

The Problem of the More-than-One: Friendship, Calculation, and Political Association in *The Merchant of Venice*

HENRY S. TURNER

If the word “democracy” allies itself or competes with that of aristocracy, it is because of number, of the reference to the required approbation of the greatest number. . . . Must friends be *in number*? Numerous? In great numbers? How many will there be? At what point do “great numbers” begin? What does “a friend” mean? . . . And what is the relationship between this quantum of friendship and democracy, as the agreement or approbation of number? We are saying here number as the greatest number, to be sure, but in the first place number as the deployment of a countable unity, of the “one more” and of this calculable form of presentable unity, the voice of the subject.

—Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*¹

MY PURPOSE IN THIS ESSAY is to show how Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* (ca. 1596) may be understood as an exercise in what we conventionally call political theory and especially in political theory pertaining to democracy, but it is also to suggest that the play requires us to specify in new ways what a “political” reading of Shakespeare might mean in light of late work by Jacques Derrida on the nature of friendship, calculation and decision, and justice. In the final years of the sixteenth century, of course, democracy was little more than a distant philosophical category—both Plato and Aristotle had regarded the prospect of government by the multitude with a distaste shared by the hierarchically minded writers of the medieval and early modern periods. And yet problems that would eventually become central to the notion of a democratic polity were discussed everywhere during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: in treatises on the nature of the commonwealth, natural law, and kingship and counsel; in ethical philosophy; in historiography and travel

For comments and recommendations on drafts of this essay, I thank Barbara Correll, Ewan Fernie, Sara Guyer, Jonathan Gil Harris, Unhae Langis, Caroline Levine, Julia Reinhard Lupton, Karen Newman, Rick Rambuss, Mario Ortiz-Robles, Ramie Targoff, Rebecca Walkowitz, and the readers and editorial staff at *Shakespeare Quarterly*.

¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), 101–2.

writing; and in prose utopias, romances, lyrics, and plays across many different genres. How can *The Merchant of Venice* be said to contribute to such a project, at once so distant from and yet so relevant to our own moment?

The first and most obvious answer to the question lies in the vexed history of early modern republicanism, as David Wootton has recently observed.

The Romans had no word for democracy, but since they read the Greek philosophers they paraphrased the concept into Latin as government by the people. They introduced a new term, *res publica*, which included the three good forms of government [monarchy, aristocracy, and “democracy” as polity, or constitutional government among equals] and excluded the three bad forms [tyranny, oligarchy, and “democracy” as rule by the *demos*, the poor and the popular]. In the late fifteenth century, in the Florence of Savonarola, a remarkable linguistic revolution took place: the only real republic, it was argued, was a popular government (which was understood to be a way of paraphrasing the Greek term democracy into Latin). Monarchies were always tyrannies; aristocracies were always oligarchies, which were themselves a form of tyranny. Thus there were really only two forms of government: republics and tyrannies. . . . Thus a history of the concept of democracy needs to take seriously the idea that republic (or, in English, commonwealth) was for a long time . . . a synonym for democracy, and, since there was a strong preference for Latin over Greek . . . , the word “democracy” was rarely needed.²

When we trace modern notions of representative democracy back to a republican model of free citizens who govern through a system of elected rather than of inherited office—to the notion of a constitutionally defined government by equals—we are, in Wootton’s view, referring to a tradition that originated in Florence at the end of the fifteenth century rather than in the Greek or Roman era, despite what many historians of political thought have presumed.³ The question of a specifically English tradition of republicanism prior to the mid-seventeenth century has been the subject of additional historiographical dispute,⁴ leaving the question of Shakespeare’s own political philosophy, much

² David Wootton, “Oxbridge Model,” *Times Literary Supplement* (23 September 2005), 7, 9–10, esp. 7, 9, reviewing John Dunn’s *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* (London: Atlantic Books, 2005).

³ See especially David Wootton, “The True Origins of Republicanism: The Disciples of Baron and the Counter-Example of Venturi,” in *Il repubblicanesimo moderno: L’idea di repubblica nella riflessione storica di Franco Venturi*, ed. Manuela Albertone (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2006), 225–57; and “Introduction. The Republican Tradition: From Commonwealth to Common Sense” in *Republicanism, Liberty, and Commercial Society, 1649–1776*, ed. David Wootton (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994), 1–41, esp. 1–19.

⁴ For J.G.A. Pocock, the strongly hierarchical nature of late medieval England precluded a genuine and sustained flourishing of republican political concepts; see *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975), 333–60. Blair Worden follows Pocock in emphasizing the mid-seventeenth-century

less any republican attitudes shared with his contemporaries, impossible to settle with any certainty.

