

# ○ ECONOMIES OF SACRIFICE IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

## GOD, THE GIFT AND SHAKESPEARE

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In this paper, I read Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in relation to the Kierkegaardian influenced thoughts Derrida developed in the *The Gift of Death*. I trace the religiously mediated economies of debt and sacrifice through the play. Who sacrifices, and to what end, I find, is a highly contentious and pressing question for both critical theory of religion and the study of Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup>

Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about' (Genesis 22. 2, NIV).

'O father Abram, what these Christians are, / whose own hard dealings teaches them / suspect the thoughts of others!' (*The Merchant of Venice*, act 1, scene 3).

### INTRODUCTION

Western philosophical and theological thought has long been preoccupied with what it means to give. As early as the first century CE, Roman philosopher Seneca (1972) in *De Beneficiis* wrestles with the ethics of giving and receiving, suggesting that 'almost nothing [...] is more disgraceful than the fact that we do not know how either to give or to receive benefits' (3). Because giving draws together obligation and self-denial with economics, the Stoic Seneca felt determining the ethical way to give was an important task. His essay suggests that one should give for its own sake, 'since Virtue neither invites by the prospect of gain, nor deters by the prospect of loss' (205). Nevertheless, one should not give foolishly without hope of return on investment because that would be to give without consideration of the bond and mutual benefit among friends which gifts should enable.<sup>2</sup> Roughly contemporaneously to Seneca, giving also became a major pre-occupation in what Daniel Boyarin (1999) terms the 'single circulatory system' (9) of Judaism and Christianity, 'within which discursive elements could move from non-Christian Jews and back again, developing as they moved around the system' (10). This circulation of meaning profoundly changed the philosophy of the gift from the pagan ethics of giving between humans (almost always men) into a relationship between self, Other *and* God, most especially in the specific form of giving incarnated in the term 'sacrifice'.

More recently, the gift has been a figure of discussion amongst philosophers in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Towards the end of his life, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida turned from earlier pre-occupations of the linguistic to examine the question of the gift. Beginning with the reading of Baudelaire's short story 'Counterfeit Money' in *Given Time* (1991), the urgent refiguring of Søren Kierkegaard in *The Gift of Death* (1994), and the long-awaited encounter with Marxism in *Spectres of Marx* (1994b) (with its notorious notion of the 'messianic'), these works meditate on the nature of the gift and its relationship to capitalism, time and the religious. In what is sometimes called his 'religious turn,' Derrida mapped out a trajectory that renewed the critical viability of deconstruction for literary theory in general, and the study of

religion in particular. It is clear from these three books that the domains of the religious and capital are inextricably linked for Derrida.

This late turn of Derrida's has a particular pertinence for Shakespearean studies, providing a rich, theologically informed framework through which to sift through the meanings of texts which are themselves thoroughly interested in the religious. Famously, Derrida framed *Spectres of Marx* through a line taken from *Hamlet* ('the time is out of joint'), finding in it a potent metaphor for the messianic time for the social transformations of Marxism. It is his work on the gift in *Given Time* and *The Gift of Death* that I think are most relevant in discussing *The Merchant of Venice* – a text which too ties together religion, economics and sacrifice in an intricate fashion. This is not to gloss Shakespeare as a proto Kierkegaardian or Derridean – let alone to judge *The Merchant of Venice* on that score (that would be theoretical solipsism of the worst kind) – but rather to show that *The Merchant of Venice* lets loose a series of elements which may profoundly illuminate contemporary theoretical discussions on the gift, and vice versa, that Derrida and Kierkegaard in particular may illuminate Shakespeare's still contemporary play.

