

“Come Ho, and Wake Diana”: the Divine Feminine and the Solar Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*

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When interpreting Shakespeare’s plays, one productive strategy is to investigate references to the sun, especially those that are linked to characters, such as the line “Juliet is the sun”, the line that reveals Juliet’s identity in a secret play about the history of man and the sun hidden in *Romeo and Juliet*. Similarly, King Duncan’s role as the sun is referenced by Lady Macbeth’s line “O, never shall sun that morrow see” (1.4,60 – 1). In the same vein, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia is first described in the play, by Bassanio, as having “sunny locks” (1.1.169):

In Belmont is a lady richly left
 And she is fair and, fairer than that word,
 Of wondrous virtues. Sometimes from her eyes
 I did receive fair speechless messages.
 Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued
 To Cato’s daughter, Brutus’ Portia.
 Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,
 For the four winds blow in from every coast
 Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks
 Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
 Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchis’ strand,
 And many Jasons come in quest of her. (1.1.161 – 172) (my emphasis)

This first characterization of Portia, spoken in her absence, functions as a

litany of words from classical mythology and the religion of Antiquity. From the context, the phrase “hang on her temples” indicates the anatomical place near the forehead, but once the word “temples” is included in the list of other words (golden fleece, Jason, Colchis, sunny), “temples” takes on its religious meaning as well — importantly not Christianity, the prevalent religion of Shakespeare’s era — but a pagan one, based on nature deities. Other words in Bassanio’s speech also give Portia an aura of being tremendous beyond a human scale. She seems to exist on a planetary scale (wide world, four winds, every coast, wondrous, speechless messages, sunny). The presentation of her secret identity as the sun (a goddess, energy, the material cosmos) is through the interaction of the two worlds: the Classical world, tied to nature gods, and the cosmic world of vastness. The word “sunny” connects both the cosmic, huge world, and the spiritual world of Antiquity, which had sun gods. “Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth” also clues us in to the notion that the sun is the base of economies and religions everywhere; the Elizabethans had some knowledge of other countries and cultures.

In keeping with this theme of light, later, in Act Five, after Portia has defeated Shylock in court, and is on her way back to Belmont, it is likewise significant that she and Nerissa comment on a light in the window of Portia’s house:

Portia: That light we see is burning in my hall.

How far that candle throws his beams!

So shines a good deed in a naughty world.

Nerissa: When the moon shone, we did not see the candle.

Portia: So doth the greater glory dim the less:

A substitute shines brightly as a king

Until a king be by.... (V.i.93 – 5)

Of course, Portia, by implication is the "king" whose true power has been revealed, in comparison with Shylock's, to be much greater than his. She has underscored her status as a "king" (a cosmic king, that is, the sun) in her famous "the quality of mercy is not strained" speech (4.1.184 – 205) where she uses a heavy and notable abundance of words like "awe", "majesty", "throned monarch", "kings", "mightiest in the mightiest", "God", "power", all words of supreme power which get associated with her, whose voice utters them:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
To mitigate the justice of thy plea;
Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there. (4.1.184 – 205) (my emphasis)

Portia, speaking these lines, becomes very regal. The message about mercy, while pleasant, doesn't carry much weight in light of the fact that the Christians don't have that much mercy on Shylock after defeating him, taking all his assets and forcing him to convert. So we are left with the majestic atmosphere enshrining the secret goddess, Portia. Moreover, the way that Shakespeare uses the gender conventions of the Abrahamic religions ("God himself") means that he was strategically hiding his pantheistic/pagan message under an orthodox surface and actively and deliberately attempting to trick people engaging in Shakespeare interpretation, in the same way that, for example, Hamlet deceives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, sending them to their deaths by rewriting their letter of command to the English king. Note that Hamlet (who allegorizes Shakespeare himself) expresses no remorse at all for this act when he tells Horatio, "They are not near my conscience. Their defeat /Does by their own insinuation grow" (5.2.60 – 61). In fact, Hamlet's words are also an implicit admission of guilt on the part of Shakespeare that he intentionally engaged in deception when he wrote his works.

