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JOSEPH PEQUIGNEY

The Two Antonios and Same-Sex Love in Twelfth Night and The Merchant of Venice

The comic Antonios have more in common than a name. The earlier and more prominent one is the title character of *The Merchant of Venice*, written in 1596/97, whose friend is the suitor and winner of Portia, Bassanio. The other, created some five years later for *Twelfth Night*, is the sea captain whose companion is Viola's twin and Olivia's husband-to-be, Sebastian. Each Antonio loves his friend more than anyone or anything else, is emotionally dependent on him, proves willing to risk his very life on the friend's account, and provides him with funds, with painful consequences to himself. Neither shows romantic or other interest in a woman. The friends, however, do otherwise, both choosing wedlock and appearing with a wife or fiancée in, among other scenes, the last, where Antonio appears too, but ladyless. Of major concern here will be whether or not the striking resemblances between the Antonios include that of sexual orientation.

The Shakespeare professoriat has a long history of avoiding the topic of homosexuality, and the critics and scholars who have written on these comedies fall into three categories: those—the largest group—who have given this topic no thought; those who are doctrinaire in denying the topic pertinence; and those—a relatively small but recently growing number, many of them feminists—who ascribe homosexuality to both the Antonios.¹ The second group always and

1. See e.g.: Janet Adelman, "Male Bonding in Shakespeare's Comedies," in *Shakespeare's "Rough Magic": Renaissance Essays in Honor of C. L. Barber*, ed. Peter Erickson and Coppélia Kahn (Newark, 1985) p. 88; Lawrence Danson, *The Harmonies of "The Merchant of Venice"* (New Haven, 1978), pp. 34–35, 40; Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (New York, 1972), p. 132; Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley, 1988), p. 91; Nancy K. Hayles, "Sexual Disguise in 'As You Like

the third ordinarily are assertive of positions that they think are self-evident and require—or admit of—no proof, so that disagreement rules in the commentary. Moreover, the critics who postulate homoerotic Antonios also maintain that the homoerotic impulses are suppressed; that the love returned by the other is nonerotic; and that the characters are finally ostracized and marginalized.

My argument will generate different answers to the above questions, and will find others germane, as how the stories of love between men are thematized in congruence with the peculiar conception of the Christian ethic that saturates *The Merchant of Venice* and with the psychological/bisexual pattern that pervades *Twelfth Night*. Starting with Antonio the sea captain in *Twelfth Night* and Sebastian, I will proceed by examining: the discourse of Antonio; the treatment of the actions and characters of the two male intimates and the rendition of their shared history; scenes in which they do not appear but which serve to shed light on their behavior; and a series of analogous love-experiences inscribed in the plot. My endeavor will be to *secure* the homoerotic character of the friendship by attempting to settle the question through textual analysis and argumentation, in the hope of removing it from current vagaries, distortions, and prejudice. The procedure will be hermeneutic insofar as I am able to discover norms for determining which friends in other Shakespearean plays are represented as homosexual. Then my discussion of the merchant Antonio and his friend Bassanio will utilize those norms.

II

That the Antonio of *Twelfth Night* is passionately in love with his friend “his words [that] do from such passion fly”² will amply demonstrate. The openly amorous language habitual to him whenever he

It' and 'Twelfth Night,'” *Shakespeare Survey* 32 (1979), pp. 71, 72n; Coppélia Kahn, “The Cuckoo’s Note: Male Friendship and Cuckoldry in *The Merchant of Venice*,” in *Shakespeare’s “Rough Magic,”* pp. 106, 110–11; Richard A. Levin, *Love and Society in Shakespearean Comedy* (Newark, 1985), p. 142; W. Thomas MacCary, *Friends and Lovers: The Phenomenology of Desire in Shakespearean Comedy* (New York, 1985), pp. 167, 183; Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare’s Comic Sequence* (Liverpool, 1979), p. 60; Stephen Orgel, “Nobody’s Perfect: Or Why did the English Stage Take Boys for Women?” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88 (1989), 27–28.

2. 3.4.382. Quotations from the plays are from The New Arden Shakespeare editions: *Twelfth Night*, ed. J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik (London, 1975); *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. John Russell Brown (Cambridge, Mass., 1975). Some punctuation has been silently altered.

speaks to or about Sebastian—and rarely does his attention turn to anything else—is the foremost clue to the erotic nature of their friendship. In their first scene, when Sebastian initially proposes that they separate, Antonio says, “If you will not murder me for my love, let me be your servant” (2.1.31), that is, accompany you as a “servant,” a word that can also mean “lover”; and the love that ascribes the cruel power to slay to the beloved is romantic, smacking of Petrarchan love. Then in soliloquy at the end of the scene, despite his “many enemies” in Illyria, Antonio resolves to go there in pursuit of Sebastian, for “I do adore thee so, / That danger shall seem sport, and I will go” (2.1.44–47). Such “adoration,” especially as prompting the adorer to risk his all happily and carelessly only to be with the other, must stem from passion. Later catching up with Sebastian, Antonio explains, “My desire, / More sharp than filed steel, did spur me forth” (3.3.4–5). This impelling “desire” is sensual: the very word would connote libido even apart from the intensifying metaphor of the flesh-cutting metal spur. Afterwards, under the mistaken impression that Sebastian has refused to return money given him, an offended and irate Antonio gives even fuller utterance to his idolization of the youth, with stress on his physical beauty: “And to his image [that is, his external appearance], which methought did promise / Most venerable worth, did I devotion.” But the devotion was apparently misplaced: “O how vile an idol proves this god,” the youth deified and adored, who has “done good feature [that is, his handsome looks] shame,” for “Virtue is beauty” and “the beauteous evil” [that is, rascally beauties, such as this one] “are empty trunks, o’er-flourish’d by the devil” (3.4.371–79). Then in the last act Antonio tells of “My love without retention or restraint,” where “without restraint” is particularly suggestive, and says, “A witchcraft drew me hither”—that is, he was pulled into this city of enemies by erotic enchantment. The only real parallel in Shakespeare for such eroticized speech about a fair youth occurs in the sonnets.