In reading Shakespeare next to and through Derrida, hopefully I will show unexpected resonances between some problematics of contemporary critical theory and *The Merchant of Venice*, a surprising proximity of Shakespeare's text to the philosophically inclined 'religion without religion' of deconstructionists such as Derrida, John D. Caputo and Jean-Luc Marion. I shall interrogate the religious and ethical economies in *The Merchant of Venice*, remaining attentive to what Jean-François Lyotard calls 'the white space' (Lyotard, 1999, 13) of the hyphen in these Judeo-Christian ethical questions (in a text that is at the very least problematic in its alliance of Judaism, usury and violence, and that has had a notorious role in fuelling anti-Semitic sentiment).<sup>3</sup> In its acutely modern movements of money, racialised bodies and avowals of faith, fidelity and sacrifice, it is arguable that *The Merchant of Venice* may be considered an important literary lens through which to view the philosophical and theological discussions of the gift and sacrifice.

## DERRIDA, KIERKEGAARD AND ABRAHAM

Whilst the gift has long been a matter for philosophical and theological debate, more recently Derrida's discussion of the gift and sacrifice has brought renewed attention to Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's (1985) writing on the subject, in particular, the pseudonymously authored *Fear and Trembling*. Writing under the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard discusses in *Fear and Trembling* the Biblical passage of Genesis 22 in great detail. In order to understand Kierkegaard, and indeed the subsequent theoretical discussion by writers such as Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, we must first recap the story at the heart of *Fear and Trembling*.

In Genesis 22, God commands Abraham to take his only 'legitimate' son Isaac<sup>4</sup> to Mount Moriah and burn him alive as a sacrifice. Abraham obeys, traveling for three days with the boy to the mountain, telling neither Isaac nor his wife Sarah of this terrible duty conferred upon him by his God. Indeed, as they are cutting up the wood, when Isaac asks him where the lamb is for the sacrifice, Abraham tells him 'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son' (Genesis 22: 8), an ambivalent response that Derrida will later devote considerable attention to. Abraham then ties Isaac to the altar and prepares to kill him, but at the last second, God ultimately suspends his commandment, telling Abraham to untie the child and offer instead a ram as substitute for this sacrifice. 'Do not lay a hand on the boy,' he said. 'Do not do anything to

him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son' (Genesis 22: 12). Whilst earlier in Genesis 4 God had shown a preference for animal sacrifice over plant, here a new kind of sacrifice emerges – a primeval substitution in which it is clear that the animal is being sacrificed in the place of a human, a move that sets the tone for much religious discourse onwards. Abraham's reward for his fidelity to God's commandment is to be blessed with 'descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore' (Genesis 22: 17), the founding act of the Jewish people. As Gil Anidjar (2003) astutely notes, 'with the Abrahamic [...] what is to be read is the *condition* of a certain religion, of a certain politics, the condition of the theologico-political and of a history 'as such,' of autobiography, and of literature' (p. 41).

Kierkegaard finds in this story an ongoing scandal at the beginning of the Bible. Rather than ignore the connotations of this potentially embarrassing story of a homicidal God demanding his follower sacrifice his child, Kierkegaard finds in it a model for moral conduct, an idealised version of faith embodied in Abraham's relation to God. On the basis of Genesis 22, Kierkegaard draws up a schema of ethical and religious categories through which to read Abraham's actions. For him, the ethical is universal, 'and as the universal it applies to everyone' (1956, 83), so that when the individual asserts their own particularity against the universal it is a sin. Under this schema, Abraham, who is preparing to kill Isaac, is ethically a murderer, whether or not God suspends the commandment or not. He's asserting his particular right to murder over the universal right to existence. Kierkegaard admits that this, by any moral standard, is a sin. Kierkegaard equates the universal ethical with the pagan morality of tragic heroes like Oedipus and Agamemnon (p. 87), but it is not until he moves to the category of the religious that we find a stark contrast to the ethics of giving in pagan writers like Seneca.

