

Shakespeare's Venetian Paradigm: Stereotyping and Sadism in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*

MAURICE HUNT

English Renaissance literary commonplaces about Venice find scant confirmation in Shakespeare's Venetian plays: *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. For the Earls of Southampton and Essex and for many literate English Protestants, Venice was the model of republican government, the alternative to monarchy for disaffected subjects of Elizabeth. Additionally, it became in English minds a center of international trade and commerce, which made possible the flowering of Italian Renaissance painting, architecture, and culture (Berry 252; McPherson 28-29, 32-36). Set against these positive images of the city was the corrupt Italianate Venice, the festering sister of Rome and Amalfi, the setting of Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, the generic Italian locus of charlatans, lechers, courtesans, and poisons.¹ Yet Shakespeare's Venice in the above-mentioned comedy and tragedy is none of these cities. Shakespeare shows little or no interest in depicting the workings of the famous enfranchising republican government of Venice,² nor does he describe the details of the paintings or opulent buildings that Venetian commerce had made possible. He never mentions the most famous piazza of Europe—

¹According to Levith (6), this negative portrayal of Venice memorably began with Roger Ascham's *The Scholemaster* (1570). For Venetians' reputation as sodomites, see D'Amico 40.

²Shakespeare's lack of knowledge of the relationship of the Venetian Senate and the Doge and the playwright's more general unfamiliarity with the workings of the Venetian system of republican government are suggested by Levith 14-15.

that of St. Mark's—or the Arsenal or the Grand Canal or the Jewish ghetto (Salingar 174). The Venice of Shakespeare's plays is not the city of Ben Jonson, composed in *Volpone* of no fewer than seventeen topographies such as the Pescaria and the Incurabili (Parker 194); nor is it the Italianate metropolitan stereotype of John Webster, replete with toxic Bibles and paintings, the vehicles of diabolical Catholic bishops and Machiavelian counts (Praz 95, 96; Oz 191). Instead, Shakespeare's Venice in both *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* activates a disturbing paradigm dependent upon the city's multicultural reputation.

Shakespeare's Venice encapsulates certain dynamic relationships between a persecutory Christian culture and a potentially savage alien—a Turk, a Moor, or a Jew—who exists both without and within the city. For this playwright, the name “Venice” denotes the place where these dynamics can be described and explored. Venice's commerce depends upon the usurious finance made possible only by the Jew, and the city's unwarlike senators look elsewhere for the rugged general required to protect them from the Turk. Unfortunately, individual Venetians stereotype and persecute the necessary “foreign” alien. They do so because a counterpart to the “foreign” alien has surfaced figuratively within their hearts and minds, where it has slept dormant. This alien within, once precipitated, seeks relief by the exercise of destructive power. This malign power manifests itself mainly through the affected Venetian's intensified stereotyping of others and the sadistic persecution that stereotyping makes possible—not only of the “foreign” Venetian alien but of other, non-aliens as well. Othello's hatred of Desdemona derives from Iago's accelerated persecution of him with the image of his wife as the stereotypic subtle whore of Venice, an identity whose mystery in the Moor's mind matches the enigma of a European people who have never completely accepted the warrior who yearns to be one of them.

By imagining Desdemona in the arms of Cassio, Othello pictures his wife in the arms of a man who has implicitly likened

Desdemona to the goddess Venus by praising her “divine” beauty arisen from the sea that threatened her. Shakespeare may have thought that Venice took its name from Venus, the goddess of love. Paradoxically, in both *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, the city of love becomes the city of hate, when its inhabitants—both native and alien alike—create the ruinous dynamics of stereotyping and persecution just described. Put simply, Venice is the Shakespearean place name for compulsive stereotyping, the conversion of love into hatred that this stereotyping occasions, and the place where the rectification of this conversion proves unsatisfying as a long-term solution.

The persecutory component of Venice, the tendency activated and strengthened by having to deal with the alien in the city, neutralizes certain finer values of Venetian Renaissance culture. In *The Merchant of Venice*, these values cluster about courtesy, refined manners. We hear this courtesy immediately in the play, in the deferential modesty of Venetian Salerio and Solanio. Salerio imagines Antonio’s ships as “signors and rich burghers on the flood,” who “overpeer the petty traffickers / That curtsy to them, do them reverence” as these lesser ships sail past them (1.1.8-14).³ When Bassanio, Lorenzo, and Gratiano enter, Solanio acts out this reverence by courteously saying farewell to Antonio: “We leave you now with better company” (1.1.58-59). Bassanio portrays Antonio as “The dearest friend to me, the kindest man, / The best-conditioned and unwearied spirit / In doing courtesies” (3.2.292-94). At the start of Antonio’s trial, the Duke of Venice tells Shylock that Antonio’s staggering financial losses are enough to

pluck commiseration of his state
From brassy bosoms and rough hearts of flint,
From stubborn Turks and Tartars never trained
To offices of tender courtesy. (4.1.30-33)

³Quotations of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* are taken from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington.