Not his words only but also his correlated actions reflect Antonio’s avid devotion to the master-mistress of *his* passion. So unacceptable is separation from Sebastian that despite the danger to himself in a hostile Illyria, Antonio follows him there and, finding him, leaves to make overnight accommodations. This second separation is followed by a second reunion at the end of the play. The companions had long since been inseparable, in fact ever since their first meeting: “for three months . . . No int’rim, not a minute’s vacancy / Both day and night

did [they] keep company" (5.1.92–94). And Antonio will see to it that they "keep company" this night also as he goes off to arrange for their dining and sleeping together at the Elephant, an inn. "There," he says, "shall you have me" (3.3.42).

Before going he hands a purse to Sebastian, who asks, "Why I your purse?" He may chance upon "some toy" he wishes to buy, Antonio replies, and "your store is not for idle markets, sir" (3.3.43–46). A kind and generous gesture, to be sure, but the intent behind it is less simple than the reply suggests. In the next adjacent scene, and some few lines later, Olivia, doting on Cesario, asks Maria: "How shall I feast him? What bestow on him? / For *youth is bought more oft than begg'd or borrow'd*" (3.4.2–3; emphasis added). This observation clearly has retrospective reference to the purse, indicating that it is given with the ulterior motive of pleasing if not purchasing the desired youth.

In 1.2 Viola appears for the only time dressed as a girl, and she, like her twin, is also with a sea captain. She plans to part from him too, and while she remarks his "fair and outward character," and believes him to have a "mind that suits" with it (1.2.49–51), their pending separation is depicted as casual and unemotional, over against the strong feelings the corresponding separation elicits in Sebastian (2.1.39) and *his* sea captain. These two, it is true, have been longer and closer together, but the calm parting of the unattached female and the appealing male, where attraction might have been more expected, is tellingly juxtaposed with the emotionally-charged parting of the characters who are both male.

To turn now to Sebastian's part in their story: for months he has continuously remained with an adoring older man who is frankly desirous of him, who showered him with "kindnesses" (3.4.360), and who, moreover, saved him from death at sea and nursed him back to health. It is the classic homoerotic relationship, wherein the mature lover serves as guide and mentor to the young beloved. Sebastian comes to depend on Antonio both emotionally and in practical matters: emotionally when he can scarcely hold back tears, the shedding of which he regards as effeminate ("the manners of my mother" [2.1.39]) at his proposed parting from Antonio; and practically in looking to him for advice when perplexed by Olivia's unaccountable conduct: "Where's Antonio then? . . . His counsel now might do me golden service" (4.3.4–8).

For making the original decision to go off alone Sebastian gives the curious reason that he is afraid his own bad luck may rub off on his friend (“the malignancy of my fate might perhaps distemper yours” [2.1.4–5]). The motivation is flimsy—both dramatically (although dictated by the plot) and also in his mind—for he quickly relents when Antonio finds him and thereafter says nothing more about wanting to withdraw. Sebastian’s change of heart is anticipated by the melancholy leave-taking and is more in character than the initial decision, for everywhere else he shows himself obliging, compliant alike to the wishes of Olivia and of Antonio, as a boy who cannot say no.

When initially about to depart, Sebastian makes the curious admission that as a companion to Antonio he had always gone by another name, calling himself Roderigo. Why he should do so goes unexplained in both the comedy and the commentary. The alias may be demystified if it is seen as a means to hide his identity, his true name and family connections, during a drawn-out sexual liaison with a stranger in strange lands. When his twin Viola, in male disguise, correspondingly goes by an assumed name, Cesario, she gets caught up in novel, and homoerotic, sexual situations. Isn’t this an intimation of something analogous happening—as it does—to Roderigo? Then, too, the given name Sebastian recalls the martyr traditionally pictured as a handsome youth—a kind of Christian Adonis—with a nearly nude body pierced by arrows. Our Sebastian is not a martyr, of course, although he once came close to death by drowning; yet like the saint, he is a young male beauty and, again like him, passive, the target of Olivia’s as well as Antonio’s desires.³

And what will happen to the male friends after one of them is startlingly claimed by a lady for her husband? The virtually unanimous opinion of critics, in the words of one of them, is that “Poor Antonio is left out in the cold.” Stephen Greenblatt’s judgment rests on dubious textual grounds and it is connected with his sense of “the dis-

3. Sebastian is also the name Julia takes when she poses as a male in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. As MacCary, thinking also of Rosalind as Ganymede, puts it, “These names certainly carry associations with pederasty” (p. 186). Well, so does Viola’s Cesario. Julius Caesar, for his sexual relations with King Nicomedes of Bithynia, was sometimes mocked and greeted as “queen.” The incident, recorded by Suetonius (*De vita Caesarum* 1.49.1–4), was used by Dante, who lets a reference to it identify the sin of the purgatorial sodomites (*Purgatorio*, 26.76–79). Portia’s alias Balthasar has no such homoerotic associations, but that is because in male disguise she performs a lawyer’s and not a lover’s role.