In a recent discussion of the problem, Andrew Hadfield has concluded that Shakespeare, like many English writers, can be said to articulate a “cluster of beliefs, ideas and identifiable modes of writing” that we may legitimately associate with republican political traditions. “Republicanism was a literary phenomenon, as well as a matter of constitutional belief and doctrine,” Hadfield argues, “because it consisted of a series of stories. . . . [that] were easy to narrate, repeat, retell and refigure, signalling a republican subject matter . . . without *necessarily* entailing a commitment to any programme.”⁵ As is well known, the story of Venice enjoyed a mythical status among early modern writers interested in the political institutions and the ethical ideals associated with republicanism, since the Venetian city-state provided a successful model of a mixed constitution, had developed an elaborate system of voting procedures designed to reduce the influence of faction, and (not least) enjoyed an economic dominance that seemed somehow to follow from its political organization—precisely how, English writers were not sure.⁶ The mere title and setting of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, therefore, could hardly fail to evoke this cluster of associations in a significant portion of his audience, regardless of how Shakespeare himself may have understood problems associated with the tradition of republican thought.

I would like to supplement recent interest in Shakespeare’s political attitudes by examining several of the ethical presuppositions that informed early

reemergence in England of a republican tradition; see “Classical Republicanism and the Puritan Revolution” in *History & Imagination: Essays in Honour of H. R. Trevor-Roper*, ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl, and Blair Worden (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1981), 182–200. Markku Peltonen has demonstrated how widely republican attitudes extended among Elizabethan writers; see his *Classical Humanism and Republicanism in English Political Thought, 1570–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995); see also David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), esp. 88, 115–16, 284; and *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric, and Politics, 1627–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), esp. 15–20.

⁵ Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), 52, 54; and “Shakespeare and Republicanism: History and Cultural Materialism,” *Textual Practice* 17 (2003): 461–83. I have greatly benefited from Julia Reinhard Lupton’s recent analysis of *The Merchant of Venice* in her *Citizen-Saints: Shakespeare and Political Theology* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005), 75–101; and “The Pearl Fishers: Thinking with Hannah Arendt and William Shakespeare.” I am grateful to Professor Lupton for making “The Pearl Fishers” available to me in advance of its publication.

⁶ On the myth of Venice in the early modern period, see Pocock, 272–330; Nicolai Rubenstein, “Italian Political Thought, 1450–1530,” in *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450–1700*, ed. J. H. Burns with Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 30–65; and David C. McPherson, *Shakespeare, Jonson, and the Myth of Venice* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1990), 51–68.

modern political philosophy more broadly and by redirecting attention to the role that economic discourse played in furnishing a conceptual framework for questions about republicanism during the late Elizabethan period. My discussion of the play will be framed by a close examination of friendship and justice in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and in Cicero's *De officiis*, and one of my purposes will simply be to demonstrate the formative influence that both books had on the political imaginary of *The Merchant of Venice*, as well as on the moral and political philosophies of its audiences. Neal Wood points out that *De officiis* "seems to have been the first book of classical antiquity to be printed" in Renaissance Europe (at Mainz in 1465); it was ubiquitous in the English grammar-school classroom throughout the sixteenth century, appearing in multiple editions carefully designed for instruction in Latin. No less a figure than Lord Burghley was said to carry a copy on all occasions.⁷

Elsewhere, I have described the centrality of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in the English intellectual landscape: it was by far the most commonly owned of Aristotle's books, appearing in both public and private inventories two, three, or even four times as often as other Aristotelian works, including the *Politics*. We find it cited by the widest range of writers on the most diverse questions, and it was as influential on English conceptions of poetic discourse as it was on the study of moral and political philosophy, strictly speaking.⁸ The work was also a long-standing source of medieval and early modern economic theory, and indeed Shakespeare critics have turned to Aristotle most frequently for his economic arguments: as a source for the distinction between use value and exchange value, for instance, or as an ancient authority on the problem of usury.⁹

In what follows, I will call friendship "the problem of the 'more-than-one,'" since as both Derrida and Laurie Shannon have shown, any investigation into the tradition of philosophical writing on friendship leads us to consider problems of number, unit, and quantity: the relationship between the one and the many, and the individual and the collective; problems of equality, similarity,

⁷ Neal Wood, "Cicero and the Political Thought of the Early English Renaissance," *Modern Language Quarterly* 51 (1990): 185–207, esp. 188, 190; David Harris Sacks, "The Greed of Judas: Avarice, Monopoly, and the Moral Economy in England, ca. 1350–ca. 1600," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28 (1998): 263–307, esp. 277 and n. 73 (providing bibliographic information on the book's many sixteenth-century editions); and Howard Jones, *Master Tully: Cicero in Tudor England* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1998), 120, 127–142.

⁸ Henry S. Turner, *The English Renaissance Stage: Geometry, Poetics, and the Practical Spatial Arts 1580–1630* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), 47–50, 62–63, 65; for the influence of the *Nicomachean Ethics* on Sidney's *Defense of Poesy*, see 86–90, with additional bibliography.