The anti-festive alien Shylock, naturally enough, represents the antithesis of this Renaissance courtesy. Jessica at one point exclaims, "though I am a daughter to [my father's] blood, / I am not to his manners" (2.3.18-19). Like the Duke does when he talks of "tender courtesy" in relation to "rough hearts of flint," Shylock evokes the image of Venetian courtesy but troublingly so, in the context of Venetian sadism and persecution when he recalls Antonio's berating him for practicing usury, his spitting upon him and kicking him. Referring to this abuse, Shylock asks Antonio rhetorically and sarcastically, "and for these courtesies / I'll lend you thus much moneys?" (1.3.126-27). Solanio unintentionally echoes Shylock's questioning of Venetian courtesy when he later, participating in the elopement of Lorenzo and Jessica and her theft of her father's gold, concludes, upon first contemplating these deeds, "Tis vile, unless it may be quaintly ordered" (2.4.6). Solanio indicts his supposed refinement if he believes that "tastefully" managing deceit makes it not "vile," but acceptable. Given all these and other dramatic qualifications of Venetian courtesy, playgoers are not surprised when the dynamics of sadism and persecution in *The Merchant of Venice* challenge its authenticity.

As he does in no other play, Shakespeare in these plays focuses upon the very moment when suddenly felt inner pain reflexively converts for relief into the sadistic impulse to harm another.⁴ In *The Merchant of Venice*, this process clearly, succinctly, appears in act III, scene i, when Salerio and Solanio bait

⁴Jane Adamson comes closest to anticipating my thesis in *Othello as Tragedy: Some Problems of Judgment and Feeling*. She writes that

[f]rom the very beginning, I believe [*Othello*] focuses on an issue that is formulated quite explicitly by Emilia in her defiant outburst at Othello in the very last scene: "Thou hast not half the power to do me harm / As I have to be hurt" (V,ii,161-2). "The human power to hurt" and "the power to be hurt," and the connection between them: from the start and all through the play Shakespeare is exploring the relationship between culpability (the impulse and capacity to inflict suffering), and vulnerability (the capacity to suffer), until he finally confronts us with the extremest forms of both, in

Shylock concerning Jessica's flight and thievery (21-69). Shylock's pain converts instantaneously into the sadistic desire to torture Antonio when Salerio makes the mistake of mentioning Antonio in the midst of one of his barbs: "There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory, more between your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish. But tell us, do you hear whether Antonio have had any loss at sea or no?" (3.1.35-40). This slip reminds Shylock of the man who has persecuted him, and the inner pain he has felt unleashes itself in the terrible resolution to exact, whatever the cost, a pound of flesh if Antonio should forfeit his bond (3.1.50-69). The pain Salerio has made Shylock suddenly feel metamorphoses into the sadistic penalty the Jew almost certainly devises at this moment. We immediately witness a second time the process of conversion when Tubal enters and unintentionally incites Shylock again to release his pain in angry homicidal threats against Jessica and Antonio. Quotation of Shylock's and Tubal's dialogue graphically makes my point:

Othello's related acts of murder and of suicide . . . [Iago's] assumption that life consists either in hurting others or getting hurt oneself is reflected in his every speech and action. (34, 74)

My account of a sadistic Venetian paradigm differs fundamentally from Adamson's description of hurting others as compensation in *Othello* for being literally and figuratively "cashiered." Adamson never considers *The Merchant of Venice* as relevant to her argument, and thus never considers the possibility that her subject might be a Venetian phenomenon. In fact, she never considers Venice as a cultural determiner in *Othello* of being hurt and of hurting others. Adamson regards love given and then withdrawn, or love yearned for but never reciprocated, as the catalyst for the impulse to hurt another. But characters such as the Gratianos and Antonio and Portia vis-à-vis Shylock indicate that factors other than love withheld or withdrawn trigger the sadistic paradigm that I associate with Venice. Adamson does not consider the possibility that problems concerning the alien and alienation rather than love might figure in the conversion of pain felt into pain inflicted. Forms of the word "scapegoat" never appear in her study.

For a survey of characters' stereotyping of others in *The Merchant*, see Thompson, who argues that "Shakespeare takes great pains throughout the play to break down the stereotypes of Jews and Christians of the black-and-white, angel-and-devil kind that he expected to find among his contemporaries" (1).

SHYLOCK: How now, Tubal, what news from Genoa?

Hast thou found my daughter?

TUBAL: I often came where I did hear of her, but cannot find her.

SHYLOCK: Why, there, there, there, there! *A diamond gone, cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfort! The curse never fell upon our nation till now; I never felt it till now. Two thousand ducats in that, and other precious, precious jewels. I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin!*

No news of them? Why, so—and I know not what's spent in the search. Why, thou loss upon loss! The thief gone with so much, and so much to find the thief, and no satisfaction, no revenge! Nor no ill luck stirring but what lights o' my shoulders, no sighs but o' my breathing, no tears but o' my shedding.

TUBAL: Yes, other men have ill luck too. Antonio, as I heard in Genoa—

SHYLOCK: What, what, what? Ill luck, ill luck?

TUBAL: Hath an argosy cast away, coming from Tripolis.

SHYLOCK: I thank God, I thank God. Is it true, is it true?

TUBAL: I spoke with some of the sailors that escaped the wreck.

SHYLOCK: I thank thee, good Tubal. Good news, good news! Ha, ha! Heard in Genoa?

TUBAL: *Your daughter spent in Genoa, as I heard, one night fourscore ducats.*

SHYLOCK: *Thou stick'st a dagger in me.* I shall never see my gold again. Fourscore ducats at a sitting? Fourscore ducats?

