithful, not only in body (with the bread) but in soul (with the blood), and Gifford makes a comparable point, when he observes, “The Papists do not say they slay Christ, they say theirs is an unbloody

71. Philippe de Mornay, *Fowre Bookes, of the Institution, Use and Doctrine of the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist in the Old Church* (London: John Windet, 1600), sig. L1r; STC 18142.

72. Harold Bloom, Introduction to *William Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice: Modern Critical Interpretations*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 4.

73. This is the argument of Dennis Teti: “Portia’s intervention which prevents Shylock from taking Antonio’s life makes sense only in light of the ‘unbloody sacrifice’ of the Catholic Eucharist” (“The Unbloody Sacrifice: The Catholic Theology of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 33.1 [2005]: 68). Teti also focuses on 3.2, where Bassanio chooses the correct casket only after Portia admonished him to “confess what treason there is mingled with your love.” Treason apparently conjures images of Catholic martyrs, and the act of confession “points to the Catholic requirement that the Sacrament of Confession or Penance precede the reception of the Eucharist” (62). Yet to make the whole play simply substantiate Catholic doctrine seems to me to underestimate the psychological complexity of the issues raised in the text.

sacrifice [presumably in part because of, symbolically, the exclusion of the cup]: [but] there is no remission of sins without shedding of blood.”⁷⁴

But the crucial irony remains that the Christian blood that Portia refuses to have shed at the Duke’s court would come not from the divine Christ but from the very human Antonio. Shakespeare intensifies this irony through his appeal to common experience in the state of nature—as in, for example, Shylock’s famous “Hath not a Jew” speech (3.1.55–69)—which closely resembles and may have been inspired by Wright’s reading of the naturalness of self-preservation and indeed of cultural animosity. Coolidge’s treatment of Pauline edification in *The Pauline Renaissance in England* constitutes a series of political ironies that Shakespeare seems to intimate through this appeal to “natural” response and common experience:

[...] the Pauline concept of edification encounters a difficulty as a description of the ongoing history of the Church which does not appear when it is applied to the ongoing struggle of the individual convert. It envisions only a single life span. Growth, as it is understood in Paul’s thought [...] is not simply quantitative increase. [...] rather, edification should come to an end in “that which is perfect” [...] the work of the ministry aims at “the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of faith, and the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man [...], unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph. 4: 12–13). For the individual this final perfection can be supposed to come with the end of his earthly life span, as Paul’s description of it in his discourse of faith, hope and charity indicates; but the idea of a corresponding historic end of communal edification, if such an idea is implicit in Paul’s words on the subject, must soon fade into the future along with the idea of the Second Coming.⁷⁵

The apocalyptic tenor of Paul’s reasoning thus poses significant problems for later generations of Christians:

Paul may well have thought of the collective edification of the Church and that of the first generation of individual believers as proceeding *pari*

74. Gifford, sig. F1r.

75. Coolidge, 78.

passu to a common point of perfection at the imminent end of the age, but those who respond to his vision fifteen centuries later cannot think of the temporal growth of the Church to perfection as coincident with the earthly life span of its present members.⁷⁶

Coolidge adds in a note that “Paul probably envisioned an interval of forty years, by a familiar Old Testament usage the time of one generation, between the Passion and the Parousia [second coming].”⁷⁷ But Pauline edification for later generations involves a continuing struggle to maintain a monopoly on truth and (potential) salvation in the face of “alien” antagonism: “Just as the individual’s conversion to Christ begins his struggle, so the historical moment of Christ by no means disengages the Church from its age.”⁷⁸ In this ideological context, neither Wright’s evocation of cultural animosity and xenophobia in the middle of a description of divine (and human) love, nor Shakespeare’s ironic reflection of this dynamic, seems that surprising.