Shylock

The line "a substitute shines brightly as a king until a king be by", can be viewed as a symbolic expression of the sun in opposition to coal eventually, in the future. Coal was rapidly displacing the sun (wood, generated by the sun) as fuel starting in the latter half of the 1500s. Coal, a fossil fuel, drives capitalism, population growth, urbanization, economic inequality, complexity, colonialism and eventually, economic collapse, as fossil fuels cannot last (that is why the sun is the "king").

Who is Shylock in the world of the microcosm in *The Merchant of Venice*? If Portia did not defeat the seemingly invincible Shylock, we would never understand her potency, nor see her brilliance as a true "king". If Portia is the

Sun, then Shylock must necessarily be "the substitute", the energy source that seems at first as if it has no rival, but is then revealed by the light of the sublime sun — the real king — to be a mere pretender. Shylock, in short, is coal. The word coal is not used, since the play is a Hermetic presentation, but subtly transmitted through a substitute word "stones", repeated with intense feeling, three times in three lines, in Shylock's emotional cry (reported by Solanio):

And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones,
Stol'n by my daughter! Justice! Find the girl,
She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats. (II.viii.20 – 22)

The cry is one of agony, revealing the underlying insecurity people felt in leaving the sun, and coupled with "ducats", money, explaining how "stones", coal, were economic necessities. The use of "stones" as a substitute for coal, goes back to *Romeo and Juliet*, where Friar Lawrence groups them with resources like plants and herbs, leading to the possibility that they are coal, which looks like stones:

O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies
In plants, herbs, stones and their true qualities;
For naught so vile that on the earth doth live
But to the earth some special good doth give;
Nor aught so good but, strained from that fair use,
Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse. (II.iii.15 – 20)

Friar Lawrence also mentions that the resources (such as stones) "strained from" their "fair use" might be used in such a way that stumbles on "abuse", which is a veiled reference to the heavy pollution from coal smoke in London

at this time. Macbeth (who represents mankind rupturing the economic and spiritual connection with the sun) also uses the word “stones” when he is about to slay Duncan (the sun figure): “The very stones prate of my whereabouts” (2.1.58).

Later, in *The Merchant of Venice*, the Duke similarly uses the word “stony” to characterize Shylock:

A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch,
 Uncapable of pity, void and empty
 From any dram of mercy. (4.2.4–6)

Shylock’s character famously has many human dimensions and also stands complexly and thoughtfully in reference to the antisemitic traditions of the time, but underneath it all, in the allegory, he represents coal: the allegory plays on the stock character of the “Jew” as outsider, outcast, counterpoint. To Shakespeare, it was not Jews, but fossil fuels that were the alien. And the necessity of using coal without regard to the future consequences is allegorized as the Venetian “law” which Shylock constantly seeks to have upheld, and which other characters, including Antonio, also all agree is necessary. In Antonio’s words:

The Duke cannot deny the course of law;
 For the commodity that strangers have
 With us in Venice, if it be denied,
 Will much impeach the justice of the state,
 Since the trade and profit of the city
 Consisteth of all nations. (3.3.26–31)

In other words, England cannot refuse to use coal, its own resource, because

then, eventually, someone else would use it. The system "consisteth of all nations", (now, we call it the "global economy"--but more accurately, the situation is more like game theory, where players must act while keeping in mind the possible actions of other players, and the idea that eventually someone will use a resource out of sheer lack of alternatives).

Antonio then gets in debt to Shylock, and then (in the words of Portia) "stand(s) within his danger" (4.1.180). The dynamic in this microcosmic world is clear: Shakespeare, allegorized by Antonio, must rely wholly on the fossil fuel economy in the creation, transmission production and performance of his plays. A whole economic structure, which included the theater industry, the court, myriad other industries and economic pathways, was reliant on coal in London by the 1590s. Without coal, permanent theaters would probably not have been built in London, starting in 1567¹.