TUBAL: There came divers of Antonio's creditors in my company to Venice that swear he cannot choose but break.

SHYLOCK: I am very glad of it. *I'll plague him, I'll torture him. I am glad of it.*

TUBAL: *One of them showed me a ring that he had of your daughter for a monkey.*

SHYLOCK: Out upon her! *Thou torturest me, Tubal.* It was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.

TUBAL: But Antonio is certainly undone.

SHYLOCK: Nay, that's true, that's very true. Go, Tubal,
 fee me an officer; bespeak him a fortnight before. *I will
 have the heart of him if he forfeit. . . .* (3.1.75-120, my italics)

Italicized text in this dialogue focuses the almost instantaneous transformation of Shylock's pain upon hearing of Jessica's "wasting" of his stolen wealth into the sadistic desire to torture and kill her and then, by transference, into the impulse to destroy Antonio. Hearing of Jessica's profligacy with his ducats, Shylock feels as though a dagger has been stuck in him. Tubal's inexplicable introduction of Antonio into this dialogue gives Shylock, figuratively speaking, the opportunity to withdraw this dagger and plunge it into Antonio for relief of his pain. The italicized utterances in the last third of this passage sharply anatomize, as no other Shakespeare text does, the transformation of inflicted pain (and the momentary relief this transformation works) into the sadistic intent to destroy a scapegoat. The alteration in this case suggests that Shylock insists on killing Antonio because Jessica has, in effect, driven a dagger into him. Jessica knew that the ring she sold for a monkey was her father's. The implication of spite reminds us that her wishing to pain her father gives her some relief for the awful pain he inflicted upon her by commodifying her and locking her in the prison of his house.

Shylock thus condenses a frightening process that occurs less spectacularly, less explicitly, in the Venetians who persecute the alien in their midst. But in their case, where could this impulse originate? Like married Iago, Antonio, the principal sadistic persecutor of Shylock, is essentially a "loner," sad, detached from others even though he is surrounded by admirers. Antonio's only bond, with Bassanio, (while platonically strong) does not appear intimate, and it almost undoes him by making him sacrifice himself to Shylock. In Antonio's case, this detachedness, this "alien" condition, seems to persist despite opportunities to love and be beloved. Iago's only bond with his wife Emilia is not intimate, or even affectionate, and it becomes the means

that undoes him when he believes he must kill her to prevent her from revealing his knavery. In some respects, Antonio and Iago, while Venetians, can be judged private, unofficial aliens, in the sense that—to different degrees—they seem “strangers” in their own country. In an odd way, the eagerness of existential aliens in both plays to forge a bond with the official Venetian alien serves to underscore an unarticulated affinity felt between two sets of men. Antonio's and Iago's relative alienation and their painful self-disgust over their lot in life could form their compound impulse to stereotype the Jew and Moor as alien “devil” and wish to abuse each victim physically.⁵ Projecting their felt alienation onto another, they seek the means to destroy what originally exists unobjectified in themselves. That their victims—Shylock and Othello—eventually enact the same process with regard to themselves or other Venetians such as Desdemona simply serves to justify in their minds their sadistic persecution of the official, public alien.⁶ Once begun, this mutual dynamic serves to rationalize the sadistic impulses of Venetians like Solanio, Salerio, the Gratianos, and Lodovico to torture or kill Shylock and Iago. (For *MV* Gratiano's desire to hang Shylock, see 4.1.362-65, 377, 396-98).

The perception that the sadistic dynamism under discussion likewise informs *Othello* encourages naming it a Venetian paradigm of Shakespeare's. At this point, my reader might object

⁵James Shapiro explains why Elizabethans would have been inclined to conflate Shylock and Othello. Shakespeare identified the Jew with blackness in “naming Shylock's ‘countrymen’ Tubal and Chus, the latter Biblical name immediately recognizable to Elizabethan audiences as the progenitor of all Black Africans” (172).

⁶Shapiro recounts contemporary anecdotes of English Christians turned Jew, Jews turned false Christian, and the widespread cultural fear generated by these conversions. He concludes that in England and Europe in general, it was “[n]o longer so easy to tell Christians and Jews apart based on their behavior or actions” (32). The shared persecutory sadism of Antonio and Shylock illustrates the truth of Shapiro's conclusion, while his collected anecdotes of “Judaizing” Christians provide another way of understanding Antonio's “Jewish” sadism in Shakespeare's play.

that the described sadistic process animates many Shakespearean characters, such as Angelo in *Measure for Measure* and King Lear. Why term “Venetian” a sadistic paradigm widespread in the Shakespeare canon? An obvious answer involves Venice’s early modern reputation as crossroads city tolerating different kinds of foreign aliens, outsiders who—in my interpretation—precipitate the previously described sadistic phenomenon. But a more specific cause likely exists for the association. Later, I will argue that Elizabethan stereotypes of Venetian cruelty may have caused the playwright and his contemporaries to regard sadism a notably Venetian vice. Shakespeare in *The Merchant* does mention the Venetian institution of slavery (4.1.347-55).⁷