quieting intensity of Antonio's passion for Sebastian."⁴ Disquieting to whom? Not to Sebastian or Antonio, nor to any other character, and not to the playwright when one looks closely at what he actually wrote. When, near the end of *Twelfth Night*, Sebastian makes his last entry, he speaks to his fiancée Olivia fondly ("sweet one") and apologetically (for hurting her kinsman), but he has far more ardent words for his comrade—whom he at first sought to quit, has since been frantically seeking, and now to his great relief finds: "Antonio! O my dear Antonio, / How have the hours rack'd and tortur'd me, / Since I have lost thee!" (5.1.216–18). This, the most impassioned speech Sebastian delivers, is hardly the prelude to a rejection; and, further, with his late dramatic change of fortune, the sole reason he gives for the separation disappears. The expectation is set up that in taking a wife Sebastian will not and need not suffer the "rack and torture" of losing his male lover. Not the rejected "poor Antonio" of the commentary, he is instead the "dear Antonio" here and hereafter of lucky Sebastian.⁵ Does this imply a *ménage à trois* at Olivia's house? That's anybody's guess, but a guess about nothing, for once they leave the stage the characters vanish into thin air.

From the data amassed above I gather that Sebastian has a personality endowed with a homoerotic component that has been awakened and activated under a peculiar and propitious set of circumstances. These include his continuous and clearly agreeable association, during a lengthy sojourn in the freedom of pseudonymity, with a savior, benefactor, fervid admirer, and would-be lover. Inasmuch as he proves capable of erotically responding to man and woman, Sebastian would be bisexual, while Antonio, who is depicted with desire confined to a male object, would appear to be homosexual.

Sebastian's amorous involvement with members of both sexes falls into a broader configuration of the plot and derives substantiation

4. Greenblatt, pp. 93, 91; cf. Adelman, pp. 88–89, Hayles, pp. 71–72n.

5. If I were to direct the play, I would want Olivia, Sebastian (in the middle), and Antonio to leave the stage together, arm in arm. But the difficulty is that Antonio throughout the scene is under guard and at the end has yet to be set free. That could be taken care of by a mere wave of the Duke's hand. Such a gesture, though without an authorizing stage direction, is in line with the script. Everything points to Antonio's imminent release. Orsino already admires him, heaping praise on him for his skill and success as a victorious opponent once in a naval battle (5.1.56–57); then he not only went to rescue Cesario, who will be Orsino's wife, but also saved the life and became the friend of her twin, who is to be Orsino's brother-in-law. Enmity cannot survive these emergent relationships—or not without exerting a destructive effect.

from different dramatic situations. Bisexual experiences are not the exception but the rule in *Twelfth Night*, and they are vital to the course of love leading to wedlock for the three principal lovers other than Sebastian: Orsino, Olivia, and Viola.

Near the close of the play, Orsino asks Cesario for his/her hand. He proposes marriage to someone he knows and has come to love only as a male servant, seen only in masculine clothes, whose feminine name he never once utters, and whom in the scene he twice addresses as "boy" (5.1.127, 264)—even at the proposal itself—and refers to as late as his final speech as being still a "man" (385). Early on, despite the cross-dressing, he does perceive Viola's true gender, noting her girlish lip and voice and "all" as "semblative to a woman's part" (1.4.30–34). The response, though, may do less to establish his heterosexual credentials than to symptomatize homoerotic proclivities, for according to Freud, "what excited a man's love" in ancient Greece (and still may do so) "was not the *masculine* character of a boy, but his physical resemblance to a woman as well as his feminine mental qualities," with the "sexual object" being "someone who combines the characters of both sexes" and "a kind of reflection of the subject's own bisexual nature."⁶ This theory seems clearly borne out by Orsino; and, further, his capacity to love the youth Cesario and the girl Viola is crucial to the happy ending for them both. His attraction to Olivia, where he is heterosexually straight, like the other would-be wooers Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Malvolio, is a disaster. The love for Cesario could not have changed instantaneously with the revelation of his femaleness; if it is erotic then it would have been erotic before; what does change is that marriage suddenly becomes possible, and hence the immediate proposal. This love that commences as homoerotic and conducts Orsino into nuptial heterosexuality is an unbroken curve, a bisexual continuity.

Olivia ends up engaged to marry a perfect stranger, Sebastian, and not the one she fell madly in love with and thought she had become betrothed to, who all along had been a male-impersonating girl. If she misses the tell-tale signs of femaleness that Orsino picks up on, that is because it is in her erotic interest to fantasize Cesario as virile, yet the feminine subtext, however ignored, remains legible. In Sebastian's

6. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. James Strachy (London, 1953–74), VII, 144.

last speech to her, coming just after the confusion of identity has been straightened out, he says, almost tauntingly,

So comes it, lady, you have been mistook.
 But nature to her bias drew in that.
 You would have been contracted to a maid;
 Nor are you therein, by my life, deceiv'd:
 You are betroth'd both to a maid and man. (5.1.257–61)