⁹ For Aristotle as a source of economic theory, see Joel Kaye, *Economy and Nature in the Fourteenth Century: Money, Market Exchange, and the Emergence of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998); Sacks, 270–75; and Will Fisher, "Queer Money," *ELH* 66 (1999): 1–23, esp. 11 (on usury in Aristotle's *Politics*).

and recognition; and the laws and power necessary to regulate relationships among people and the values that justify this regulation.¹⁰ For all these reasons, the problem of the more-than-one is fundamentally a political problem, and it introduces several major questions that drive Shakespeare's play in both form and content. How is the common good to be defined, and how is the common good of a community to be reconciled with the rights and claims of singular members? How is community itself to be defined and how is the individual understood—that is, what classical philosophies of social life and subjectivity are implied in Aristotelian and Ciceronian approaches to the problem of justice and how does Shakespeare's play work on these philosophies? What or who persists outside possible associations between the more-than-one ("partnership," "friendship"), forms of association that mediate entrance to the political community by providing the structuring principles and the system of value by which the political community constitutes itself and seeks to persist? Who is the noncitizen? What is owed to the noncitizen? And can this debt be calculated?

In *The Merchant of Venice*, these questions are sharpened by a late sixteenth-century confrontation between two systems of reasoning that were forcing a reexamination of the core concepts of humanist moral and political philosophy—the definition of the person; the nature of the collective, or persons living together; and the principle of justice that mediated between them. Borrowing from Derrida and Bruno Latour, I call these two systems of reasoning "modes of calculation": they may provisionally be described as classical and qualitative, on the one hand, and early modern and quantitative, on the other, and their convergence produced a crisis in methods of deliberation about human affairs.¹¹ This crisis extended above all to standards for evaluating the means and ends of human action, in both its public or political and private or ethical

¹⁰ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*; Lorna Hutson, *The Usurer's Daughter: Male Friendship and Fictions of Women in Sixteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1994), esp. 3–9, 52–64, 224–38. See also Laurie Shannon, *Sovereign Amity: Figures of Friendship in Renaissance Contexts* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002); and "Likenings: Rhetorical Husbandries and Portia's 'True Conceit' of Friendship," *Renaissance Drama* n.s. 31 (2002): 3–26.

¹¹ The concept of "calculation" is central to Derrida's late work and emerges around two distinct but related problems, that of decision and that of the gift. On calculation and decision, see n. 15 below; on calculation and the general economy of the gift, see *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992), esp. 142, 146–148, 155–56; and *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995), esp. 93, 107, 112. On Bruno Latour's notions of "centres of calculation" and "logistics," see his *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987), 232–41; *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), 3, 19; *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996), 183–84; and *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), 304.

forms: public or political, insofar as this action pertained to the maintenance or destruction of the larger community of persons, and private or ethical, insofar as it pertained to relationships between singular people and to their affective relationships with one another. And so it is with a question of affect that I begin.

I. ANTONIO'S SADNESS

"In sooth, I know not why I am so sad."¹² How are we to explain the cause of Antonio's sadness? One ready psychoanalytic answer—a melancholia brought on by the failure to incorporate a lost Other; a generalized mourning constituted by a lack in the subject's (unconscious) refusal of a (homo)erotic object—risks foreclosing full consideration of the play's ethical and political difficulties. These difficulties are not without homophilic dimensions, to be sure, but they cannot be fully encompassed by them.¹³ As we shall see, Antonio suffers from an irreducible passivity in decision that is a fundamental precondition of any political association in the community of the more-than-one: in my view, his sadness should be understood first as an instance of this generalized undecidability at the heart of the ethical and political subject, before it is reinserted into the calculus of desire that drives the play.

The problem of decision is, of course, a famous theme throughout the play, as in the plot of Portia and her suitors or in the trial scene of Act 4, in which Shylock is repeatedly asked to decide between two notions of justice, that of mercy and that of contract. Lancelot Gobbo must decide between one master and another; Jessica chooses Lorenzo, a Christian husband, over her Jewish father, producing in herself justifications and regret, the malicious pronouncements of Salarino and Solanio, and the spectacle of Shylock, caught between two ends he deems equally valuable ("My daughter! O my ducats!" [2.8.15]). Antonio decides to sign the bond rather than to deny Bassanio, choosing love for his friend over love for himself; Bassanio decides to accept the gesture despite its terms, choosing self-love over love for his friend; Portia decides to dress as Balthasar in order to deliver the friend of her love. These decisions and

¹² All quotations from the play are from William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Jay L. Halio (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993). This line appears at 1.1.1.

¹³ For attempts to explain Antonio's melancholy, see Lars Engle, "'Thrift is Blessing': Exchange and Explanation in *The Merchant of Venice*," *SQ* 37 (1986): 20–37, esp. 21–28; Cynthia Lewis, "Antonio and Alienation in 'The Merchant of Venice,'" *South Atlantic Review* 48.4 (1983): 19–31, esp. 31–32n7; Karen Newman, "Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*," *SQ* 38 (1987): 19–33, esp. 22 and n. 13; and Steve Patterson, "The Bankruptcy of Homoerotic Amity in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*," *SQ* 50 (1999): 9–32, esp. 10n3.

others like them, from the smallest to the largest, seem to constitute nothing less than the very fabric of the play and the principle from which dramatic form in general results.