For now, I want to demonstrate how closely *Othello* resembles *The Merchant of Venice* in terms of my subject. As is true in the *Merchant of Venice*, sadistic passions in *Othello* obliterate a “soft” quality linked to the republic of Venice. From time to time, Venetian courtesy surfaces in *Othello*. Encountering Gratiano, Desdemona’s uncle, in Cyprus in the scene of Cassio’s wounding and Roderigo’s death, Iago exclaims, “I cry your gentle pardon. / These bloody accidents must excuse my manners / That so neglected you” (5.1.95-97). So strong is the Venetian preoccupation with courtesy that the hard-bitten sergeant Iago feels compelled to think of his manners when he sees Gratiano, even though the violence of the moment would easily excuse his concern. Gratiano personifies a Venetian preoccupation with courtesy in the midst of the most startling threatened violence when Desdemona’s uncle, as “*Iago offers to stab Emilia*,” shouts, “Fie, / Your sword upon a woman?” (5.2.22-24).⁸ Playgoers’ impression of a Venetian fixation on manners registers more

⁷For Venetian slavery as the embodiment of the capitalist phenomenon of the “common trade or sale of living flesh for money,” see Mallin 150.

⁸Brabantio’s concern for the “manners and the civility that gentlemen hold in common” is apparent even during Iago and Roderigo’s report of Desdemona’s elopement, according to R. A. Yoder 215.

positively in their sense that Desdemona's virtues include exemplary courtesy. Nevertheless, a concern with manners does not preoccupy the Venetians of *Othello* to the degree apparent in *The Merchant of Venice*. In fact, one could say that the renowned Venetian courtesy in this play gets displaced onto the Florentine Cassio (2.1.100-1, 167-78). Instead, the "soft" Venetian Renaissance value that sadistic impulse overwhelms in *Othello* is a more generalized effeminess, a super-refinement entailing pusillanimity. Pamela Jensen concludes that in this tragedy "[t]he rule of civility in Venice establishes a pronounced distinction between a martial way of life, suited to honest or true men, and a civilian way of life, which, because it renders men especially agreeable to women, makes them susceptible to the accusation of effeminacy" (162). Desdemona's unsuccessful suitors are "wealthy curled darlings" (1.2.69) in her father's account, surely an ironic pejorative image.

To be sure, the tough warrior Iago is a Venetian.⁹ But he stands alone as a military man. Playgoers sense, without being told, that Venice's military forces reflect a decidedly international mixture. Roderigo is no soldier, and none of Venice's senators is a captain or general. For its safety, Venice depends upon the generalship of an alien, the Moor Othello (1.1.151-57).¹⁰ The sense of an unwarlike, perhaps pusillanimous, Renaissance republic is reinforced in the play's violent final scenes when the Venetian Lodovico, hearing bleeding Cassio's call for aid, tells Gratiano, "Let's think 't unsafe / To come in to the cry

⁹Nevertheless, Iago has a Spanish name (Levith 35).

¹⁰Shakespeare never mentions the historical reason for Renaissance Venice's practice of engaging foreigners to command the republic's troops—to prevent Venetian *coups d'état* (Levith 29-31; McPherson 73). In keeping with this fact, the playwright never mentions Venice's famous Arsenal. Thus little in *Othello* violates the impression of a soft, unwarlike culture.

¹¹The Elizabethan "Fynes Moryson believe[d] the Venetians to be cowardly vis-à-vis the Turks: 'And indeed the Gentlemen of Venice are trayned upp in pleasure and wantonnes, which must needs abase and effeminate their myndes.' [Jean] Bodin remarked that the Venetians were 'better citizens than warriors'" (McPherson 35).

without more help" (5.1.44-45).¹¹ Consistent with this impression of Venetian timorousness is Gratiano's later behavior. When near play's end Othello, locked within his bedchamber, tells his guard Gratiano, "Uncle, I must come forth," the Venetian states from the other side of the door, "If you attempt it, it will cost thee dear; / Thou hast no weapon, and perforce must suffer" (4.2.254-56). Seeing Othello unexpectedly wielding a Spanish sword, however, Gratiano fearfully retreats, even though he is armed. Othello's question—"Do you go back dismayed?"—indicates Gratiano's "Venetian" nature.

In an apparent paradox that is really not paradoxical, this likely pusillanimity coexists in Gratiano with a strong sadistic impulse. It is Gratiano who, hearing cross-examined Iago's final resolve to speak no more, exclaims "Torments will ope your lips" (5.2.302). Like his namesake, the Gratiano of *The Merchant of Venice* who during the trial scene calls for Shylock's death by hanging, the Gratiano of *Othello* becomes a voice of Venetian penal cruelty. Lodovico reinforces this sadistic tendency when he promises concerning the "slave" Iago, "If there be any cunning cruelty / That can torment him much and hold him long, / It shall be his" (5.2.342-45).¹² While Iago's motives for destroying Othello are multiple, the one that pains him the most involves his conviction that Othello and his wife Emilia are committing adultery. He admits that this thought "Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my innards" (2.1.298). It is the physical pain of this jealousy that Iago converts into silent sadistic rage against Othello. In Othello's case, the visceral pain he feels concerns an unbearable mental anguish over the uncertainty of Desdemona's honesty. Telling Iago that he thinks Desdemona is "honest and think she is not" (3.3.400), Othello concludes, "If there be cords, or knives, / Poison, or fire, or suffocating

¹²Psychologists have documented a characterological phenomenon wherein sadistic torture becomes a compensation for the loss of self esteem and sense of powerlessness accompanying habitual cowardice.

streams, / I'll not endure it" (3.3.404-6). The implied referent of "it" in this utterance is a tortured state of mind. In the episode wherein Othello eavesdrops on Iago's contrived conversation with Cassio, a scene wherein he sees Bianca bring Cassio his sacred handkerchief, the Moor determines that Desdemona is a whore and converts his mental anguish into the relief of resolving to kill his wife.