She has been “mistook” in two related senses: “mistaken” in taking Cesario for a male, and “taken amiss” in being captivated by a female (cf. 2.2.34). But in “that” matter of being “mistook,” nature “drew” “to her bias” or described a curved course (like the curve of a bowling ball that the noun denotes), and this homoerotic swerving or lesbian deviation from the heterosexual straight and narrow cannot be considered unnatural since it is effected by nature herself. “Would” in the third line above, indicative of a contrary-to-fact condition, may also connote “would like [to],” a condition of wishing. That “you are betroth'd both to a maid and man” is not a deception but precisely right: to “both” twins, the maid who elicited your love and whom you thought you were contracting to marry, and the man who accidentally and unbeknownst to anyone substituted for her and to whom you are in fact engaged.⁷ The line (261) may also bear this alternate reading: Sebastian could be referring only to himself, as a maiden man, a girl/boy, a master (to Olivia)-mistress (to Antonio).⁸

Like Orsino, Olivia goes through a homoerotic phase that lasts through and beyond betrothal; both have experiences that evince their bisexuality. Nor do they ever pass beyond it, for it is the *sine qua non* of their psychological development—his away from a fruitless doting

7. Greenblatt's reading of the passage is the mirror opposite of mine. For him the swerving connotes heterosexuality, which is “licit sexuality” and “the *only* craving the play *can* represent as *capable of finding satisfaction*,” while to be homosexually matched, instead of “correctly paired,” is “to follow an *unnaturally* straight line.” To make the licit, natural, and superior equivalent to “bent” and the illicit, unnatural, and inferior equivalent to “straight” is to skew ordinary geometrical symbolism and is even suspect as English. He then follows those annotators who give “male virgin” as the signified of “maid” at line 261, even though the same word is used two lines before with its more customary meaning (pp. 67–68, 71; italics mine). For all his dazzling new-historical detours through tabloid French anecdotes and antiquated anatomy, Greenblatt comes back to a conventional and conservative interpretation of *Twelfth Night*.

8. Stephen Orgel seemingly reads the line this way; and he sees Antonio and Sebastian as “an overtly homosexual couple” whose presence in the play “acknowledges . . . that men *do* fall in love with other men” (“Nobody's Perfect: Or Why Did the English Stage Take Boys for Women?” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 88 [1989], 27–28).

on her, hers away from fixation on a dead brother—and it has a crucial, integral, and unerasable part in both their love stories, that of Orsino with Cesario/Viola and that of Olivia with Cesario/Sebastian.⁹

Viola works a variation on this bisexual theme. In imitating her brother as his “glass” (3.4.389–93), she combines both sexes: “I am all the daughters of my father’s house, / And all the brothers too” (1.4.121–22). From the fourth scene on, however, she plays a brother rather than a daughter, being masculine in name, dress, behavior, and the awareness of the other characters; not until the late recognition scene between the twins is she called Viola, and nobody else ever uses her real name. As Cesario she enters into a male friendship with Orsino, having man-to-“man” talks with him, mainly about women and love; and spontaneously responding to the beauty of Olivia (“‘Tis beauty truly blent” [1.5.142–46, 255]), she throws herself headlong into the assignment of courting her. Partly because she is in love and knows how she would like to be wooed, she succeeds with the proud and disdainful lady, even reducing her to amorous desperation. She proves herself a better man at wooing than Orsino is, with his go-betweens, or than her brother, with the strain of passivity in his nature, could ever be. Sebastian could never have done what was necessary to win Olivia, and his only chance was for his sister to perform this masculine role for him. Her Cesario makes a lasting impression.

Sebastian turns out to be the most extreme exemplar of this recurring theme of bisexuality, for he is not only attracted to, but also able and willing sexually to enjoy, both a man and a woman—and in his case a man and a woman who are, and with obvious passion, enamored of him. While he remains heterosexually virginal, he is unlike the virgins Viola and Olivia or Orsino in that he entertains homosexual

9. A few critics can grant a homosexual ingredient in the affectionate or passionate responses of some or all of the principal characters—Olivia, Orsino, Viola, Sebastian—because they regard them as passing through a temporary phase of adolescent sexual confusion on the way to heterosexual maturity (Coppélia Kahn, *Man’s Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* [Berkeley, 1981], p. 211; and see Helene Moglen, “Disguise and Development: The Self and Society in *Twelfth Night*,” *Literature and Society* 23 [1973], 13–23). Nothing to worry about, it’s all a normal part of growing up. But Orsino’s attraction to Cesario postdates rather than antedates his heterosexual infatuation with Olivia. The heterosexual male characters who are presented as untinged by homoerotic feelings and as sexually not unready for marriage, however deficient in other respects, are these specimens: the pre-Cesario Orsino, Malvolio, Sir Andrew Aguecheek—all three of whom seek to wed Olivia—and Sir Toby Belch. No, the play does not lend itself to such attempts to domesticate its treatment of homoerotic desire.

impulses that are fully conscious and indulged. Antonio awakens those impulses, initiates him into interpersonal sexuality, and perhaps thereby prepares him to receive the sudden, surprising advances of the Illyrian lady. The reason for Antonio's portrayal as homosexual is that a liaison with him opens space for Sebastian in the diverse bisexual fictions that make up *Twelfth Night*.¹⁰

These fictions have a dimension of metadrama, and nowhere else does Shakespeare more elaborately play with his theater's convention of boys in the opposite-sex roles. In this comedy five actors play three male characters and two who are female, including the one disguised most of the time as male, that are love-related in the following pairs: a man (Orsino) and a pseudo-boy (Cesario); a cross-dressed (Viola) and another young woman (Olivia); male with female (both Sebastian with Olivia and Orsino with Viola); and two men (Sebastian and Antonio). The first two pairs are sexually ambiguous, the next two move toward heterosexual unions, and the last is homosexual. It is in this last relationship that the dramatic representation becomes most transparent to what was actually happening on the Elizabethan stage, since the lovers are both males, and so were the players who took the roles.