The play returns us again and again to the reality of the human body—with issues determining the lives of those “borne after the flesh” (Galatians 4:23)—and the predominance of material motives in all human actions. Among the play’s male lovers, Antonio actually stands out—ironically—somewhat favourably, for in spite of his intense anti-Semitism his main motive, however unconscious, is romantic or erotic rather than mercenary. And yet this eroticism is precisely what defeats him, for Portia, assisted by the (culturally legitimate) body, succeeds in her own “standing for sacrifice” because the heterosexual nature of her attachment to Bassanio justifies her love according to nature’s procreative necessity, as well as society’s patriarchal regulations—even if her subsequent actions suggest her supposed sacrifice has earned her a man she can, and will, always effectively control. In fact, matrimonial fidelity ironically emerges as physical or sexual control (but is it male over female, or female over male?) in the wedding ring = vagina joke, the play’s most notorious metaphor, in the final lines.⁷⁹ As has been frequently noted, even the literalist/materialist Shylock is allowed to express one moment of purely metaphorical valuation,

76. Coolidge, 79.

77. Coolidge, 79–80.

78. Coolidge, 78.

79. This metaphor in fact reflects another sacramental controversy of early modern England. Under Protestantism, marriage was no longer a sacrament, and Coleman points out that the significance of

when he exclaims, “It was my turquoise [that Jessica has exchanged for a monkey]. I had it of Leah [his wife] when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys” (3.1.113–15), but here the transcendental nature of the sentiment accepts ideological support from the flesh, since his body and his sexual desire have been put to heterosexually “proper” and acceptable spiritual use through subsequent marriage and procreation.

In spite of this apparent legitimation through the body, Shylock has his daughter stolen from him, and *her* procreative capacity appropriated by the Christian men. Moreover, the still celibate Antonio suggests in court the final hypocrisy of Shylock’s conversion to Christianity, a move which effectually denies the inner essence of Shylock as much as Portia has denied the expression of the inner essence of Antonio: both men are “saved” but now forced to live a lie, a life of false surfaces. Historically the enforced conversion of a Jew may not be altogether remarkable or surprising—many converted in Spain under Inquisitorial pressure, and presumably many in England to avoid the Expulsion in 1290⁸⁰—and the enforced conversion of Jews is casually mentioned as a possible punishment by Ferneze’s officer in *The Jew of Malta* (1.2.74). Nevertheless the shocking superficiality of the imposition of Christianity on Shylock remains highly significant in the thematic context of Shakespeare’s play. It constitutes, in fact, a radical deconstruction of the central doctrine of Christianity, the supposed inner essence of the life of grace; one emphasized by the Reformation, with its attack (as mentioned earlier) on the externals of worship in Catholicism. This ideological critique can be clarified by considering an earlier, theologically orthodox reading of the play. Barbara Lewalski argues that

the stipulation for Shylock’s conversion, though it of course assumes the truth of Christianity, is not antisemitic revenge: it simply compels Shylock to avow what his own experience in the trial scene has fully “demonstrated”—that the Law leads only to death and destruction, that faith in Christ must supplant human righteousness.

Lewalski thus defends the Christians’ maneuvers in court:

the exchange of rings in the marriage ceremony was still being debated in the early seventeenth century (*Drama and the Sacraments in Sixteenth-Century England*, 7).

80. Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, 14–17, 43–55.

Portia's final tactic—that of permitting the Law to demonstrate its own destructiveness—seems a working out of Paul's metaphor of the Law as a "Schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be made righteous by faith" (Gal. iii.24). [...] Shylock, as representative of his entire race, having refused the earlier opportunity to embrace voluntarily the principles of Christianity, must undergo in the trial scene the harsh "Schoolmastership" of the Law, in order to be brought to faith in Christ.⁸¹

And yet this reading underlines why the text invariably evokes uneasiness in the sensitive reader: Shakespeare implies a rigorous correction by the law which does not, in any way, touch his Christians, whose righteousness, though *performed* perfectly—as in Bassanio's choice of the proper leaden casket—remains perfectly encoded with their continuing, indeed unchallenged, cultural prejudices, which belie their supposed perceptions of inner essence, as when Bassanio attacks the allure of outward beauty with a phrase that underlines his own racism: "Thus ornament is but the guilèd shore / To a most dangerous sea, the beauteous scarf / Veiling an Indian beauty" (3.2.97–99).