Kierkegaard argues that we have a 'need for a new category for understanding Abraham' (1956, 88) -pagan ethics, laudable as they are, are not helpful in reading Genesis 22. Instead, he makes a clearcut distinction between the ethical and the religious, and it is to the latter he argues Abraham's actions fall. The counter-intuitive position that Kierkegaard takes is that the individual of faith makes a religious *suspension* of the universal ethical law, and instead stands 'as the particular [...] in an absolute relation to the absolute' (1985, 85); that is to say, God.<sup>5</sup> So, while both assert the individual's particularity, the difference between sinning against the universal ethical and the religious suspension is that the knight of faith stands in a one on one relationship to God, and is thus bound to not only obey his commandments, but to not communicate them (for to do so is to break the unmediated nature of the absolute relation). For Kierkegaard, faith is a secret that cannot be communicated to the social, and it is this aspect that Derrida draws particular attention to in *The Gift of Death*.

So it strikes me that Kierkegaard is on the one hand making a characteristically Protestant move in privileging interiority, the individual believer's relationship with God, over the external social universal. At the same time, Derrida is quite right in calling this a 'still Jewish experience of a secret, hidden, separate, absent or mysterious God, the one who decides, without revealing his reasons, to demand of Abraham that most cruel, impossible and untenable gesture [of sacrificing Isaac]' (Derrida, 1994a, 58). Rather than meditate on, say, the sacrifice of Christ, Kierkegaard examines a Jewish story through a philosophical lens that places notions of sacrifice outside the eschatological Christian narrative of redemption. The fact that God ultimately suspends

his own commandment and offers a substitute in the form of a lamb is profoundly irrelevant to Kierkegaard, because his focus is on the movement of Abraham from the ethical to the religious rather than a passage towards redemption (which is more easily placed within, if not exclusively, a broadly Christian thematic).<sup>6</sup>

Kierkegaard frames the religious as an absolute fidelity to the absolute, mediated through sacrifice. Now, obviously the sacrifice of one's child to God is horrific beyond belief, and Isaac was Abraham's only 'legitimate' son with his wife Sarah, which in a patriarchal world is the most precious of things. Indeed, born to Sarah after she had gone through menopause, Isaac is himself a gift from God, which Abraham is now being commanded – forced – to sacrifice. So it is a rare and unlikely form of patrimony that is at risk with the sacrifice of Isaac, for it would require another miracle for Sarah to conceive. It makes *all* the difference then that Isaac is Abraham's only 'legitimate' son with Sarah. To lose Isaac is to lose the familial line; the story would lose its symbolic dimensions if it was Abraham's 'illegitimate' son Ishmael who was being sacrificed. As Derrida states:

God decides to give back, to give back life, to give back the beloved son, once he is assured that a gift outside of any economy, the gift of death – and of the death of that which is priceless – has been accomplished without any hope of exchange, reward, circulation, or communication (1994, 96).

If it is patrimony which is risked, it is patrimony which constitutes Abraham's reward for his fidelity to God. By abandoning economy, Abraham is ultimately rewarded with descendants beyond counting. Yet this is *not* an investment, Abraham's reward is unable to be anticipated, calculated ahead of time. As Derrida points out, it is only when calculation has been suspended that God will stop the sacrifice to reward Abraham in the same patrilineal terms.

Under such a circumstance, then, it would be the easiest thing in the world for Abraham to disobey God and not sacrifice Isaac, out of love for his son. This would of course be the ethical thing to do as Kierkegaard describes it. Indeed, Kierkegaard (1956) describes the ethical as a kind of 'temptation' for the knight of faith (89). Yet love is the pre-condition for sacrifice, it is that (and faith) that separates the sacrifice from murder.<sup>7</sup> Abraham chooses to go through with the sacrifice of his beloved son, to suspend calculation, and it is *that* which for Kierkegaard constitutes the religious suspension of the ethical.

Interestingly for our speculations regarding sacrifice and economy, Kierkegaard explicitly opposes what he calls 'the knight of faith' (of whom Abraham provides the exemplary example) to the calculation of capitalism. He says that if the knight cannot concentrate the entirety of his life on one single wish, he will never 'make the movement [of the religious suspension of law, instead], he will act prudently in life like these capitalists who invest their capital in every kind of necessity' (1956, 72). So the knight of faith is imprudent, outside of the laws of rationality and capitalism. Indeed, Kierkegaard argues that at the moment of sacrifice, Abraham 'believed on the strength of the absurd, for all human calculation had long since been suspended' (65). Here, one can make a Derridean pun on the meanings of calculation – which encompass both a commonsensical scientific (calculating possible outcomes of an event), and the monetary (calculating bank balances, exchange rates, interest etc.). And arguably the incommunicability of this

suggests that the religious sacrifice has exited the social world of capital, which is allied with the ethical and the universal.