The most condensed, graphic version of this Venetian paradigm of conversion occurs in *Othello* in act IV when the Moor, driven near madness by the conviction of Desdemona's infidelity, learns from Lodovico that the Venetian senate has ordered him to depute Cassio Governor of Cyprus and to return to Venice. "Fire and brimstone!" Othello exclaims, reading that the imagined cuckold will replace him:

DESDEMONA: My lord?

OTHELLO: Are you wise?

DESDEMONA: What, is he angry?

LODOVICO: Maybe the letter moved him;

For, as I think, they do command him home,

Deputing Cassio in his government.

DESDEMONA: By my troth, I am glad on't.

OTHELLO: Indeed?

DESDEMONA: My lord?

OTHELLO: I am glad to see you mad.

DESDEMONA: Why, sweet Othello—

OTHELLO: [*striking her*] Devil! (4.1.233-43)

Othello's remark, "I am glad to see you mad," amounts to a sarcastic claim: "I am glad to see that you are insane enough to rejoice in Cassio's promotion" (*The Complete Works of Shakespeare* 1153n). In its function, the above-quoted dialogue corresponds to the conversation of Tubal and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* concerning Jessica's wasting of Shylock's wealth. Othello's sudden, intense pain of learning of a humiliating loss of power instantaneously converts to physical violence against the scapegoat Desdemona. Likewise, the immediate catalyst of Desdemona's death is her weeping for Cassio, who she believes

is dead. Believing that she weeps for a lost lover rather than for a betrayed friend, Othello channels his pain into her strangulation:

OTHELLO: Out, strumpet! Weep'st thou for him to my face?

DESDEMONA: O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!

OTHELLO: Down, strumpet! (5.2.81-83)

In these cases, those of striking Desdemona and of strangling her, Shakespeare creates the impression that unbearable pain triggers violence that most likely would not have occurred at that moment without the trigger of unexpected anguish.

Several aspects of the early modern image of Venice gave Elizabethans a way of accounting for a paradigm involving sadism. In "Retaliation as an Italian Vice in English Renaissance Drama," Michele Marrapodi has documented the English stereotype of Italians as temperamentally prone to vengeance for perceived injuries, particularly to the sadistic "decorum" of their bloody retaliation. Ferdinand, for example, in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (c. 1613) sadistically mocks the supposed incorporation of man and wife in his sister's marriage by in the dark giving her a severed dead man's hand (her husband's?) bearing a ring. As an Italian city, Venice, in English opinion, could not escape this stereotyping. Moreover, J. R. Mulryne has claimed that the "unreasoning aggression against outsiders" seen in the Venice of *The Merchant* derives from Shakespeare's understanding of the decline and fracturing of a once powerful, cohesive city-state during the latter half of the sixteenth century (88-93). In Mulryne's view, Shakespeare represents sadism as characters' compensatory outlet for their anxiety over cultural

¹³Given these assumptions, one could interpret in my argument's terms Salerio's remark that, were he a merchant such as Antonio, he could not go to church "[a]nd see the holy edifice of stone" and refrain from thinking "straight of dangerous rocks / Which, touching but my gentle vessel's side, / Would scatter all her spices on the stream, / Enrobe the roaring waters with my silks" (1.1.29-34). Salerio's fanciful image of puncturing a vessel's side, causing bleeding (auditors usually imagine the silks as red), betrays a sadistic impulse of large proportions; for it recollects the Roman soldier lancing the crucified Christ's side.

break up and consequent lapses of morale.¹³ Robert C. Davis reveals Venetians' early modern reputation for a singular kind of physical aggression in his study of the bizarre Venetian "festive" custom of pitched battles between hundreds and even thousands of artisans for the city's bridges ("*battaglie sui ponte*").¹⁴ These notorious, staged *guerre dei pugni* between the Castellani and Nicolotti factions and their allies drew thousands of middle- and upper-class spectators and resulted in many crippling injuries and even deaths—all for personal and clan honor.

Nevertheless, the most plausible explanation for Shakespeare's identification of Venice with sadism derives ironically from the city's fame for the rigorous and even-handed administration of justice (Mullini 161-165; McClure 1:89-90). Applied impartially to all social classes as well as to citizen and foreigner alike, Venetian social justice was also characterized as "arbitrary, secret, and cruel" (Parker 197-198). Sir Henry Wotton, the English ambassador to Venice, "frequently used his influence to mitigate the severity of Venetian law" (Perkinson 15). In Lewis Lewkenor's *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* (1599), the English translation of Gasparo Contarini's *De Magistratibus et Republica Venetorum* (1524), Shakespeare's contemporaries could read that "[a]lwaies the Aducators [in Venetian courts] doe propoude that punishment which to that sorte of offence doth seeme most sharpe and grievous, their office and duty being more to incline to seuerity than to mercie" (Perkinson 17).