III

As *The Merchant of Venice* opens, the other Antonio is sad and says he does not know why. That "why" (I.I.I) never receives an explicit answer. When the pair Salerio/Solanio probe for the causes, one suggests, "Why then you are in love" (I.I.46). The response is an evasive "Fie, fie!" which registers a mild embarrassment at the very idea, and which is received by the others as a negation that closes the subject.

Solanio had clearly meant "in love" erotically and heterosexually, which Antonio never is. His "fie, fie" rules out that but not the kind of love he holds for Bassanio. He had known something about his friend's wife-seeking plans even before the opening speech, and that

10. Adelman also discusses, though in somewhat different terms, the aspect of the play that I call its bisexuality, and her sense of the way it operates is close to mine (pp. 86–91). Moreover, she explicates some of Antonio's speeches in demonstrating the homosexual nature of his love and is one of the few critics to recognize that Sebastian's response to him is erotic. I have some disagreements with her, yet find her insights into *Twelfth Night* fresh and penetrating.

the pending loss of him was the cause of the initial sadness is implicit in the description of his behavior when Bassanio was setting out for Belmont. Then, “with affection wondrous sensible,” an eye “big with tears,” face averted and hand held behind him, Antonio “wrung Bassanio’s hand, and so they parted.” The listener adds, “I think he only loves the world for him” (2.8.46–50), a choral comment amply justified by Antonio’s actions.

He seldom verbalizes his love, and we hear more about it from others’ mouths than from his own. He makes his fullest statement on the subject in the courtroom as he expects to be put to the knife by Shylock; he again bids Bassanio farewell and now asks him to tell his “honorable wife” “how I lov’d you” and to “bid her judge / Whether Bassanio had not once a love” (4.1.269–73). Here the word “love” may signify “an experience of love,” as I suspect it does. But it may also or instead mean “lover,” in which case the usage, of one man as the “love” of another, is rare, and with the exception of the sonnets does not occur elsewhere in Shakespeare or, I believe, in the period.

The word “lover” as “friend,” without erotic connotation, was quite common, however. It is used twice with reference to Antonio, by Lorenzo to Portia, “How dear a lover of my lord your husband,” and then by her some ten lines later (3.4.7, 17) in an important and often misconstrued speech. She makes it after having wed Bassanio and sent him off to Venice with ducats galore to redeem Antonio. Her insight, first into male friendship, and then into the deep affinity between that friendship and the erotic love of man and woman, is remarkable. She explains,

in companions
That do converse and waste the time together,
Whose souls do bear an egall yoke of love,
There must be needs a like proportion
Of lineaments, of manners, and of spirit;
Which makes me think that this Antonio
Being the bosom lover of my lord,
Must be like my lord. (3.4.11–18)

As opposed to the idea that opposites attract, the true basis of liking here is likeness—moral, spiritual, and even physical. “Lineaments” is a curious word; it brings bodily features or physical but asexual compatibility of some sort into this conception of friendship, but it does not specify physical beauty. Her husband and his “bosom lover”

are necessarily so close that Portia can be confident that in knowing the one she thereby gains knowledge of the other whom she has never met. She continues,

If it be so,
How little is the cost I have bestowed
In purchasing the semblance of my soul
From out the state of hellish cruelty! (18–21)

While “my soul” could figuratively allude to Bassanio, as most annotators surmise, a literal reading seems to me far preferable and impossible to dismiss. Antonio is the “semblance” of Portia’s soul because the love each has for Bassanio insures that their souls or selves in resembling his must thereby resemble each other.¹¹ Portia postulates a kind of spiritual homology between the male-male and male-female loves, and sees them as now composing a triangle, although one without discord among its members. The insight enunciated here has, as will be seen, telling implications for the comic resolution at the close.

Antonio expresses his love primarily through deeds. His pledge to Bassanio that “My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlock’d to your occasions” (1.1.137–39) is amply carried out in what follows, as he not only risks his fortune and life by signing the bond but is content to give up both for his friend: “pray God Bassanio come / To see me pay his debt, and then I care not” (3.3.35–36), and in a last message to him the sole request is that “I might but see you at my death,” and even then only if love and not “my letter” should “persuade you to come” (3.2.318–20).

Bassanio’s love—along with Portia’s urging—does persuade him to come, and he speaks of his devotion early on: “to you Antonio / I owe the most in money and in love” (1.1.130–31). Later he asserts that “life itself, my wife, and all the world, / Are not with me esteem’d above thy life. / I would lose all . . . to deliver you” (4.1.280–83). Even though this Antonio may love Bassanio exclusively, emotionally, and to the point of willingness to die for him, and even though Bassanio may return the love along with gratitude and to the extent of valuing his friend higher than everything else, their love is

11. Danson reads Portia’s speech in this way also (pp. 48–49); in other respects as well his reading corresponds with mine, notably in the recognition that Bassanio does the right thing in giving up the ring (pp. 192–93, 195) and that Antonio is not excluded at the end, the ring episode resulting in “the reaffirmation of Antonio’s loyalty to both Bassanio and Portia” (pp. 40, 36).

very different from that between Antonio and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*.