What are we to make of this problem of decision that seems both extraordinarily self-conscious and utterly beneath notice? For one thing, it is clear that there is no such thing as a simple decision in *The Merchant of Venice*. We would be perfectly justified in arguing that no character decides anything and that the play's central philosophical dilemma concerns neither the act of decision making nor the decision to act, but the *impossibility* of decision, a phrase that I will take for now in a relatively straightforward sense. The whole point of the casket device, after all, is that Portia herself cannot choose a suitor but is under the Laws of the Father and of Fortune, forces conspicuous throughout the play. Antonio cannot help but furnish Bassanio, since he is compelled by a melancholy stronger than himself; his default on Shylock's loan results from the cruelty of Fortune and the lottery-like force of chance that drives a merchant's life. There can be no question of Shylock forgiving the loan, since he, too, is compelled by an emotion larger than himself, since the hatred that motivates him is not simply his own but is shared by Antonio and other Christians and directed toward the category of person to which he belongs. Antonio cannot but submit to the force of Law that rules the commercial community of Venice, which preempts anything like choice; for the same reason, Shylock can only suffer a judgment that has gathered decisive force into itself and that seems to reside in the very letter of the statute. It is easy to see how problems of decision are central to the play's staging of a variety of ethical, legal, and political attitudes, especially in those scenes endowed with several opposed voices (the scene of Jessica's elopement; the trial scene). Our own critical position on the staging of these problems goes a long way toward predicting a final assessment of the play's (or even Shakespeare's) political opinions. We assume either that characters deliberate, decide, and act as free subjects or that they move within a structure (social, discursive, legal, ideological) that determines the conditions of possibility for any choice and action. If Shylock refuses to deliver Antonio, then he acts cruelly and demonically; if the Law chooses for him, then he is the victim of a Christian community that uses the statute as a fig leaf for its hypocrisy.¹⁴

The relationship between decisions and political ideals is a very old philosophical problem: as Derrida has shown, the analysis of their relationship forms the bedrock of the Western philosophical tradition of political thought

¹⁴ On critical attitudes to the play, see Walter Cohen, "The Merchant of Venice and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism," *ELH* 49 (1982): 765–89; and Richard Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997), 159–226.

from its very first articulation. At stake is nothing less than the notion of democracy as a mode of political organization depending on the freedom of choice of equal persons, and thus also the notions of subjectivity that inform democratic discourses: notions of sovereignty, law, and (pace Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben) a state of exception; and notions of justice, ethics, and (pace Levinas) a responsibility to the Other that exceeds moral duty as traditionally conceived.¹⁵ Derrida has recast the problem of decision as the experience of a radical impossibility, an aporetic event that always exceeds the rational agency of a putatively sovereign, free subject. Contrary to traditional philosophical accounts, Derrida argues, what we call a decision must be understood as a suspension of reason and freedom rather than as their fullest exercise: insofar as every decision worth the name involves a disposition of forces and circumstances utterly heterogeneous both to the subject and to that decision's conditions of possibility, the event of the decision projects the subject into a time-to-come that is wholly other and thus cannot be foreseen in advance, grasped with certainty, understood, comprehended, or calculated according to any logic. To do so would be to negate the newness and alterity of what results from the decision *qua* event.

At the same time, however, the impossible and aporetic dimension of the decision resides in the fact that it immediately negates the suspension, however momentary, of the radical chance that has made it possible—what Derrida, after Nietzsche, has called “the perhaps”¹⁶—since the decision *determines* the moment of the perhaps and chooses one person, one thing, or one course of action over others. The decision therefore has a performative force, since it *makes* the event that would seem to preexist it or be outside it, and it is this performative force that leads Derrida to describe the decision not as rational or teleological but as *teleiopoetic*.¹⁷ The decision is what makes its own end, or (to employ the necessary grammar of the future anterior) the decision makes the end that will have come about when it has been completed and is viewed retrospectively (as it always must be). We cannot even say with certainty that the decision occurs in “time”—why should time not be the *effect* of the decision, and life (or death) the effect of an infinite string of tributary decisions

¹⁵ In addition to the *Politics of Friendship*, see Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1990): 920–1045, esp. 929, 941–42, 947–73; *Given Time*, 127–129; *Gift of Death*, 5–6, 24–26; *Points. . . : Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf and others (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), 147–48; and *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 23–24.

¹⁶ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 67.

¹⁷ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 32.

and subsequent decisions, each of which is perforated by the same impossible, aporetic structure and each of which operates with a performative power? How, indeed, could we identify a moment of nondecision, especially since the act of identifying a moment as nondecisive would itself constitute an act of decision making?