Now, if Kierkegaard's thoughts on sacrifice and the economy draw out a basic schema through which to categorise the ethical and religious, Jacques Derrida's work on the gift fleshes out the discussion considerably. In *Given Time*, Derrida (1992) discusses the impossibility of the gift, arguing that for a gift to be truly a gift, it must not appear as an object in the economy of exchange. If a gift appears *as* a gift, it immediately enters its recipient into a cycle of debt and repayment – a gift must either be returned in kind, or one remains in the giver's debt. Derrida questions 'how is one to speak reasonably [...] of a gift that could not be what it was except on the condition of not being what it was?' (35)

In various ways, then, Derrida draws our attention to the linguistic economies of sacrifice. Any gift must not appear to be a gift, must not appear to be a sacrifice, for that is the usual state of economic exchange. *Given Time* (1992) makes clear that the very method of circulation is cut through with anxieties about the counterfeit, the simulacrum. Paradoxically too, counterfeit money for Derrida can only be what it is by virtue of appearing to be what it is not – real money, 'good and true money' (59). 'The enigma of the simulacrum should orient us towards the triple and indissociable question of the *gift*, of *forgiveness*, and of the *excuse*. And to question whether a gift can or *ought* to *secure itself* against counterfeit money' (ibid.). But dissimulation is a risk that must be taken by any potential gift giver: '[o]ught they not – but beyond duty and debt – *deprive themselves* of any security against the counterfeit, or any mistrust regarding counterfeit money, so as to preserve the chance of being what they *ought to be*, but ought to be beyond duty and debt?' (70). Yet, if on one level the gift appears to be outside the sphere of economic circulation, Derrida suggests that it is 'aneconomic' (7), that it is not completely foreign to the circle of economy, but that it 'must *keep* a relation of foreignness' (ibid.).

And thus Derrida argues, in his other meditation on the subject in *The Gift of Death* (1994), that the only true gift is death itself, which is un-returnable. Death exits (or appears to) the economic in all its anxieties about the counterfeit, the true, the authentic. For while death is certainly not foreign to capital (86), it maintains a relation of foreignness. Like Kierkegaard, Derrida finds in Genesis 22 a story of fidelity, of silence, of sacrifice – Abraham's 'gift of death' as he so evocatively terms it. If the economic is fraught with the danger of the simulacrum, a gift must instead be given in silence. Derrida underlines the secret nature of Abraham's actions and their incommunicability to the social. To speak is to be social, to enter the economic sphere. Again, this provides a stark contrast to Seneca (1972), who suggests that silence 'spoils' a gift – 'how much better to add kindly words to kindly actions, and grace the gifts you bestow with humane and generous speech!' (55)

But though he follows Kierkegaard's argument for some distance, what separates Derrida from Kierkegaard is his recognition that the infinite alterity of God differs little in the end from the infinite alterity of any other Other. Derrida (1994a) suggests that 'everyone else [...] is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessibility, solitary, transcendent' (78). Therefore, 'what can be said about Abraham's relation to God can be said about my relation without relation to every one (one) as every (bit) other' (ibid.). In typical fashion, Derrida collapses the distinction between ethical and religious, opening the religious up to a generalised responsibility, a universal singularity.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Derrida goes so far as to suggest that every fidelity to an Other is an implicit be-

trayal of every other Other (70). And yet, he argues that it is from this impossibility that ethical conduct must nevertheless begin.