That Antonio's gesture of self-sacrifice offers, as observed above, homologous parallels to, and ambiguous reflections of, both Catholic and Protestant readings of the Eucharist indicates that Shakespeare's artistic point is not in the end primarily a partisan theological critique that supports one religion by denigrating the other. Still, the play's "theo-sexual matrix" may in one sense implicate its predominantly Protestant audience. Antonio's attempt to be his own priest or mediator suggests the uneasy conflation of personal/carnal and transcendent desire in the heightened individualism of Reformation theology. That is, an Italian, Catholic figure who on one level can be scapegoated for his potentially "sodomitical" longings is in fact, psychologically, brought closer to home, the English cultural and political context. Antonio's radically individualized appropriation of a spiritual impulse, which is personalized in such a way that enhances an inner or essential desire but ultimately problematizes or even compromises his masculine agency, can be construed as Shakespeare's complex psychological and political response to the Reformation's emphasis on *sola fide*, justification through faith alone, but a faith that comes only through divine grace won by Christ's atonement. Such a doctrine encourages the deepest

81. Lewalski, 51–52.

desires—ones that, emotionally, absolutely fulfill or define the self—but renders the self radically unstable through the uncertain identification of the sources of its own agency—through, that is, a simultaneous encouragement of extreme individuality and extreme dependency.⁸² Antonio’s masochistic passion for Bassanio clearly contradicts the “radical self-sufficiency” that, according to Shannon, “liberates [...] friendship [in the stoical traditions inspired by classical *amicitia*] from any inference that it might stem from ‘slavery’ to weakness or need.”⁸³

What Shakespeare suggests through his narrowing of Christian atonement to the romantic self-interest and masochism of the repressed Antonio is the psychologically problematic nature of a theology of grace, insofar as it provides, or fails to provide, an adequate model of masculine self-assertion. The eroticization of Wright’s evocation of the tradition of amity speaks to the special concerns of the theologically transitional culture that Shakespeare inhabited. The relation between human and divine agency, and the relation between God’s love and human desire, become increasingly vexed and conflicted within the context of Reformed theology, with its weakening of hierarchical

82. For ideological reasons, devotional treatises are unlikely to address the psychological problematic I am attempting to describe here, although Debora Shuger’s treatment of early modern Calvinist passion narratives, which “seem to encode some sort of cultural disturbance involving manhood, violence, and urban decadence” (*The Renaissance Bible*, 7) offers an illuminating parallel. Shuger classes such narratives as “end myths”: “If, following Durkheim’s influential thesis, the function of dominant myths is to provide normative values and ontological solace—to relieve anxiety by grounding social experience in sacred order—then disintegrating myths [...] ‘end myths’ [...] can be characterized by their failure to effect this. [...] [In this context t]he agony of Christ becomes a locus for the articulation of strange desires and moral uncertainties, disclosing rather than resolving cultural paradoxes” (90).

Whereas “Patristic theology [had tended] to envisage Christ’s humanity as largely impersonal,” the Calvinist passion narratives “[un]fortuitous[ly]” build on the personalization of Christ, the “production of an unstable, internally riven selfhood” in late medieval Christology (100), and then potentially intensify their traumatic effect through the *internalization* of Christ’s sacrifice under the pressure of Calvinist Christology: “The church has the duty, ‘by bringing men into the obedience of the Gospel, to offer them as it were in sacrifice unto God,’ Calvin explains, ‘and not as the papists have hitherto proudly bragged, by the offering up of Christ to reconcile men unto God’”(107). Thus Shuger concludes that these narratives “construct a new male subjectivity, one formed not by identifying with ideal types—the rhetorical mode of the medieval passions—but by internalizing the whole *drama*, by restaging the Crucifixion in the theatrical subject. The end myth produces and mirrors a conflictual, decentered, and chimerical manhood” (122).