¹⁴The eagerness with which Venetian patricians dropped their business and ran to watch—and even participate in—the violent war of the fists (Davis 43-46) amounts to a historical analogue to Shakespeare's suggestion that an upper-class Venetian sadistic impulse coexists with, in fact may compensate for, a pusillanimity and generally inactive life-style. Davis implies that honor and reputation won in the *guerre dei pugni* compensated for an artisan life in which honor could not be won at work or in military service (82, 86-87). Lacking a permanent military garrison, Renaissance Venice had only a kind of loose workers' militia made up of Arsenal shipbuilders that was useless in controlling the contagious violence of the *pugni* because these artisans (as Castellani) were a party to the war of the fists (Davis 147).

Jonson in *Volpone* registers the severe Venetian “sorting” of punishment to offence when the avocatori sentencing Volpone, noting that his wealth was gotten by “feigning lame, gout, palsy, and such diseases,” condemn him “to lie in prison, cramped with irons, / Til thou be’st sick and lame indeed” (5.7.121-24). Richard Wilson has provided a commentary on the sadism of the punishments at the end of *Volpone*, which include Corvino’s being “paraded around Venice in an ass’s cap and set in the stocks, to have his ‘eyes beat out with stinking fish, / Bruised fruit and rotten eggs’ (v, vii, 135-41)” (145). Shakespeare appears aware of the harsh Venetian “sorting” of punishment to offence when he has the Venetian Iago argue that Desdemona’s self-appointed judge, Othello, not poison his wife but instead strangle her in bed, “even the bed she hath contaminated” (4.1.207).

The severity of “decorous” Venetian punishments often seemed excessive, even by early modern English standards. David McPherson notes that in Renaissance Venice

[s]wearing was sometimes punished in laymen by the loss of hand, tongue, or eye. In 1609 the Scottish traveler Lithgow watched a friar burnt alive for lechery. [The Englishman Fynes] Moryson saw two young sons of senators have their hands cut off at one of the sites of their mischief, their tongues cut out at the site of their singing of blasphemous songs, and finally their heads chopped off by a sort of guillotine at the Piazza. (37)¹⁵

This last gruesome example may represent the kind of “impartial” severity that Wotten attempted to mitigate. One might object that Elizabethan and Jacobean justice was every bit as cruel and bloody as the awful spectacle that Moryson witnessed. But one could respond by saying that no record in England exists of children being drawn and quartered for singing blasphemous songs or committing similar “crimes.” Wotton’s attempts at mitigation suggest that Englishmen at times found Venetian justice overly sadistic. Shakespeare’s awareness of Venice’s repu-

¹⁵For other examples of gruesome punishments for crimes committed in Venice, see Chambers and Pullan 88-90, 91-93, 95-97.

tation for this kind of sadism could have provided a rationale for locating in this city a dynamic involving sadism and persecution. Sometimes literary critics argue that Venice in Shakespeare's plays is simply a stand-in for London (Salingar 173; D'Amico 6, 9-11, 38, 44, 59; Gillies 66, 130, 135). Yet a larger number claim that Shakespeare in two plays constructs Venice in ways that ensure that the city is never confused with Renaissance London (Nuttall 120-121, 128-130, 140-141; Bruster 33-35; Hendricks 194-195). One difference in this respect involves the frequency of the operation of a sadistic paradigm of mind.

Desdemona's father Brabantio participates in the Venetian paradigm, and he does so in a way that is highly instructive of alternative dynamics. Shakespeare equates Brabantio with Shylock early in the play when Iago cries out, "Awake! What ho, Brabantio! Thieves, thieves, thieves! / Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags! / Thieves, thieves!" (1.1.81-82). Like Shylock, Brabantio appears a miser, commodifying his beautiful daughter and locking her up in his house with his bags of gold. While Brabantio is not a miser, this reference to his "bags" seems designed solely to associate Brabantio with Shylock and Desdemona with Jessica (Fiedler 140). Like Shylock, Brabantio keeps his daughter under lock and key. His exclamation—"O heaven! How got she out?" (1.1.173)—uttered upon his discovery of her flight, implies that she is a virtual prisoner at night in the patriarchal house. Even as the father Shylock stereotypes Christians including Jessica's Lorenzo, Brabantio coarsely stereotypes the alien "husband" of his fled daughter as a black magician, practicing the charms of a black race (1.2.63-82). Like Shylock, Brabantio begins participating in the Venetian paradigm when he visits his pain upon his child. His visitation is not homicidal, milder than Shylock's on Jessica: it consists of his coldly saying in her hearing that he had rather adopt a child than beget one (1.3.194), that he is glad he has no other child (for Desdemona's elopement would teach him the tyranny of hanging clogs on him or her) (1.3.198-201), and that he will not have

Desdemona home when the Duke suggests she lodge there after Othello's departure for Cyprus (1.3.239-43). Brabantio's visitation is milder than Shylock's perhaps because Desdemona's father does not transfer all his pain into the sadistic persecution of his daughter. Near the play's end, Gratiano exclaims,

Poor Desdemon! I am glad thy father's dead.
 Thy match was mortal to him, and pure grief
 Shore his old thread in twain. (5.2.211-13)

Attentive playgoers conclude that the-not-fully-transferred pain of loss kills Brabantio. This of course is not to argue that he should have fully translated it onto Desdemona, but to suggest that the alternative to following through with the Venetian paradigm can be lethal and that, within the patriarchy of Venice, Brabantio should, strangely enough, perhaps be qualifiedly commended for manfully swallowing part of his pain and not pouring it all upon a scapegoat.