Shakespeare knew quite well that he "owed" his success and wealth to coal. He understood that the economic process entangled everyone, including himself. It is of course Portia who so eloquently states "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" (4.1.174), echoing Antonio's lament "that I have much ado to know myself". In fact, Shakespeare risked the annihilation of his own identity, or his solar-based principles, in a city which progressively abolished the sun economy by degrees every single day. This feeling of being compromised is in a coded way, Antonio's "sadness" in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Antonio is sad, even before he undertakes to borrow money from Shylock. In the allegory, we can say that Shakespeare is pointing to the fact that a coal-powered economy created conditions where large numbers of poor people lived in urban conditions that were both less healthful and less abundant in food than the simple rural villages that had preceded the coal-based economy. More generally, Bassanio's penury points to the overall stress a fossil-fuel-economy-based society faces as it constantly compensates, by issuing debt, for

the depletion of its main supporting fuel.

Antisemitism and Roderigo Lopez

Shakespeare sympathized with another man besides Giordano Bruno who was executed by self-righteous bullies for religious reasons. This man was Roderigo Lopez, a physician of Portuguese background who was tried and executed for trying to poison Elizabeth I. Born into a Jewish family in Portugal, Lopez graduated from university with a degree in medicine, then went to England where he was appointed chief physician to Elizabeth I in 1586. In January 1594, the Earl of Essex accused Lopez of conspiring to poison the Queen. (Stephen Greenblatt explains that Essex had tried some years before to recruit Lopez as a secret agent, but Lopez had refused, and this had prompted the Earl of Essex to become Lopez' enemy (Greenblatt 273)). Lopez insisted on his innocence, and Elizabeth's three-month delay signing Lopez death warrant is sometimes cited as evidence that she doubted the case against him. According to the 16th century historian William Camden, Lopez declared from the scaffold that "he loved the Queen as well as he loved Jesus Christ" (Greenblatt 277). This statement, coming from a man of Jewish background, prompted cruel mocking laughter from the crowd.

In the background of this event is the fact that in 1290 England had expelled the entire Jewish community from its shores. Jews had been "forbidden on pain of death to return" (Greenblatt 258), though there was "no precipitating crisis, no state of emergency....and no chronicler bothered to record the official reasons" (Greenblatt 258) and indeed:

Perhaps no one, Jew or Christian, thought reasons needed to be given. For decades the Jewish population in England had been in desperate trouble: accused of Host desecration and the ritual murder of Christian children, hated

as moneylenders, reviled as Christ killers, beaten and lynched by mobs whipped into anti-Jewish frenzy by the incendiary sermons of itinerant friars. (Greenblatt 258)

By Shakespeare's era, the "Jewish population of England was ancient history" (Greenblatt 258), and there were no more Jews who openly practiced their religion, though London had a small population of converts from Judaism, some of whom may have been Marranos, those secretly practicing Judaism while professing Christianity (Greenblatt 258). Nevertheless, despite being virtually non-existent, Jewish people became a class of beings, like "Ethiopians, Turks, witches, hunchbacks and others" (Greenblatt 259) who could be used to project various fantasies relating to religion, nationality, identity, sexuality, gender and so on, onto. "To sort out who they were to themselves....the English 'constructed' a figure of the Jew, over against which they contrasted a figure of the Englishman."² In this process:

Not surprisingly, (Jews) found their way into the ordinary language that theatrical characters, including Shakespeare's, speak. "If I do not take pity of her I am a villain," says Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*, tricked by his friends into declaring a passion for Beatrice. "If I do not love her, I am a Jew" (2.3.231 – 32). Everyone knew what that meant: Jews were by nature villainous, unnatural, coldhearted....Jews were in circulation as despised figures in stories and in everyday speech, and Shakespeare, particularly early in his career, reflected and furthered this circulation, apparently without moral reservation. (Greenblatt 259 – 260)

As Greenblatt later says these "moments of impulsive, unself-conscious Jew-baiting...cannot be taken as the expression of the playwright's considered 'opinion' about Jews or other strangers...they are simply instances of lively or amusing speech...the language of the crowd" (Greenblatt 264 – 5). Obviously

Shakespeare was familiar with the stereotype of the Jew. But *The Merchant of Venice* reveals that Shakespeare had some other observations to subtly add.