83. Shannon, 31.

identifications and external mediation. Wright significantly emphasizes the moral disadvantages to this loss of social control: “the Catholike commeth [to worship] with humilitie, the Heretike with arrogancie: the Catholike with submission to the leaders of Christs flocke, the heretike with presumption of his own conceit: the Catholike armed with consent of Fathers, the heretike with his owne singularity.”⁸⁴ From our perspective it is difficult not to conclude that the Christology of the Reformation intensifies the narcissistic potential of masculine self-fashioning. With the increasing obsolescence of the homoerotic amity and homosocial fraternity commended by Wright, the highly individualized, even solipsistic manliness posited by Protestantism offers only masochistic self-annihilation—through its imitation of Christian self-sacrifice—as a vehicle or cathexis for Antonio’s still potent (and extramarital) longings.

This exploration of the psychological limitations, even dangers, inherent in atonement theology partly explains why Shylock’s independent masculinity, not his effeminacy, operates as the source of anxiety for the play’s Christian men. The fact that masculine identity seems ideologically dependent on the necessary and rigorous self-discipline imposed by the “law”—theological, moral, sexual—might help explain the slightly later historical phenomenon observed by Shapiro, where radical Puritans went to remarkable extremes in embracing a strict Judaic moral code.⁸⁵ The romantic failure of Antonio’s bid for immortalized passion may even suggest Shakespeare’s critical response to, or reflections upon, the homoerotic network of patronage, suggested or recalled through Wright’s own social connections, of the Southampton-Essex circle. While Katherine Duncan-Jones very carefully delineates the mental disturbances evident in one extremely interesting source of Elizabethan observations, the soldier and manic letter-writer William Reynolds, she nevertheless notes his increasing cogency as well as, suggestively, his bitter insinuation, based on his own military service in Ireland, “that rewards could be obtained from either or both of the two Earls in return for sexual favours.”⁸⁶ Bray in *The Friend* significantly discusses Reynolds as one of the “rare” early modern cases which

84. Wright, *A Treatise ... of the reall presence*, sig. A2v.

85. See, for example, the section of chapter 1 of *Shakespeare and the Jews* entitled “Judaizing in England,” 20–26, in particular the discussion of John Traske. Traske actually went so far as to circumcise a handful of Puritan infants around 1620 (115).

86. Katherine Duncan-Jones, “Much Ado with Red and White: The Earliest Readers of Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* (1593),” *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 44 (1993): 485.

encourage a “sodomitical meaning” in “those conventions of friendship which elsewhere seem protected from that interpretation.”⁸⁷

The Merchant of Venice delegitimizes a traditional framework for amity, almost nostalgically evoked by Thomas Wright in the 1590s, by isolating and in a sense pathologizing the Eucharistic gesture of self-sacrifice which had earlier provided a more comfortably symbolic rationale for masculine friendship, with the “real presence” supplied by Christ alone. The play thus both heightens and *contains* the erotic potential in such bonds. Such containment would appear not inconsistent with Shakespeare’s other dramatic portrayals of homoeroticism, such as the poignant but ultimately futile expressions of desire by Antonio in *Twelfth Night*.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, the implicit morality which supports the repression of homoerotic desire does not interfere with the relentless commodification of the body by the characters in *The Merchant*, from the pound of flesh worth three thousand ducats to the “golden fleece” of Portia herself. If we look backward historically, Shakespeare’s text appears to challenge Bray’s concept of a “traditional society” in which Christian charity universally informs the bonds of friendship (even while such bonds were undeniably often “dangerous” in their financial or ethical obligations). If we look forward historically, Shakespeare’s text appears to undercut the moral integrity of the proto-liberal, autonomous self, in whose formulation Protestant individualism, in seventeenth-century England, plays a significant role (even while the play also nicely foreshadows the ethical problems of a developing capitalist state).⁸⁹

87. Bray, 186.

88. I thus obviously fall into the category of critics who, as Joseph Pequigney writes, “ascribe [homoerotic desire] to both Antonios” (“The Two Antonios and Same-Sex Love in *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*,” *English Literary Renaissance* 22 [1992]: 201). While Pequigney describes significant differences in the portrayal of the relationships experienced by the two Antonios, I am unpersuaded by his assertion that the attraction Antonio feels for Bassanio cannot be characterized as homoerotic. See also Alan Sinfield, “How to Read *The Merchant of Venice* without being Heterosexualist,” in *The Merchant of Venice: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Coyle (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998).