Much more so than in *The Merchant of Venice*, stereotyping enables in *Othello* the sadistic transference of inner pain to another by making a scapegoat of that person. Thus Iago makes Othello a beast in Brabantio's imagination and a devil in Roderigo's by stereotyping the Moor as such. Likewise, he stereotypes Desdemona for Roderigo as a "supersubtle Venetian" (1.3.358-59), a characterization that quickly becomes whorish for Othello when Iago tells him that Venetian wives "let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience / Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown" (3.3.216-18). Iago thus provides an image Othello needs to rationalize the pain he sadistically inflicts upon Desdemona. In his language, she consistently becomes the Whore of Venice, a European stereotype that Shakespeare incidentally discredits not only in Desdemona but also in the prostitute Bianca's genuine love for Cassio (3.4.170-204, 4.1.95-97, 5.1.124-25). Admitting to himself that Othello is "of a free and open nature" (1.3.400), "a constant, loving, noble nature" (2.1.290), and that

Desdemona is of a “free. . . kind. . . blessed. . . disposition” (2.3.314), Iago reveals that he knows his stereotypes of Othello and Desdemona are false. And yet so disturbed is Iago’s mind that he operates as though they were true (and at times he may actually think they are true). Iago trades in racist, demeaning stereotypes of Othello and his wife because he knows that Venetians such as Brabantio and Roderigo subscribe to racist, patriarchal stereotypes. If Desdemona becomes a “subtle whore” (4.2.22), “that cunning whore of Venice / That married with Othello” (4.2.93-94),¹⁶ Emilia in Othello’s imagination becomes a stereotypic “simple bawd” (4.2.21), the “mistress” who “[1]eave[s] procreants alone and shut[s] the door” (4.2.29-30). Thus Othello rationalizes Desdemona’s murder by crying out as he strangles her, “Out, strumpet!” (5.2.81) and “Down, strumpet!” (5.2.83). When Desdemona is not the whore of Venice in Othello’s imagination, she is a “Devil!” (4.1.243), the stereotypic name Othello gives her justifying in his opinion his slapping her before Lodovico. Ironically, he stereotypes her in this case exactly as Iago has stereotyped him, as though he were aware of his application of this racist label to him and were gaining relief by transferring it to Desdemona and abusing her (a scapegoating perhaps unfortunately encouraged in his dis-

¹⁶According to McPherson,

[w]hen Othello bitterly and sarcastically says to Desdemona, “I took you for that cunning whore of Venice” (4.2.89), his words would have struck a chord of recognition for practically every educated person in Western Europe Coryat’s estimate of twenty thousand [prostitutes in Venice] in 1608 is called “fantastic” by Molmenti, but the early sixteenth-century diarist Sanudo, himself a patriotic Venetian, puts the number at 11,654. Cavendish’s servant Fox sets it at eight thousand in 1589. Thus it seems likely that somewhere between five and ten per cent of the entire population was composed of prostitutes—a somewhat astounding proportion, by almost anyone’s standards. (43)

In this vein, see Bate 61-63, 66-67.

traught mind by the presence of the word “demon” within her name).

Iago’s disparagement of Emilia causes her, with poetic justice, to divert inflicted pain back onto the inflicter according to the dynamics of the Venetian paradigm. One could say that the very mechanism Iago employs for revenge and self-promotion detects and destroys him. Bantering with Desdemona on the quay of Cyprus, Iago stereotypes women as “wildcats in [their] kitchens, / Saints in [their] injuries, devils being offended, / Players in [their] huswifery, and huswives in [their] beds” (2.1.112-14). There, he stereotypes his wife Emilia as a shrew (2.1.102-11). Many commentators on *Othello* have noted that Emilia’s angry stereotyping of abusive, adulterous husbands (4.3.89-106) reprises the language and message of Shylock’s famous accusation of menacing Christians beginning “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions . . .” (3.1.55-69). Fewer commentators have noted that, while both speeches end with a similar defense of personal revenge against the abuser, Emilia’s bitter conclusion—“Then let [husbands] use us well, else let them know, / The ills we do, their ills instruct us so” (4.3.105-6)—seems based on first-hand experience of Iago’s mistreatment. Emilia’s eagerness to divulge her husband’s guilt thus illustrates her revenge, her returning ill upon the man who has abused her. She sadistically re-circulates the pain he has given her back on his head, partially satisfying the playgoer’s sense of poetic justice.

Partially, I say. For there is nothing redemptive about this process. Does a way out of the self-destructive Venetian paradigm involving alienation and stereotyping exist? Brabantio’s half-way measure of swallowing some of his pain and inflicting the rest offered no real solution. Othello’s solution to the working of the paradigm is even less satisfactory. Deprived after Desdemona’s death and Iago’s apprehension of a scapegoat outside himself upon which to re-circulate his load of pain, Othello for relief sadistically makes himself that victim. His

public suicide is partly designed to create a Venetian identity that, as an alien, he has yearned for but never been fully given by a racist state:

set you down this;
And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
And smote him, thus. [He stabs himself] (5.2.361-66)

By stereotyping his alien self as a “Turk,” a “dog,” Othello ironically joins those racist Venetians who regard him as an exotic curiosity, not realizing that the Venetian he figuratively rescues in his narrative and in himself suffers from this dark propensity. Othello called the Venetian Gratiano “Uncle” from behind the door that separated them.¹⁷ Sadly, Gratiano is the Venetian who not only inherits Othello’s worldly goods (5.2.376-78), but he also is the citizen who rejects Othello’s final bid for Venetian acceptance. “All that is spoke is marred” (5.2.368), Gratiano coldly says as Othello falls dead to the floor.