Shylock as a character has been connected to the case of Rodrigo Lopez since February 1880 when a young Oxford student named Solomon Lazarus Levi (who changed his name to S.L. Lee before he matriculated at Oxford due to pressures to assimilate) published his essay “The Original of Shylock” in *Gentleman’s Magazine*.³ Levi’s essay portrays Lopez in a sympathetic light, and many writers since, including Greenblatt, have concluded that Lopez was probably innocent, and that Shylock’s power in the comedy partly stems from Shakespeare’s sympathy for his character and for Rodrigo Lopez. Greenblatt concludes, and I agree, that *The Merchant of Venice* proves that Shakespeare must have been “both intrigued and nauseated” (Greenblatt 278) by Lopez’ public hanging, the laughter of the crowd, the fact that Lopez’ profession to be a Christian was taken as an obvious lie by a Jew “practicing an art perfected, it was said, by the Jesuits: equivocation” (Greenblatt 277).

At some point between 1880 and 1937⁴, it was noticed by someone studying the play that the word *lupus*, Latin for “wolf”, sounds a bit like “Lopez” and it was speculated, I believe convincingly, that the following three images of wolves (one of which has the phrase “hang’d for human slaughter” beside it, echoing Lopez’ fate) in *The Merchant of Venice*, all of which occur in reference to Shylock, might be subtle but sure signs of Shakespeare’s sympathy for both Shylock and Lopez:

Antonio: I pray you, think you question with the Jew:
 You may as well go stand upon the beach
 And bid the main flood bate his usual height;
 You may as well use question with the wolf
 Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb; (4.1.70 – 74)

Gratiano: O, be thou damn'd, execrable dog!
And for thy life let justice be accused.
Thou almost makest me waver in my faith
To hold opinion with Pythagoras
That souls of animals infuse themselves
Into the trunks of men. Thy currish spirit
Governed a wolf, who, hang'd for human slaughter,
Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
And whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed dam,
Infus'd itself in thee; for thy desires
Are wolvish, bloody, starv'd, and ravenous. (4.1.128 – 138) (my emphasis)

As for Shylock's own lines, his famous "hath not a Jew eyes?" speech does, as many critics have said, support the idea that Shakespeare was not an anti-Semite, looked very much beyond the stock figure of the Jew and saw all people as people:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means... (3.1.59 – 62)

In addition, as many critics have said, in justifying his bond of a pound of flesh, Shylock also says to the Christians, "you have among you many a purchas'd slave....Shall I say to you 'Let them be free'" (4.1.90 – 94), which calls into question the claims of the Christians that they are morally superior.

The Abrahamic Religions: "Jew", "Turk" and "Tartar"

With his emphasis on the goddess or the Divine Feminine (Portia's, Nerissa's and Jessica's disguises symbolize the disguise of this heretical goddess in the text), Shakespeare preferred pagan and pantheistic spiritual ideas that uphold

the dignity, agency and importance of nature and our material world. In this view people, (who are made of natural material such as water, carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, iron, and so forth, and who eat and drink various foods to keep our bodies going), are a small part of this scene.

Giordano Bruno regarded the Abrahamic religions as an inevitable but regrettable evolutionary blip based on competition, finite resources, game theory and thermodynamics⁵, and Shakespeare seems to have gotten his ideas from Bruno. I have covered how *Hamlet* is based on *Lo spaccio della besta trionfante* (1584) (*The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*)⁶ and how Shakespeare agrees with Bruno's harsh criticism of Christianity for its theological concept of the divine as not based on material (i.e. because material nature is not included). The same non-material (text-based) male god is seen in other Abrahamic religions as well, including Judaism. It is likely that Shakespeare did not see the two religions as particularly different.

Portia, disguised as a boy symbolizes the heretical (from the point of Christianity) goddess of the earth, material and nature disguised in this play. Similarly, Jessica, a Jewish woman, dresses as a boy for the same reason, because this nature goddess is also heretical in Judaism. Mirroring Portia, Jessica bestows wealth with caskets, and gets associated with pagan gods such as Cupid:

Jessica: Here, catch this casket, it is worth the pains.
 I am glad 'tis night, you do not look on me,
 For I am much asham'd of my exchange.
 But love is blind, and lovers cannot see
 The pretty follies that themselves commit,
 For if they could, Cupid himself would blush
 To see me thus transformed to a boy. (2.4.33 – 39) (my emphasis)