89. I am in effect offering here a pronounced variation of a psychological and social pattern traced by MacFaul in *Male Friendship*, where he builds carefully on observations by Shannon in *Sovereign Amity*: “as Shannon notes, a relatively rigid and naturalized social hierarchy is the starting point; within this structure, but driven by an ideology of equal friendship, points of equality are recognized, giving a temporary sense of parity which ennobles both parties in a friendship, producing an autonomous but paradoxically interdependent sense of selfhood; in the course of time and narrative this gives way, more or less mournfully, to a recognition of difference between the friends.” MacFaul admits, “I do not

Indeed, the isolation or individualization of the homoerotic passion—by intimating a new predominance of the private and competitive over the public and communal—helps Shakespeare’s text expose the evident if painful fact that the collective identity of a (Catholic) Christianity can no longer, or only ironically, serve to authorize the facile displacement of material motive onto the demonized Jew. As an artist who sometimes quite ruthlessly tests the possibilities of masculine assertiveness in a rapidly changing society, Shakespeare apparently ironizes the assertion of Christ quoted by Gifford: “It is the spirit that quickeneth, the flesh profiteth nothing” (John 6:63).⁹⁰ The playwright portrays, in much of his work but perhaps most acutely and ironically in *The Merchant of Venice*, a disjuncture between this mystical vision and the processes of human experience—especially those related to masculine power and control—in the political and cultural world of early modern England. The implication of this disjuncture may be understood finally not as Shakespeare’s assertion of a purely “materialist” vision, in a postmodern sense, but as a daring attempt to come to terms with the paradoxical intensification of both masculine agency and masculine anxiety within a society destabilized through the ideological and theological transformation of the Reformation. Divesting itself of one mythos that served to rationalize human alliance as a form of the transcendent, the play registers the temporary, if traumatic, inchoateness of a newer

wish to emphasize the emergence of modernity, much less the ‘invention of the human’ in Shakespeare, but I do think that we see a highly characteristic type of selfhood at the end of Shakespeare’s plays; this involves a kind of ironically melancholic recognition that one is fundamentally alone—one has one’s place in the story, but one’s self will never be *fully* realized” (20). It is important historically to recognize, within this particular loss, the spiritual dimension of the full but apparently impossible “self-realization” to which MacFaul alludes. *The Merchant* not only rather devastatingly underlines the material motives in the romantic relationships it portrays, it also strongly suggests that the “difference between the friends” in this case hinges on unreciprocated erotic desire. By emphasizing religious and sexual concerns absent in the arguments of MacFaul and Shannon, my reading thus brings us close to a peculiar confirmation of the (initially surprising) generalization formulated by Coleman: “one can say that sexual sin, for Shakespeare, creates the subject” (*Drama and the Sacraments in Sixteenth-Century England*, 119). While the end to its social repression and the arrival of a substantive “place in the story” will have to wait centuries—specifically for more radical redefinitions of masculinity and gender—Renaissance homoeroticism nevertheless functions as a symptom of an emerging secularized self which remains haunted by a desire for spiritual sustenance even as it challenges hierarchical identifications of both gender and class.

90. Gifford, sig. C4r.

metaphysics—an increasingly secularized Protestantism, as a precursor of the liberal humanism of the Enlightenment—that will in time come to consolidate the sanctity of bonds no longer posited on (masculine) self-sacrifice as their defining characteristic.