For all these reasons, Derrida will declare that every decision is a decision of the Other: decisions require passage into an "other" temporality that is the duration of the "perhaps" rather than the carefully managed time of logic and deliberation. The performative force of the decision ensures that it remains at some level absolutely singular, differing both from what preceded it and from what it makes. Decisions are "made" by me and make me other in the time of a heartbeat (other to myself, then; other to myself, now; other to the myself-to-come). Decisions are "made" by others for and about me as subject, much the way my choosing one word over another is possible only within the structure of language that I inherit and in which the other always resides. Decisions are "made" in the name of and about the other to whom I am/we are always accountable—for any decision is, rigorously speaking, always both a singular and a plural, and thus also a "political," undertaking. For all these reasons, too, however, the Other can never have only one name, since any true act of decision requires us to experience the impossibility of making an absolute determination of the Other: if I choose "in the name of one" who is a friend, then I must inevitably choose my friend over others whom I do not choose, the others who form part of my political community, the others against whom my political community is defined, the Other who is myself.

If after Derrida the notion of decision can no longer function as a simple political and philosophical concept, it nonetheless remains a critical problem *to be thought* precisely because of its ethical and political implications. I would now like to turn to the ways in which *The Merchant of Venice* contributes to such a project, not least because drama itself depends upon the same performative, teleiopoietic structure that makes decision so problematic and so necessary to the history and the future of a politics—of a democracy—that is yet to come.¹⁸ The long tradition of ethical philosophy that underlies early modern republican thought would suggest that what is at stake in the play's first scene is how Antonio's private affections render his public and political person coherent, and vice versa. The *Nicomachean Ethics* claims that "happiness" is the supreme Good, the defining characteristic of the virtuous man who performs noble actions and who is, for this reason, most worthy of emulation and most deserving of power and authority over the community of persons. To be happy is finally to be

¹⁸ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 104.

dominant: not simply to achieve the acme of ethical life but to prepare oneself to assume the mantle of power that defines the political man.¹⁹ If Antonio is unhappy, therefore, it is because he remains in a *passion* of Fortune: he awaits but is not yet in possession of that Good which is “not easy to be taken away from” the person who possesses it.²⁰ As a merchant, moreover, his case is hard: “the life of money-making,” Aristotle notes, “is a constrained kind of life, and clearly wealth is not the Good we are in search of, for it is only good as being useful, a means to something else.”²¹ If “happiness does seem to require the addition of external prosperity,”²² we should not confuse this happiness with the possession of the Supreme Good, which finally escapes a mercantile logic of accounting:

We think happiness the most desirable of all good things without being itself reckoned as one among the rest; for if it were so reckoned, it is clear that we should consider it more desirable when even the smallest of other good things were combined with it, since this addition would result in a larger total of good, and of two goods the greater is always the more desirable.²³

Viewed in ethical and political terms, therefore, the play can be said to open upon a partial citizen: a man sad because his possession of the Good is uncertain, a passive man not yet entirely virtuous, who remains caught in an unfortunate tautology. According to Aristotle, the truly virtuous man will “remain happy all his life,”

since he will be always or at least most often employed in doing and contemplating the things that are in conformity with virtue. . . . And if, as we said, a man’s life is determined by his activities, no supremely happy man can ever become miserable.²⁴

Antonio’s case now appears even more desperate than we first recognized, since his (passive) sadness bespeaks a constitutional *incapacity* for (active) happiness and thus a perpetual deprivation of the virtue and power that is the entitlement of the citizen.

What brings happiness—not the single swallow of the false spring or the one fine day, but happiness for a complete lifetime, as Aristotle argues?²⁵ If

¹⁹ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (London: William Heinemann, 1947), 1.2.8.

²⁰ Aristotle, 1.5.4.

²¹ Aristotle, 1.5.8.

²² Aristotle, 1.8.17.

²³ Aristotle, 1.7.8.

²⁴ Aristotle, 1.10.11, 13.

²⁵ Aristotle, 1.7.16.

happiness requires active virtue, then action requires “instruments . . . in the shape of friends or wealth or political power.”²⁶ The person who wishes actually to *be* happy and good rather than merely to seem so cannot afford to remain apart, as Antonio does;²⁷ indeed, even if he wished for solitude it would seem to be impossible, at least insofar as he remained human, “since man by nature is a social being.”²⁸ We know from the inquiries of Salarino and Solanio that Antonio is at least a man of acquaintance and perhaps even of friendship. Although their solicitude would seem to vouch for his virtuous character, these acquaintances bespeak a loss no less devastating than a loss of ships and merchandise, for the true friend, here, is absent. Antonio is sad because Bassanio is elsewhere, and this absence implies a double threat: dissolution of the private self that finds itself most fully in the act of loving a friend and deprivation of the equitable exchange of love that bonds private friends and public citizens alike. As Aristotle had posited about the highest form of friendship, one that is based on virtue:

In loving their friend they love their own good, for the good man in becoming dear to another becomes that other's good. Each party therefore both loves his own good and also makes an equivalent return by wishing the other's good, and by affording him pleasure; for there is a saying, “Amity is equality,” and this is most fully realized in the friendships of the good.²⁹

To love the friend is to love the self and thus to participate in a perfect economy of both feeling and virtue for which the merchant is, among all citizens, arguably the best suited, Aristotle's prejudice notwithstanding. To be deprived of the love of the friend—the friend's love, and the act of loving the friend—is to alienate oneself and be made unnatural, excluded from the human community of virtue and the (natural) impulse to engage in social (homophilic) life.