Later, in Act 5, Lorenzo is talking to Jessica and says to her "Come ho, and wake Diana with a hymn" (5.1.66). "Diana" here is the Greek goddess of the moon and the hunt, but also she is the pantheistic symbol of divine material nature used by Giordano Bruno in *Gli Erioici Furori* in his retelling of the Actaeon and Diana myth. For the same reason, Portia is also associated with Diana when she says: "If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana unless I be obtain'd by the manner of my father's will" (1.2.106 – 107).⁷

To understand Shakespeare's ideas about the Abrahamic religions, we can look at another play, *Macbeth*, where the witches are adding some ingredients that are human body parts, and which seem random, but of course are not, to the potion in their cauldron:

Third Witch: Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf,
Witch's mummy, maw and gulf
Of the ravin'd salt-sea shark,
Root of hemlock digg'd i' th' dark,
Liver of blaspheming Jew,
Gall of goat, and slips of yew
Sliver'd in the moon's eclipse,
Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips... (4.1.22 – 29) (my emphasis)

Examining the relevant ingredients that symbolize the Abrahamic religions, we see "liver of blaspheming Jew" (Judaism), "Nose of Turk" (Islam), and "Tartar's lips" (Christian Orthodox). Macbeth, of course, who is about to enter onto the stage, represents Western European Christianity. Thus, including Macbeth, all four representatives of the major Abrahamic religions are included. The witches, by listing these symbolic aspects (and implying Macbeth's inclusion and the representative of Western European Christianity) mean to single out these four flavors of closely related "triumphalist" religions,

which all stress patriarchal (male) power and (female) obedience to this power. These patriarchal religions also strongly wield political power (expressed as colonialism and capitalism in history) that both drives Macbeth to the top and then destroys him in eventual collapse. The body parts (liver, nose, lips) foreshadow Macbeth's own death, his own breakdown as he collapses. This is because a non-sacred nature (where Earth becomes merely a source of economic resources and a sink for wastes instead of a precious spiritual resource to be protected for generations acting together) means that eventually the planet becomes so degraded environmentally that it cannot sustain life or any type of religious groups with clerics and hierarchies. Thus, Portia's line "Which is the merchant here? And which the Jew?" also implies that, from the standpoint of the goddess (pantheism and paganism), there is not much difference theologically between any of the Abrahamic religions (although clearly, as I explained above, Shakespeare's sympathies lay more closely with Shylock than with the Christians).

Another piece of evidence pointing to the fact that Shakespeare saw no particular difference between Abrahamic religions can be seen in Shylock's lines addressed to Antonio: "You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog, and spet upon my Jewish gabardine" (1.3.111 – 12). Interestingly, we never actually see Antonio spitting on anyone, including on Shylock. Although we can be of course one hundred percent sure that Shylock is telling the truth (and Antonio even confirms this: "I am as like to call thee so again/To spet on thee again" (1.3.130 – 131)), nevertheless, Antonio never fails to behave properly, kindly and like a gentleman throughout the play. This opens up a little gap in the mind as the reader/audience must mentally form the image of Antonio spitting on people and try to square it with the polite Antonio presented on stage. This gap is exactly the sort of quiet and subtle trick that Shakespeare uses to raise subconscious questions in the minds of the people who consume his content:

"Why is someone like Antonio, a polite person, driven to behave badly to someone else?" "What sort of narratives are being fed to people to make them behave so out of character?"

The Magic of Golden Rings

Golden rings are used throughout Shakespeare's plays to both denote and convey the power of the sun. Sometimes gold rings, merely by being mentioned, constitute a piece of poetic, though hidden verbal magic: through the hearing or voicing of the words "gold" and "ring" together, a troubled character with a deficit may be "cured" or else achieve a new status which brings him or her closer to the sun. Sometimes actual gold rings, exchanged by the characters, serve a similar purpose. Whether they are mere words or real objects seen on the stage as props, gold rings transmit the power of the sun in Shakespeare's plays. The intention and the result are magic of a certain kind. But what kind of magic?