## WHO SACRIFICES?

Writing in *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard (1987) confesses that his ‘soul always turns back to the Old Testament and Shakespeare’ (28). Though both *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* were both published in 1843, given the capricious nature of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authorship, it is difficult to reconcile the two authorial personas – the personas of *Either/Or*’s editor Victor Eremita, and its various ‘writers’ are most assuredly *not* the same as Johannes de Silentio. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile speculating what kinds of thematic resonances draws Kierkegaard’s attention to the two (or perhaps together). If we read *The Merchant of Venice* through the Kierkegaardian/Derridean discussion, a number of important critical questions arise – does Shylock, like Abraham, remain ethically a murderer, despite Portia’s own suspension of the contract law at the end of the play? Or is he, as Ken Jackson (2007) suggests, a Kierkegaardian knight of faith of the religious, and how does that differ from the ethical? Where might we situate the offer by Antonio to Bassanio in the pound of flesh wager?

‘Shylock,’ Gil Anidjar (2003) notes, ‘is a theological enemy [...] who hates and is hated on the explicit basis of his religion’ (108), but he equally hates and is hated for monetary reasons. Given the centrality of economics to *The Merchant of Venice*, it should be equally explicitly clear that theological and capitalist notions are bound up together. When it comes to sacrifice in *The Merchant of Venice*, everything pivots around the bond plot, which is unambiguously framed in religious terms. Shylock introduces the idea of interest through a speech about the Biblical stories of Jacob and Laban that frames wealth through the patrilineal kinship system that he himself is using in borrowing the three thousand dollars from Tubal, a wealthy Jew of his kinship. Interest is for Jewish-Christian transactions, and it is this that Antonio is thwarting in lending without interest, the explicit reason that Shylock gives for hating Antonio. So, if as René Girard (1978) argues, ‘the truth of the play is revenge and retribution’ (107), it’s clear that revenge is mediated through the linked notions of religious obligation, kinship, and capital. Indeed the pound of flesh sacrifice itself, as James Shapiro (1996) persuasively argues, is informed by 16<sup>th</sup> century English ideas of Jews ritually circumcising and then murdering Christians (10).

So, whilst it is clear that Shylock is focusing the entirety of his life upon one wish (as Kierkegaard suggests), is he holding to the bond out of an unconditional response to the infinite? Shylock does, in his repeated denials for mercy, seem to be acting out of an excessive fidelity to the Law – an absolute relationship between himself and the legal contract (which is of course his undoing, where Portia out-literalises him in the trial scene). But his motivations are hardly in the form of an uncommunicated relation to the absolute. Far from being secret, they are instead multiple and highly overdetermined, unable to be pinned down to one cause. Further, the bond comes not in response to a call from the divine, but is, of course, at his own instigation.

Rather than reading the Abraham gift of death across the entirety of *The Merchant of Venice*, Ken Jackson (2007) has recently argued in a provocative article that we may find it in a single moment of the play. Jackson turns to the abrupt about-face of the trial scene, in which Portia suddenly urges Shylock to kill Antonio. ‘Why doth the Jew pause?’ she asks (act 4, scene 1). As Jackson (2007) says:

In other words, Shylock suddenly and subtly finds himself in something more like the actual position of Abraham in Genesis 22 – called to give death though it will cost him everything – rather than the position he believe himself to be in: someone with the law on his side, an Abraham with a license to murder – not a son – but a hated enemy (77).

And yet, despite the pressure of the Law to kill, Shylock pauses, ever so slightly. Shylock's pause, Jackson argues, is an ambivalent moment, a moment of mercy, grace, of the Abrahamic gift.

Whilst this is undoubtedly a compelling and imaginative reading of the play, Jackson's reading is nevertheless incomplete. The reading of alterity is undoubtedly persuasive, yet elides the fact that the Kierkegaardian gift of death is conditional on *love*. Abraham loves his son Isaac, and it is that which prevents his actions from being truly monstrous. The loved one that Shylock would lose if he obeyed the order to kill is himself. The calculation of Shylock's, even if surprised by this turn, is not ruptured. Instead, far from being outside calculation it is arguable that that this is a moment of *pure* calculation – to live or to die, to exchange his life for the ability to put his enemy to death. His hesitation is therefore writ ambivalently between the mercy that Jackson rightly perceives and the sheer will to live.