As a foundational articulation of the problem of the more-than-one, therefore, the Aristotelian analysis of friendship introduces several difficulties that *The Merchant of Venice* stages with particular clarity. The self is not one but more than one and at the same time less than two, since the one with whom I most fully *am* always remains a version of myself. How is subjectivity to be defined as a unitary thing, in other words, if the very idea of unitariness requires at least this one *more-than-one*, and when the very one that is with me is no more one than I am? As Derrida has asked, what numerical or arithmetical calculation is necessary for this type of friendly relation, especially if, as Aris-

²⁶ Aristotle, 1.8.15.

²⁷ Cicero, *De officiis*, trans. Walter Miller (London: William Heinemann, 1947), 2.13.44.

²⁸ Aristotle, 1.7.6.

²⁹ Aristotle, 8.5.5, 8.6.7.

totle emphasizes, it is to remain one of *equality* in exchange.³⁰ Do we really wish everything good to our friend, if these goods will change him to the point where we become unequal and “he” is no longer “himself,” perhaps no longer even human? For neither gods nor animals can be friends with men; and in any case, Aristotle concludes, everyone really “wishes good things for himself most of all.”³¹

Furthermore, *who* is this one whom I find in relation to me? For if I recognize my “oneness” through friendly relation with another, this other one is a “friend” because he is not an enemy: he is one whom I seek to preserve and maintain in (his and my) oneness rather than destroy. As Derrida has argued in his reading of Carl Schmitt, the enemy is “the one who can be killed,” and the distinction between friend and enemy will result from the suspension of this mortal opposition: if the enemy is constituted as he who can be killed (by me), then the friend is he whom I do not kill.³² And he will be the *human* one who can or cannot be killed, since both I and the friend require a human category. “I” am not a friend to animals or slaves or gods but only to another human “I.” Whether this threat or the possibility of killing remains even in friendship is a question crucial to Antonio’s predicament, especially since, as Aristotle had argued, the truly virtuous man will choose death in order to help a friend.³³ It is certainly as an enemy that he declares himself to Shylock:

If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends; for when did friendship take
A breed for barren metal of his friend?
But lend it rather to thine enemy
Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face
Exact the penalty.

(1.3.128–33)

Or is the enemy Shylock, even though he declares himself otherwise?

Why, look you, how you storm!
I would be friends with you and have your love,
Forget the shames that you have stained me with,
Supply your present wants, and take no doit
Of usance for my moneys; and you’ll not hear me.
This is kind I offer.

(ll. 133–38)

³⁰ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 19–22, 63–64, 101–4, 215–17; and Aristotle, 8.7.2.

³¹ Aristotle, 8.7.5–6.

³² Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 122–24.

³³ Aristotle, 3.9.4; see Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 295.

Or is the enemy Bassanio, since he accepts Antonio's gesture despite an initial protestation and allows his friend to submit himself to the risk of death? Between the one and the more-than-one we find a relation that is difficult to calculate.

Such a political economy of friendship, in the strictest sense of the phrase, is indispensable to any concept of political association attempting to reconcile the one with the many, and it depends on *logisteia*, a "logistic" or mode of reckoning with units, numbers, and particulars fundamental to deliberation about both justice and virtuous action.³⁴ As Cicero points out, each individual circumstance differs from others, each person has a unique need, and each relation between persons is characterized by a different degree of obligation, literally, "that which is owed to another" (*aliis debeantur*):

For there are obligations that are due to one individual rather than to another: for example . . . should it be a case in court, one would defend a kinsman and a friend rather than a neighbour. Such questions as these must, therefore, be taken into consideration in every act of moral duty, and we must acquire the habit and keep it up, in order to become good calculators of duty, able by adding and subtracting to strike a balance correctly and find out just how much is due to each individual.³⁵

For Cicero, this habit of calculation that distinguishes between the friend and the non-friend is necessary, quite simply, in order to *capitalize* on virtue:

But as there is a method not only of acquiring money but also of investing it so as to yield an income to meet our continuously recurring expenses—both for the necessities and for the more refined comforts of life—so there must be a method of gaining glory and turning it to account.³⁶

This conjunction of quantitative and qualitative modes of calculating obligation—the methods of prudence imagined as a merchant's technique—emerges even more forcefully in John Brinsley's 1616 translation of *De officiis*, an edition meticulously designed for grammar-school translation exercises, which incorporates introductions by Erasmus and offers alternative formulations of many terms in the marginal glosses (I have placed Brinsley's glosses in italics within parentheses):

These things therefore, and the like are to be thorowly considered (*warily looked vnto*) in euery Dutie; also custome and practice (*exercise*) are to be vsed (*is to be taken*), that wee may bee good makers (*reckners*) of account (*able to giue vp a good account*) of Duties: to see by adding and deducting what

³⁴ Aristotle, 6.15–16, 6.26.