To understand better how the "magic" of the golden rings in Shakespeare works, we should first examine some of the theory behind the rise of the Hermetic study of magic that occurred in the Renaissance:

The potentialities open to human ingenuity were greatly enhanced by the tide of Neoplatonism which swept through Renaissance Europe. The revival of this, the last school of ancient pagan philosophy, fostered a disposition to blur the difference between matter and spirit. Instead of being regarded as an inanimate mass, the Earth itself was deemed to be alive. The universe was peopled by a hierarchy of spirits, and thought to manifest all kinds of occult influences and sympathies. The cosmos was an organic unity in which every part bore a sympathetic relationship to the rest. Even colours, letters and numbers were endowed with magical properties. The investigation of such phenomena was the primary task of the natural philosopher, and their employment for his own purposes was the distinguishing mark of the

magician. Three main types of magical activity thus lay open: natural magic, concerned to exploit the occult properties of the natural world; celestial magic, involving the influence of the stars; and ceremonial magic, an appeal for aid to spiritual beings. (Thomas 265)

Although the author, British historian Professor Keith Thomas, clearly regards the premise behind the catalogue of magical practices here to be without any scientific basis, there is *one* line in his dismissive summary that cannot be totally rejected by modern scientists. That line is “*The cosmos was an organic unity in which every part bore a sympathetic relationship to the rest.*” We know through studies of ecology and environmental science, as well as quantum mechanics, how the many parts of our planet are influenced by a myriad of factors, emergent interactions of all of the other parts, including subatomic particles. And out of all the relationships that cause influences on the other parts, the relationship between the sun and the earth relationship has an out-sized importance and value. By dwelling on the implications of the *real relationship* of the two celestial bodies, Giordano Bruno, Shakespeare’s secret hero, was the first to outline a vision of the solar system and the larger universe so modern and fundamental that it is still with us today:

All celestial bodies are either hot or cold, luminous or opaque, throughout the infinite whole the cold and opaque bodies will necessarily circulate around the hot and luminous ones, in order to guarantee the infinite and eternal process of generation and corruption, that is, the infinite process of life. (Gatti 125)

Further, in *Operelatine*, Bruno showed how a fundamental understanding of the relationships— what was dependent on what in the cosmos—could bring clarity and avoid confusion in thinking down here on earth when he wrote, “When you conform yourself to the celestial forms, ‘you will arrive from the

confused plurality of things at the underlying unity'. For when the parts of the universal species are not considered separately but in relation to their underlying order—what is there that we may not understand, memorise and do?" (Bruno, qtd in Yates 219)

These words express Bruno's underlying vision of unity in the universe (the underlying order) and this idea can show how Keith Thomas' sentence "The cosmos was an organic unity in which every part bore a sympathetic relationship to the rest" might also be considered a valid scientific statement, and moreover it might be considered a partial paraphrase of Giordano Bruno's own view of how magic works through "the art of memory", where the "real point was to order sense perceptions, imagination, and, ultimately understanding to reflect the basic harmony of the world itself." (Rowland 125) (my emphasis)

We should therefore understand Shakespeare's use of verbal magic as something that, first, is broadly aligned with Bruno's basic concept of the relationships of the sun and the earth within a larger infinite cosmos, and that, second, relies primarily on the principle of analogy, since "all magic, whatever its level of sophistication, worked on the principle of analogy" (Rowland 119).

For Bruno, "Real Magi were wise men, not tricksters, and their art derived its power from understanding how the world worked" (Rowland 117); and this same understanding is the basis of Shakespeare's art, as well as its underlying claims to transmit images, enact processes, or model the world's unseen natural secrets. Thus an encompassing awareness of the supreme cosmic importance of the sun is the basis for Shakespeare's ideas. He aligns his art with recognized supreme powers ("a king"), which he could know, through the cosmology of Bruno, to be the Sun. He demonstrates and enacts this process of recognition or transmission of "the power of the sun" in his plays in esoteric ways, and one way is with the rings.