What of Antonio, then? Is Antonio a knight of faith? When he agrees to the bond with Shylock, he is in effect agreeing to his own death, but he initially appears unconcerned about the risks of the bond and it takes the loss of his ships to realise the implications of the bet. As Jackson (2007) states, 'one could say that Antonio only truly and horrifically realises the nature of true or absolute giving when his ships are so suddenly and unexpected lost' (70). It is doubtful a pound of flesh could have been removed in the period and the patient still survive, without dying of blood loss, infection and so on.<sup>9</sup> So does Antonio's agreement to the pound of flesh contract constitute a movement from the given time of capitalism to the realm of Kierkegaardian religious sacrifice? Or does it remain trapped within the economy of exchange?

At the very least, it is clear that Antonio is risking his life, out of love for Bassanio, and a sense of responsibility for his well-being. His response to Bassanio's need appears unconditional. He says: 'My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions (act 1, scene 1). In doing so, it is arguable that there is a rather profound version of Levinasian ethics at work here, since for Levinas (1998), what is originary is responsibility to the Other – the unconditional ethical response to the vulnerability of the Other (for instance in his notion of 'the face').<sup>10</sup> The ethical response to the Other, as Levinas puts it, is 'a responsibility without concern for reciprocity' (xv). As Derrida (1994a) argues, this 'institutes responsibility as a putting-oneself-to-death or offering-one's-death, that is, one's life, in the ethical dimension of sacrifice' (48). Antonio's actions then, appear to be pagan in the sense that Kierkegaard describes it.

So Antonio's sacrifice is, in this sense, about the responsibility inherent in the universal ethic, and rather than putting what is precious to oneself to death, one is putting oneself. So this differs wildly from Kierkegaard's privileging of singularity in the form of the religious sacrifice. Indeed Derrida for his part reminds us that distinctions between ethics and religion are arbitrary, that ethics requires respect for absolute singularity, that there is little difference between the infinite alterity of God and any human (1994, 84).

So the real question, then, hinges on not so much whether Antonio's potential sacrifice appears as a gift to Bassanio (because it clearly does, since Bassanio is aware that Antonio is doing him a favour), but whether it is returnable as an object in exchange. In a literal sense, it would be unreturnable if removed, since Bassanio cannot give Antonio his own flesh back, though he offers to take his place in Act 4. Antonio rejects the offer with a speech that recalls the Abrahamic sacrifice, calling himself a 'wether' (that is, a sterile ram). It is clear that Shylock would never accept such a substitution, out of vengeance, or fidelity to the bond, depending on your reading – though it is equally clear that Antonio appears to, in some form, desire his own death. In short, the only way Bassanio can return the gift is to cancel it out, which he is unable to do even when he becomes wealthy – Shylock emphatically denies that his money is a substitute for the pound of flesh, thus blocking the traffic of capital for flesh. However, Portia's own suspension of the law cancels out Antonio's gift – though in the end, it puts Bassanio and Antonio in *her* debt. If he appears to flirt with the Abrahamic, Antonio still remains within the Heideggerian being-towards-death, a partial saving, a stay of execution aptly summarised by Derrida as an 'economy of sacrifice' (1994, 43).