³⁵ Cicero, 1.18.59.

³⁶ Cicero, 2.12.42.

summe remayneth of the rest (*what may be the summe of the rest or remainder*). Wherupon wee may vnderstand (*you may understand, viz. a man may understand*) how much is due to euery one. But, as neither Physicians, nor Captaines nor Oratours, although they haue gotten the rules (*perceiued [or attained] the precepts*) of [their] art, can attaine to any thing worthy great commendation (*praise*), without use and practice (*exercise*): so indeed those rules of keeping (*observing*) Duty are taught vs (*set downe or deliuered*), that wee our selues should put them in vse (*may doe them*). For (*But*) the hardnesse (*greatnesse or difficulty*) of the matter requireth also vse and exercise.³⁷

Whereas Aristotle had recognized the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of calculating the Good and thus recognized the “hardnesse” of a determination of justice, Cicero maintains that the citizen can always capitalize on virtue through specific acts of kindness, so long as he learns to calculate them correctly. This is especially necessary when his acts result from an obligation incurred within a reciprocal friendly relationship:

If, as Hesiod bids, one is to repay with interest, if possible, what one has borrowed in time of need, what, pray, ought we to do when challenged by an unsought kindness? Shall we not imitate the fruitful fields, which return more than they receive? . . . For generosity is of two kinds: doing a kindness and requiting one. Whether we do the kindness or not is optional; but to fail to requite one is not allowable to a good man, provided he can make the requital without violating the rights of others.³⁸

Or as Erasmus’s introduction to the chapter in Brinsley’s translation summarized the problem:

Of liberality the second parte of Iustice . . . we must giue either to them who are commended for vertue (*to [men] being commendable or praise worthie*), or to them who are louingly affected towards us (*prosecute vs in honest good will*); or with whom wee haue some speciall bande of societie (*some band of societie doth come betweene to vs or passe between vs*): or to conclude, [to them] who [haue] deserued well of vs; **to whome a kindnesse is to be repayed** (*measured backe*) **euen with vsurie.**³⁹

For both Erasmus and Cicero, in short, kindness obeys its own economy. If financial generosity has the potential to destroy itself by using up resources,⁴⁰ a generous expenditure of virtue, in contrast, only produces more kindness.

³⁷ *The First Book of Tullies Offices translated Grammatically . . .*, trans. John Brinsley (London, 1616), 124–26 (sigs. I6^v–I7^r). In quoting from Brinsley’s text, contractions have been silently expanded; the square brackets are rendered as in the original.

³⁸ Cicero, 1.15.48.

³⁹ Brinsley, 92–93 (sigs. G6^v–G7^r) (emphasis, indicated by boldface type, added).

⁴⁰ Cicero, 2.15.52.

But if people are generous and kind in the way of personal service—that is, with their ability and personal effort—various advantages arise: first, the more people they assist, the more helpers they will have in works of kindness; and second, by acquiring the habit of kindness they are better prepared and in better training, as it were, for bestowing favours upon many.⁴¹

Here, friendship literally *manufactures* good will, respect, and power: this is no mere metaphor, since both things and men are finally tools or instruments in the perpetual exercise of virtuous action, an *industria* that generates laws, statutes, cities, and finally the bond of “good will” necessary to the exercise of power over the commonwealth as a whole.⁴² This “common wealth” includes even our own actions, which we contribute to a fund of general good or communal profit “by an interchange of acts of kindness, by giving and receiving, and thus by our skill, our industry, and our talents to cement human society more closely together, man to man.”⁴³ In contrast, Cicero maintains, there are “some also who, either from zeal in attending to their own business or through some sort of aversion to their fellow man,” are “traitors to social life, for they contribute to it none of their interest, none of their effort, none of their means.”⁴⁴ We *must* contribute to the community and to the common good, Cicero writes in one of the passages most often cited of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and we must do so because we are *shared* creatures: “we are not born for ourselves alone, but our country claims a share (*partem*) of our being, and our friends a share (*partem*).”⁴⁵ Citizen-friends, in short, do not merely form a political community: they form a *corporation*.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Cicero, 2.15.53.

⁴² Cicero, 2.15.53, 2.3.12–2.5.16.

⁴³ Cicero, 1.7.22.

⁴⁴ Cicero, 1.9.29.

⁴⁵ Cicero, 1.7.22.