Gratiano has this to say about the ring that Nerissa gave him:

About a hoop of gold, a paltry ring
 That she did give me, whose poesy was
 For all the world like cutler's poetry
 Upon a knife, "Love me, and leave me not." (V.i.147 – 150)

The first line, with its occurrence of both the words "gold" and "ring" signals the presence of Shakespearean magic about to be performed. The magic is a kind of hidden, though direct, and therefore unobtrusive pathway to the mind of the listener, where these two words create a round gold flashing symbol that is then followed by the words "for all the world", indicating the cosmic significance of the event, and then ending in the valediction: "Love me, and leave me not", that is to say, mankind should stick with the sun economy. Shakespeare lets slip his didactic intentions in a bit of comedic dialogue spoken by a subordinate: Gratiano. But let us not forget one salient fact about him, a compass point that indicates Gratiano's position: Gratiano is a Fool (in sophisticated Venetian dress) and the Fool is ever the character to tell the truth (though the truth he tells is generally unrecognized as such since Fools are not taken seriously) because he also retains a closeness to ritual and festivity, which is to say, to the Sun.

Before leaving the important topic of the gold rings, I would like to trace their route through the play. The paths they follow is intrinsic to the message of the power of art as a device to restore the sun economy to man. First, we have to remember that the golden rings originate with Portia and Nersissa, the Sun Figure and her assistant. That the sun shines is the inciter of all the action for anything. And at the end of the play, Bassanio and Gratiano have the rings. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the sun economy is restored to man through the actions of the comedy. It is the Sun (Portia) who saves Antonio-Shakespeare by providing inspiration and an ultimate 'answer' to coal. Thus though

Shakespeare risked being ethically compromised by having to "carry coals", (as someone working in a city where coal had become the primary fuel), by secretly enshrining and validating the sun economy and the spiritual divine sun he could save himself from moral and artistic annihilation. Through the sacrificial action of Antonio the rings come to be given to Portia and Nerissa who can then return them to Bassanio and Gratiano.

Shakespeare (through identification with Antonio) is a catalyst in the process to circulate the rings, symbols of the sun, and through their circulation the rings generate and express fellowship, gratitude, understanding, forgiveness, laughter, and recognition of the values that create communal bonds.

Antonio

The turning point in the play is the climax where Portia and Nerissa successfully battle the threatening, damaging and destructive force located in the character of Shylock. But who is cured? Not Bassanio, who is 'safe' by then.

The answer to this question is the key to the whole underlying dynamic of the play. That is why Shakespeare starts off this play with the words of Antonio, who states the key problem (although it is in allegory):

In sooth, I know not why I am so sad;
It wearies me, you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn.
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me,
That I have much ado to know myself. (1.i.1 – 7)

The first lines in Shakespeare's plays are coded messages that announce the theme. Here we have an "injured", or rather a "sad" protagonist. How will he get cured if he doesn't even know the reason for his misery? The theme is psychological depression and mental agony. How to find joy in such a situation? Furthermore, if Shakespeare's plays are allegories, then who is hiding behind the mask of Antonio? In Antonio, we can see a hermit (a lonely and isolated) character working assiduously 'behind the scenes' to bring Bassanio (the mankind character) together with the sun (Portia). It is Antonio who borrows money from Shylock in order to give Bassanio the means to visit Portia and win her hand. Like Friar Lawrence, who tries to bring Romeo and Juliet together, like Friar Francs, who brings Claudio and Hero together, and like Sir Topaz, who marries Olivia and Sebastian, Antonio masks Shakespeare, and to realize this gives us a new perspective on the notion of Antonio's "merchandise" (1.1.45). His ships, his wealth, all are ventures, not unlike plays, risky vessels launched in expectation of success. And Salerio even equates Antonio's ships with dramatic productions:

Your mind is tossing on the ocean,
 There where your argosies with portly sail
 Like signiors and rich burghers on the flood,
 Or as it were the pageants of the sea... (1.1.8 – 11) (my emphasis)

Shakespeare sees his role like this: he helps Man to win the Sun (that is to reclaim the Sun economy) through a special process whereby he gives his wealth (his plays) to Man. The whole complex mechanism can be compared to a kind of "Art of Memory", or theater of memory, and goes back to Giordano Bruno's description of the "practice of artificial memory as 'clever application of thought' to 'presenting, modeling, noting, or indicating in the likeness of

painting or writing, in order to express or signify" (Rowland 123):