## SACRIFICING SHYLOCK

But if this seems to at one level recall the archaic gift economy, discussed by the anthropologists like Marcel Mauss, that Derrida references in *Given Time*, at another it is a far more sophisticated, modern economy. For the Venetians, love is equated with speculation. As Girard (1978) points out, 'human flesh and money in Venice are constantly exchanged for one another' (p. 102). Bassanio risks his money, and Antonio's flesh, in his economic speculations, gambling that this will pay off in the form of Portia's love and inheritance. Antonio risks his life by gambling in his dealings, because it is remarkably strange that he would agree to the wager having not insured his ships, a common practice in 15<sup>th</sup> century Venice and 16<sup>th</sup> century England (Shell, 1986, 111). So, if as Kierkegaard argues, Abraham risks his son's life on the strength of his absurd faith in God, Antonio risks his own on the strength of an absurd (if not unconditional) faith in merchant capitalism – he is blasé, but Shylock's summary that 'ships are but boards, sailors but men' (act 1, scene 3) seems far more realistic. This faith in the market cannot be disentangled from Antonio's own faith in Bassanio, or in his unconditional ethical response to his friend. Shylock puts his faith in literal flesh ('the man is, notwithstanding, sufficient,' act 1, Scene 3) and it is this unwillingness to assume the risks of abstract capital (or even accept the rewards after the fact) that leads to his ultimate downfall. His faith in the apparent stability of the law – and in the straightforward transaction of loan and interest – pays off less than the Venetians gambling on a riskier mercantile economy. Indeed, even after all this, the Venetians continue their speculations between flesh and money, with Gratiano's wagering a thousand ducats on whether he and Nerissa or Bassanio and Portia will have children first. In an early modern world with a high childbirth mortality rate, this too is a risk.

Indeed, economics, love and debt are entangled in *The Merchant of Venice*, in a chain from Antonio to Bassanio to Portia, and finally from Portia back around to Antonio. Though this might seem a rather banal observation, what I want to draw attention to is the way that love is an economy of its own, inextricably tied to both capital itself, and to religious and ethical questions of sacrifice. Portia initially appears as an object of capitalist exchange between men – as per Lévi-

Strauss and Gayle Rubin – the casket plot by which she gains her husband and her inheritance passes her from her (dead) father to Bassanio. But if love and capital are for the Christians happily one and the same in *The Merchant of Venice*, for Shylock, this is clearly not the case. Indeed, though numerous writers have suggested that Shylock and Antonio's antagonism is fueled by homoerotic desire – and thus Shylock's pronouncement 'I would have your love' in Act 1 – the circulation of love between the two is blocked, Shylock's Jewishness positions him outside of the homosocial world of the Christian Antonio, Bassanio and Gratiano. If capital can flow between the two, the ethical dimension of sacrifice does not, for neither will assume any true risk for the other.

This positioning of the Jew outside of the social becomes clear when we consider Shylock's response to Jessica's robbing her father and running away with Lorenzo. He exclaims, 'My daughter! Oh, My ducats! Fled with a Christian! Oh, my Christian ducats!' (act 2, scene 8), not only a hyperbolic version of the stereotype of the money-hungry Jew (here the 'pure' Christian love of Lorenzo becomes implicitly contrasted with a Jewish fatherly love tainted by money) but also his inability to fulfill the demands of a patriarch. Yet even Jessica, who has converted to Christianity to marry Lorenzo remains positioned outside the religious economy of the Christian Venetians. Though Salerio tells Shylock, 'there is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory', (act 3, scene 1) there is no mercy in heaven for Jessica (act 3, scene 5), nor on Earth one suspects. The damning judgement of Lancelot remains – 'the sins of the father are to be laid upon the children (act 3, scene 5). Indeed, despite gestures towards Christian piety, Jessica's conversion remains a profound problem for the anti-Semitic Venetians. 'This making of Christians will raise the price of hogs' says Lancelot (act 3, scene 5), a rejoinder that not only confirms the economic links between religious observance and consumption, but Jessica's always-already foreclosure from full citizenship. It is hard to imagine, furthermore, that Shylock's forced conversion at the end of the play will result in anything like acceptance.

So if for Kierkegaard, capital is equated with the prudence of investment, it is arguable that the actions of the characters of *The Merchant of Venice* are fraught with highly irrational investments in the substitutions of capital. What condemns Shylock, by contrast, is that he stops the constant capitalistic speculations, that he demands tangible returns, in interest, in flesh. As such, the trial, and his subsequent downfall and conversion, is quite clearly a 'rite of social unanimity' (Girard, 1978, 111) in which Shylock is, paradoxically, made to assume all the risks of the Venetians' wagers. It is he who sacrifices, but it is far from a response to divine imperative. Or to, put it another way, if we imagine Shylock as a scapegoat (as I think Girard does given his other critical pre-occupations), Shylock is *sacrificed* rather than sacrifices. As such, Shylock is the inverse of Giorgio Agamben's (1998) *homo sacer*, who is killed but not sacrificed – though he is positioned outside of the social like the *homo sacer*, Shylock is metaphorically sacrificed, sublated into Christianity through his 'inclusion' but not killed.