Desdemona’s Christian forgiveness of the abuser represents the only positive method for breaking the Venetian paradigm involving revenge. Her response to Emilia’s grim conclusion, “The ills we do, their ills instruct us so,” is the Christian resolve: “Good night, good night. God me such uses send / Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend” (4.3.107-8). Desdemona implies that the behavior she will seek to mend by contemplating the example of others’ bad behavior will not only be her own but others’ as well, potentially that of her abuser Othello (whom she always forgives). Desdemona’s admirable attitude, taken to an extreme, could involve martyrdom. That Desdemona, unlike

¹⁷For M. M. Mahood, Gratiano at the end of *Othello* is “a personification of family loyalty whose tender words over Desdemona, together with his concern for the dying Emilia, reawaken a sense of ordinary family cares and affections. The effect is all the stronger if the actor is the one who played Brabantio in the first act” (36).

Brabantio, *fully* absorbs her pain, refusing to inflict it on another, means that she never stereotypes Othello, or anyone else, for that matter. In this respect she differs from Portia of *The Merchant of Venice*, who says of the black Prince of Morocco, after he has failed to guess the correct casket, “A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go. / Let all of his complexion choose me so” (2.7.78-79). Portia’s touch of racism encourages stereotyping, in which she heavily engages when she caricatures the nationalities of failed English and German suitors (1.2.64-74, 82-97). Portia’s inclination to stereotype others, troubling in the case of Morocco, may partly account for the absence of “Desdemonan” Christian forgiveness of Shylock in the trial scene. If Portia is legalistic, stipulatory, in her forgiveness of part of what Shylock has done and said, the reason may lie in her perception of him as an alien, like Morocco, the “other” who will never be “Venetian.”¹⁸ She and the Venetians in the courtroom, for the time being, may have halted the operation of the Venetian paradigm, by which pained inhabitants of the city of Venice heap pain on others. But the price paid is a broken, despairing Shylock, the alien so benumbed that he will never persecute another to relieve his torment.¹⁹

¹⁸Richard Wiesberg explicates the sadistic cruelty of “Christian” adoption beginning with the trial scene of “Jewish” legalistic thinking and Portia’s oppressive application of it first to Shylock and then, in the last act, to Antonio.

¹⁹The forced aspect of Shylock’s conversion to Christianity especially breaks Shylock. Shapiro notes that “coerced conversions [to Christianity] were virtually unheard of in the various narratives circulating about Jews in sixteenth-century England” (131). As Shapiro phrases the dynamics of this forced conversion, a sadistic element in it becomes apparent.

Antonio’s consummate revenge upon his adversary . . . is to ask of the court a punishment that precisely reverses what Shylock had in mind for him. When Antonio demands that Shylock “presently become a Christian” . . . the “christ’ning” that Shylock is to receive will metaphorically uncircumcise him. The new covenant has superseded the old, as the sacrament of baptism, which had replaced circumcision, turns Jew into Christian. (130)

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MAURICE HUNT is Professor of English and Chair of the Department at Baylor University. He is currently editing the MLA New Shakespeare Variorum edition of *Cymbeline* and completing a book titled *Shakespeare's Religious Allusiveness: Its Play and Tolerance*. He has articles forthcoming on *Cymbeline* in *Studies in Philology* and on *The Winter's Tale* in *Studies in English Literature*.

A look at the flaws in Shakespeare's comedy, including the heartless Christian characters and the folly of the trial scene. Barring the Merchant himself, a merely static figure, and Shylock, who is meant to be cruel, every one of the Venetian dramatis personae is either a 'waster' or a 'rotter' or both, and cold-hearted at that. There is no need to expend ink upon such parasites as surround Antonio - upon Salarino and Salanio. William Shakespeare wasn't above using stereotypes in his plays. He was, after all, writing popular stories that the audience of the time could relate to. And, when the audience saw a sniveling, conniving moneylender plotting a hideous revenge against the main character, the Elizabethan audience knew exactly that this character was the villain. After all, he fit the profile of that era's most stereotypical nemesis, the 'Jew'. Antisemitism is not a trait often associated with a Shakespearean play. However, one can't escape it in *The Merchant of Venice*. To Shakespeare's credit, Shylock was a dyn Read *The Merchant of Venice* original text by Shakespeare. The *The Merchant of Venice* text language is slightly different to today's modern English, so understanding. The language used in Shakespeare's day is slightly different to today's modern English, which is reflected in the text. Our article on Shakespeare & early modern English, or our Shakespeare dictionary, will help you to understand the language as you read through *The Merchant of Venice* original text. Another thing to bear in mind as you read *The Merchant of Venice* text are Shakespeare's stage directions, which are italicised. Stage directions are instructions and direction to the actors, and not spoken lines.