Like the paintings of the "divine" Raphael or the sculpture of the "divine" Michelangelo, Bruno's art of memory brought heaven down to earth by capturing sublime ideas in physical form. Although he often compared his art to painting and writing, he called it architecture, an internal mental architecture where the imagination, rather than painter's brush or writer's pen, acted as the tool: "Just as a painting and sculpture use tools to shape their material, so, too, this art has no lack of tools to make its pictures." (Rowland 122)

By looking closely at these ideas of Bruno's, we can note their basic structural and functional similarity to the designs of Shakespeare's plays, cosmic allegories in which important cosmic 'statues' (figures or representations) move about in a specially designed microcosm or "architecture", an artwork with cosmic proportions and implications.

Act Five of *The Merchant of Venice* starts with romantic poetry, but the melodious exchange is suddenly interrupted by the entrance of a messenger with news:

Messenger: Stephano is my name, and I bring word
My mistress will before the break of day
Be here at Belmont. She doth stray about
By holy crosses, where she kneels and prays
For happy wedlock hours.
Lorenzo: Who comes with her?
Messenger: None but a holy hermit and her maid.
I pray you, is my master yet returned? (V.i.28 – 34)

Portia, who has carried all her plans to victory, is now seen in the mind's eye of the theater audience, though not on the stage, to be praying, accompanied

by a mysterious “holy hermit”. And he is never mentioned again: when Portia appears, accompanied by Nerissa, some 60 lines later, this obscure religious figure has completely vanished.

Portia’s “holy hermit” has been totally ignored in conventional scholarship, but I would like to propose a correct function for this mysterious monastic figure. Moreover, his identity is of great importance to the play and the guidance he implicitly, but so briefly, delivers has a parallel in the whole central thematic concept of *The Merchant of Venice*, which is another in the series of allegories Shakespeare wrote to celebrate the sun-driven economy and the Divine Feminine. The “happy wedlock hours” bespeak the union of the Sun (Portia) and Mankind (Bassanio in the allegory) in a solar-based economy. This is the constant project of all the “holy hermit” figures in Shakespeare, including Friar Lawrence, Friar Francis and Sir Topaz. They bring together Man and the Sun, and, by doing so, to implicitly banish and purge Coal from the world.

Note

- 1 Greenblatt notes, “...it was not until 1567 that a prosperous London grocer, John Brayne, put up the city’s first freestanding public playhouse, the Red Lion, in Stepney”. (p. 182)
- 2 William Myers, “Shakespeare, Shylock, and the Jews”, *Commentary*. April 1996.
- 3 <https://www.brunel.ac.uk/creative-writing/research/entertext/documents/entertext031/Alan-Stewart-The-Birth-of-a-National-Biography-The-Lives-of-Roderigo-Lopez-Solomon-Lazarus-Levi-and-Sidney-Lee.pdf>
- 4 https://dalspace.library.dal.ca/bitstream/handle/10222/57414/dalrev_vol17_iss3_pp333_338.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
 “The trial and execution-he was hanged, drawn and quartered-aroused great public feeling. It may be added that Lopez was very probably innocent. Now, a philosopher might have risen above such common prejudices against Jews, but it is most improbable that a dramatist dependent on the suffrage of these same Londoners-a dramatist who very likely punned on the words Lopez, Lupez (a variant), Lupus, and Wolf (IV, i, 134)-would dare, even if he felt such emotion, to set forth a Jew as a semi-tragic figure.”
- 5 https://www.academia.edu/85949008/_Con_il_vital_calore_with_a_vital_heat_Using_Science_and_Thermodynamics_to_Understand_Giordano_Bruno_s_Lo_Spaccio_Della_

Besta_Trionfante

6 https://www.academia.edu/90277922/Fish_Crocodiles_and_Whales_Giordano_Brunos_The_Expulsion_of_the_Triumphant_Beast_as_a_Source_for_Hamlet

7 Please see this paper for a full discussion of "Diana" and Shakespeare's heroines.
https://www.academia.edu/42153360/Shakespeare_Pantheist_Heretic_Defender_of_the_Divine_Feminine

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