Neither of the Venetian friends ever makes reference to physical beauty in the other, or ever speaks in amorous terms to or about the other, and neither has any reason to employ an alias. Neither do they ever lodge together, let alone keeping exclusively to themselves for months on end without letup. Both Antonios put their lives in jeopardy on account of the friend and provide him with funds, the one knowing he will lose him thereby, and the other seeking to hang on to him. Both save their friends: one from ruinous debt and deprivation of a desirable marriage, and the other from drowning, although the latter, upon nursing Sebastian back to health, cannot bear to relinquish him, while the merchant, however sorrowfully, does accept Bassanio's departure. While they have little to do with women, and most of that with women in disguise, the one Antonio belongs to the commercial life of Venice, the other chooses a life at sea on manned ships, except that lately he has been roaming on land with the fair young "Roderigo." As to the friends, the acquiescence that is so salient in Sebastian is a trait not shared by the enterprising, risk-taking Bassanio, and his name does not conjure up any associations of youthful comeliness and pierced flesh such as "Sebastian" can evoke. Moreover, male friendship in *The Merchant of Venice* is furnished with no comparable scenes and no plot rich in situational analogues of the kind that corroborate and thematize bisexuality and homoeroticism in *Twelfth Night*. Even cross-dressing works differently in the two comedies: Portia and Nerissa adopt male disguise to participate in a legal action, as distinct from Viola whose disguise involves her in varied eroticized actions.

As the above contrasts make plain, the profusion of detail that establishes and supports the homoerotic character of the liaison between Antonio and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night* is not to be found in *The Merchant of Venice*, wherein there is almost nothing to suggest a sexual dimension in the amity of Antonio and Bassanio. This Antonio is not, then, like the other, "in love," and his love for his friend is philia instead of eros.

Such love was expounded by Aristotle and Cicero and consciously cultivated and idealized in the Renaissance. But commentators as a rule have had trouble distinguishing between, on the one hand, the homoeroticism in the depiction of Antonio and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night* or of the male lovers of the sonnets and, on the other hand, the

non-libidinal mutuality exemplified by Antonio and Bassanio, and of which Hamlet and Horatio are but two of the many other exemplars in Shakespearean drama. The term “same-sex love” in my title does not translate *homosexual* but is meant to be more comprehensive, more akin to Eve Sedgwick’s notion of “male homosocial desire,” comprising the male bond in which the sexual body takes part and the one in which it does not,¹² as well as affinities between those bonds, as, for example, the affective attachment to the other and psychic need of him common to both Antonios.

To eliminate the reigning misguidance in the commentary that has another poor Antonio ending up relegated to the outer cold,¹³ it is imperative to reexamine the episode of the rings, which begins near the middle of *The Merchant of Venice* and becomes dominant toward the end.

Portia, overjoyed when Bassanio wins the lottery and herself, gives him a ring with the injunction that discarding it would “presage the ruin of your love, / And be my vantage to exclaim on you.” He receives it with the pledge that he would relinquish it only with his life (3.2.173–74, 183–84). The compact is so solemn that any violation of it should have dire consequences, but in this comedy the breaking of contracts, when higher principles intervene, is commendable—as witness what happens to the bond.

Portia’s own motives for reclaiming the ring, in her role as Balthasar and as a reward for “his” legal brilliance and triumph, are never directly disclosed; but they are implicitly contained in a statement made to Nerissa when she resolves likewise to get her husband’s ring, which he too had sworn “to keep forever.” Portia remarks that “We shall have old swearing / That they did give the rings away to men; / And we’ll outface them, and outswear them too” (4.2.15–17). Gratiano has just delivered Bassanio’s ring when she says this, but she is not bothered; to the contrary, she is in high spirits and anticipates with relish the scene that will ensue at Belmont when both husbands return ringless and tender tall excuses the wives have fun disputing. Portia’s

12. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, 1985), pp. 1–2, 25.

13. Adelman, pp. 79–80; Anne Barton in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al (Boston, 1974), p. 253; Kahn, “Cuckoo’s Note,” pp. 106–07, 110–11; Fiedler, pp. 135–36; Leonard Tennenhouse, “The Counterfeit Order of *The Merchant of Venice*,” in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore, 1980), pp. 63, 66.

words here and her behavior in the final scene, the jocund one she forecasts, imply that Portia's intention in seeking the ring is to play a practical joke, and certainly that is a part of it, if not all.

Bassanio surrenders the ring only when Balthasar has left and Antonio requests that he do so: "Let his deservings and my love withal / Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment" (4.1.446–47). Another too had urged the very same course—that wife herself in disguise. Portia and Antonio, the two to whom he is most deeply committed and who most have earned the audience's trust, both press him, one cryptically (4.1.440–44) and the other openly, to give away the ring. It is more than dramatic irony, it is intuition born of really knowing Portia that causes Bassanio to say to her afterwards at Belmont, "Had you been there, I think you would have begg'd / The ring of me to give the worthy doctor" (5.1.221–22). How right he is: she was there and did so.

Before Portia, Bassanio rather desperately defends parting with the ring, but he does refer to the decision as a "fault" and asks her to "forgive me this enforced wrong" (5.1.186, 240). If *enforced*, the wrong is unavoidable, and one might regard him as having been in an impossible dilemma, wrong to and wrong not to let go of the ring. However, he extends the apology (a) still ignorant of Balthasar's true identity, and (b) under Portia's relentless and wittily disingenuous verbal assaults, which he takes at face value, before learning what we have known all along: that she has been teasing him. If she has a serious purpose as well, it materializes when and by the manner in which she gives him the ring once again.