## CONCLUSION

In contrast to Kierkegaard, for whom the religious transcends the ethical (which is equated with the capitalist), I argue that the religious in *The Merchant of Venice* is cut through with capitalist concerns, as much immersed in the reciprocal flow of money and ethical responses as in an unmediated relationship to the absolute. The ethical is never truly exited, but as Derrida points out,

the aneconomic is ambivalently poised on the edge of the ethical economic – the gift has a relation of foreignness, but is not foreign itself. *The Merchant of Venice* blurs together a (pagan) economy of ethical giving with the aneconomic gift. In doing so, as with Genesis 22, more questions about what it means to give and to sacrifice are raised than are answered. We cannot know if either Shylock or Antonio are knights of faith – for if the gift is in secret, in silence, we cannot truly know if calculation has been suspended. Every other is a little bit other. Indeed, the problematic status of the gift in the circle of economy seems to inadvertently raise the question of the simulation, of counterfeit money, indeed a counterfeit God. What if God dissimulated to Abraham; what if the call heard by Shylock or Antonio *is itself* (dis)simulated?

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 My thanks to Suzan Manuel and Jess Caddwallader for their thoughts.
- 2 My thanks to the anonymous reviewer who suggested this reading of Seneca.
- 3 Lyotard (1999) warns that Christian readings of the Jewish Bible sublute Judaism through an inclusion that displaces. He says ‘the whole content of the new covenant is the result of its mode of assertion. That is why Paul can unite the new covenant to the old one with a single trait – with a hyphen. But the new mode breaks with the old’ (23).
- 4 Abraham also had, of course, an “illegitimate” son named Ishmael with his handmaiden Hagar (Genesis 16).
- 5 This recalls in some sense Jewish theologian Martin Buber's (1999) description of the ‘I and Thou’ relationship between God and self, though it lacks the reciprocal nature of Buber's theory.
- 6 The interesting question is whether Kierkegaard sublutes Judaism into Christianity in his reading of the Abrahamic in *Fear and Trembling*, or whether the hyphen remains in a state of tension.
- 7 It is worthwhile noting the Kierkegaard elsewhere in *Works of Love* (1962, 25) argues that only Christian love is eternal, all other love is transient. Other love ‘blossoms’ and thus inevitably perishes, but Christian love ‘has being’ (26). The question, then, is whether Kierkegaard is reading Abraham as a kind of honorary or proto-Christian, or whether this is an inconsistency or change in his thought.
- 8 Here Derrida is close to Levinas (1996), who in his few brief but poignant notes on Kierkegaard in *Proper Names* argues that ethics must be marked by singularity.
- 9 Though there is of course no particular reason why Shakespeare would need to be realistic about that, I think that the loss of the pound of flesh is staged as potentially fatal so as to make the sacrifice important – since a sacrifice needs to be significant in order to be at all, one needs to destroy or lose something in order to sacrifice.
- 10 Here, it is worth considering Girard's (1978) suggestion that ‘the generosity of the Venetians is not feigned. Real generosity makes the beneficiary more dependent on his generous friend than a regular loan [...] the lack of precise accounting makes personal indebtedness infinite’ (p. 103). Girard suggests that the loan has a degree of calculation about it, which would preclude the act from inhabiting any genuine ethical responsibility.

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Cite this article as: Em McAvan. 2010. 'Economies of Sacrifice in The Merchant of Venice: God, the Gift and Shakespeare'. *The Bible and Critical Theory* 6 (1): pp. 2.1–2.11. DOI: 10.2104/bc100002.