For these actions of Portia and Bassanio to be fully understood, they must be viewed in the larger context of the play's religion and morality. A Christian-Jewish opposition is fundamental to *The Merchant of Venice*, with Judaism exemplified almost singly by Shylock, the villain, and Christianity by most of the other characters, and particularly by the three kindred spirits Antonio, Portia, and Bassanio. The religion treated herein is hardly theological—outside Portia's "quality of mercy" speech God and salvation are rarely mentioned, Christ never. Apart from the exegetical dispute between Antonio and Shylock over the Genesis account of Jacob and Laban's sheep (1.3.66–90) and the allusion to the Lord's Prayer at 4.1.196–98, religion is hardly scriptural either. Instead religion is pretty much restricted to right conduct. The Christian ethic does not derive from the New Testament so much as from Portia's father, who devised the

inscription on the winning lead casket, and it may be reformulated as a beatitude: blessed is he who chooses to “give and hazard all he hath” (2.7.9, 16; 2.9.21). Shylock’s actions—and that they are presented as characteristically Hebrew is truly disquieting—go counter to this principle: he will give and hazard nothing. This is his business as well as his personal ethic. As a money-lender he takes security to eliminate risk, in contrast to Antonio, who deals in the hazardous hence laudable enterprise of overseas trading. To make money by venture capital is commendable, by banking reprehensible. When Jessica elopes with some of Shylock’s wealth and, with her Christian husband, squanders it, that not only serves the miser right but her prodigality is a seal of her conversion. The ring from Leah may have sentimental value for Shylock, but it sears him to let go of any material possession. He wishes his own daughter dead and his ducats and jewels restored with the corpse (3.1.108–13, 80–82). He ends up with nothing except what Christian mercy vouchsafes him. It is better to give than to receive in this moral universe, in no small part because those who give abundantly receive abundantly. This paradox does not conflict with the commandment that valorizes, along with loving one’s neighbor, loving oneself. It is when self-interest, especially with regard to affluence, is prioritized and exclusory that it becomes Shylockian. The comic version of Christian charity entails rich mundane rewards. Justice prevails in the here and now, with no reference to any hereafter. The graspers and hoarders lose; the givers gamble and win.

Bassanio gambles everything on the lottery. Like the others who play, he risks having to remain wifeless, but in addition he risks utter financial ruin. Again, in the courtroom he “would lose all” he had gained by his victory, along with his life, to deliver Antonio. This proposal reveals a frame of mind in which Bassanio is detached enough from his new acquisitions to be able to forego them for a higher imperative, and it places him, in terms of bountifulness, in a class with Antonio and Portia. He follows their advice and manifests feeling the opposite of Shylock’s in resigning the ring. Here he rightly takes another chance. He again complies with the give-and-hazard code of conduct. This code—operative in both the pound-of-flesh and casket-test plots, and linking them, as also in the ring episode—is everywhere sanctioned and always rewarded in the comedy.¹⁴

14. John Russell Brown makes thematic sense of the play in much the way I do. For him the “central theme [is] love’s wealth”: not only “how this wealth is gained and possessed by giving

Each of the instances of giving and/or hazarding proves beneficial to Bassanio. In the first he wins Portia and her fortune; in the second his projected self-sacrifice is obviated when Portia/Balthasar comes to the rescue of Antonio; in the third the ring is returned with interest, that of a renewed and abiding friendship with Antonio.

Portia is at once the prize of the lottery and put at risk by it, hazarding out of filial obedience her nuptial happiness. The results are not simply a matter of luck, however, for the winner must prove to be perspicacious and right-minded, as Bassanio does in choosing the lead casket. Then Portia gives him all she has—herself, her wealth, her mansion, her servants—with the one regret that she does not have immensely more to give (3.2.152–57). Nor is this exuberant wish to lavish favors on him frustrated. The next benefit she finds to confer is to liberate his friend. Then she gets the ring back in order to give it to him a second time, and this time through and with Antonio.

Antonio is the referent of the title because, besides being the protagonist to Shylock's antagonist, he gives and hazards the most. All his wealth is risked in foreign trade and then seemingly lost, and without distressing him; he lets go of Bassanio, on account of whom alone he loves the world; and most crucially, he ventures the pound of flesh and is ready to lay down his life for his friend—than which “greater love hath no man” (John 15.13): “Grieve not that I am fall'n to this for you” and “your friend . . . repents not that he pays your debt” (4.1.262, 274–75).

Upon such sacrifices the Bard himself throws recompense. The moral law peculiar to this comedy coincides with the law common to all Shakespearean comedies, according to both of which felicity and, in cases of suffering, equitable to superabundant compensation await the virtuous, be they lovers, spouses, siblings, rulers, servants, or friends, and this Antonio is no exception. He joins the others—“precious winners all” as their counterparts are called in *The Winter's Tale* (5.3.131)—at Belmont. Having there been introduced to Portia, and then having witnessed the altercations over the missing rings, he interjects, “I am th'unhappy subject of these quarrels”; to which Portia replies, “Sir, grieve not you; you are welcome notwithstanding—

freely and joyously” but also “how destructive the opposing possessiveness can become.” He perceives, as well, that to “give and hazard” is a guiding principle of several of the characters (*Shakespeare and His Comedies* [London, 1957], pp. 70, 74, 62, 67).

fear and aversion of homophobia may come into play. It adds antipathy toward immoral and “unnatural” sexuality to the bias against bachelorhood. It would seem that readers who can predicate homoerotic impulses of the Antonios would be free of such prejudice. Not necessarily, however, when the judgment can be facilitated and encouraged by the certainty that a penalty lies in store for the deviant characters. Some feminist critics give homophobia a special twist when they admire Portia’s invention of the ring trick as a device to protect her marriage from the threat to it mounted by the husband’s friend’s homosexuality. With such misapprehensions and obscurantism bedeviling the comedies, some effort at objectivity is clearly called for.¹⁵

Homosexuality may not inform the bonding of Antonio and Bassanio but the topic is nonetheless introduced into *The Merchant of Venice* in the bantering of Portia and Nerissa with Bassanio and Gratiano over the rings. Their talk is bawdy, as befits the occasion wherein the young couples have been reunited and are sooner or later this day to consummate their marriages (cf. 5.1.300–03). Putting into effect the original scheme to “outwit” and “outswear” their husbands, the women harp on adultery: each wife feigns suspicion that the rings had been presented to other women; the wives vow that if ever given the opportunity they will lie with the doctor and clerk who have the rings; and upon returning the rings, the women come up with the story that they got them from the doctor and clerk with whom they spent the previous night. The men’s quips, by contrast, are about

15. In the interpretation of one feminist critic, “men, if they are to marry, must renounce their friendships with other men—must even, perhaps, betray them.” The ring plot “portrays a tug-of-war in which women and men compete—for the affections of men”; and a “strong, shrewd woman like Portia” must “combat the continuing appeal of [homoerotic] ties between men.” She does so by getting back the ring in order “to teach [her] husband a lesson” about the primacy of marriage over male friendship, put him to a test, and even plot against him for “erring” in proposing to sacrifice wife and all to deliver Antonio. The contest between Portia and Antonio lasts until he “offers to sacrifice himself once again,” when Portia and marriage triumph over Antonio—the title character!—and ward off an inviting “homo-erotic attachment” (Kahn, “Cuckoo’s Note,” pp. 106–07, 109–11; cf. Adelman, p. 80; Richard Wheeler, “The Sonnets, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Othello*,” in *Shakespeare’s “Rough Magic,”* pp. 194, 197, 200; and see Danson, p. 40).

The message here unearthed is a forbidding one: this “feminist” Portia uses the ring for entrapment and plays on her husband’s “fears of cuckoldry” in the interest of removing a male rival and gaining full and exclusive possession of him. Maybe shrewd, she is certainly turned into a shrew, one as possessive if not quite as ruthless as Shylock. The notion that homosexuality is a temptation to married men and so poses a danger to marriages has no more validity as social than as exegetical commentary.

homosexuality. Gratiano first calls it up in a sadistic form with his jealous threat to “mar the young clerk’s pen[is]” (5.1.237). Then, once the truth about Balthasar and his aid comes out and the pressure is lifted, the relieved husbands enter into the fun with gusto. Bassanio says to Portia, “Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow; / When I am absent then lie with my wife,” and Gratiano anticipates “couching with the doctor’s clerk” (5.1.284–85, 305). These jests might be considered cruel if the Antonio in whose hearing they are made had harbored homosexual passion, and for one who does the jesting too; however, they can remind us of those two “bedfellows” in *Twelfth Night*, Antonio and Sebastian, who so often had “couched” together.

Finally, the comedy concludes with a bawdy pun. From now on Gratiano’s only concern will be “keeping safe Nerissa’s ring,” and he here expresses what had all along been tacit, that each woman’s giving of her ring was symbolically the giving of her pudenda, a round of flesh. The humor is broad and easy-going, as Shakespeare and his audiences liked it, and the attitudes toward all the varieties of sexualities, including the male–male type, are relaxed. Only once does someone get out of line, and it is when Gratiano wisecracks about being cuckolded and Portia calls him down: “Speak not so grossly” (5.1.265–66). She does not, however, find the joking about men going to bed together “gross” or disquieting.

IV

The distinction I have drawn between the amorous reciprocal love of Antonio and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night* and the amicable love between Antonio and Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* is quite unusual, not to be found in the critical discourse of those who deny sexuality to either of the loves or of those who affirm sexual love in both the Antonios. No less unusual is my conclusion that each Antonio at the close of his comedy is permanently reunited with his friend and included in the community composed of reconciled, loving, and admirable members, with neither one being or deserving to be omitted or self-excluded with the likes of a Shylock or a Malvolio. The conclusions depend for their persuasiveness to a degree on the method used in reaching them. Textual analysis has been fundamental throughout, and it generates supportive evidence. The evidence for securing the homoerotic character of relations between Antonio and Sebastian falls

into the categories outlined at the outset as follows: 1. diction, with initial emphasis on the amorous language of Antonio; 2. character, including modes of conduct, the personalities they manifest, and the individual histories as reported and dramatized; 3. scenes that illuminate the thesis with circumstantiality comparable to that of the two companions, and these may be subsumed under: 4. the structure of incidents that make up the main plot. These categories, while initially tailored to *Twelfth Night*, turn out to have a broader applicability, as may be suggested by their close correlation with the principal parts of comedy and tragedy—plot, character, diction—distinguished by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. My next point has been to turn these components of one play into criteria for determining whether or not homoeroticism enters into the friendship of Antonio with Bassanio in another, and the criteria produce a negative result. They may further serve as a test for detecting sexuality in male bonding in other Shakespearean plays. The failure of expositors until now to differentiate the two Antonios in terms of erotic desire may stem in part from their neglecting to invent an adequate method of inquiry.

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