⁴⁶ The *body politic*, familiar in current scholarship, is a commonplace of early modern political thought and features prominently in Shakespeare’s work. In contrast, the role played by the *corporation* in modern communal organization, citizenship, and territorial sovereignty has received little attention; this issue forms the focus of my current book in progress (of which this essay forms a part), tentatively entitled *The Corporate Commonwealth: Economy, Technology, and Political Community in Early Modern England*. The sixteenth-century corporation ranged in size from the universal Church and kingdom to universities, guilds, boroughs, and cities; by midcentury, we find international trading companies receiving corporate status. At once an “artificial person” and a fictive community, the corporation is both “one” and “many,” enjoying rights and freedoms that are simultaneously rights of persons and rights of collectivities. It provided a durable mode of association in which to examine the nature of sovereignty and of acephalous group organizations, notions of the common wealth and common good, ideals of justice as the distribution of values, and the regulation of the relationship that persists among members, including all aspects of law, penalty, and reward.

II. BASSANIO'S WORTH

We are now in a position to consider more closely the friendly relations between Antonio and Bassanio and between Bassanio and Portia, since both of these pairs depend upon the "usurie" of kindness, as Brinsley puts it, distinctive of Ciceronian friendship. This economy of kindness stages a series of questions that had troubled both Plato's and Aristotle's accounts of virtue.⁴⁷ Can the value of a person be calculated according to a general standard, whether quantitative or qualitative? Can the value of a person be *measured*—abstracted, generalized, and thus extended to other people, whether they be of similar or different kinds? How would we calculate differences among persons who might be comparable to or "worthy" of one another, especially when the question is choosing between friends or deciding whether or not to act on behalf of another? Here is Bassanio's case:

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.
O my Antonio, had I but the means
To hold a rival place with one of them,
I have a mind presages me such thrift
That I should questionless be fortunate.

(1.1.161–76)

Bassanio employs a merchant's logistic that calculates virtue in terms of money and vice versa so as to secure a total accumulation of two distinct kinds of value by means of a deliberate balance between expenditure and "thrift."⁴⁸ Here,

⁴⁷ I draw on Nussbaum, 87–121, 290–317.

⁴⁸ Many critics have discussed the role of gifts and of financial and symbolic exchange in the play; see Marc Shell, "The Wether and the Ewe: Verbal Usury in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Kenyon Review* n.s. 1.4 (1979): 65–92; Engle's discussion of credit, debt, and love in "Thrift is Blessing"; Ronald A. Sharp, "Gift Exchange and the Economies of Spirit in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Modern Philology* 83 (1986): 250–65; and Hutson, esp. 22–51, 52–64. For a specifically Derridean analysis of the gift in Shakespeare, see Ken Jackson, "One Wish' or the Possibility of the Impossible: Derrida, the Gift, and God in *Timon of Athens*," *SQ* 52 (2001): 34–66, esp. 42–45.

Bassanio articulates a restricted economy of virtue identical to the one Portia employs later:

You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,
Such as I am. Though for myself alone
I would not be ambitious in my wish
To wish myself much better, yet for you
I would be trebled twenty times myself,
A thousand times more fair, then thousand times more rich
That only to stand high in your account
I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends
Exceed account.

(3.2.149–57)

Portia's imagined self-reckoning expresses no loss and no remainder, only enrichment, distillation, and an accumulation of attributes. In this way, both speeches quoted above develop the logistic that Bassanio applies to his relation to Antonio, in which love is compared to money as a standard for measuring the value of their friendship.

To you, Antonio,
I owe the most in money and in love,
and from your love I have a warranty
To unburden all my plots and purposes
How to get clear of all the debts I owe.

(1.1.130–34)

In his description of Portia, furthermore, Bassanio's rhetorical deployment of a mode of calculation simultaneously quantitative *and* qualitative renders it an especially economical figure, one that performs several functions at the same time: the trope of "thrift" balances out Bassanio's earlier actions (poor judgment and debt alike will be cancelled). The speech plays on the double meaning of "fortune" in order to construe this balancing of accounts as a cosmic inevitability rather than as one of decision (it is "questionless"); at the same time, it manages to suggest that questionless fortune somehow *depends on* improved human judgment and decision (acting "thriftily" rather than "prodigally"). Together, the two speeches articulate with particular clarity a convergence of two prescientific modes of calculation occurring at the end of the sixteenth century, both practical in their methods and basic epistemology: one, a system of reckoning with number and quantity typical of the merchant's account book; the other, a method of reasoning about qualitative particulars fundamental to classical ethics.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Turner, *English Renaissance Stage*, 43–81, 216–43.

This crossing of mathematical and prudential modes of calculation already visible in Cicero, as we have seen, also emerges in James Peele's practical book for merchants, *The Pathe waye to perfectnes* (1569), which directly evokes the arguments of both Aristotle and Cicero in its preface:

And surelye amonges all thinges in this world, that passeth betwene man and man: there is nothinge more nedefull then perfecte & playne order in reconinge, for it encreaseth frendshippe and amitie, wheras the contrary: procureth great discorde, strife and debate. And by the opinio[n] of the wyse and prudente Philosophers men cheiflye differ from beastes onelye in nomberinge, accomptinge or reconinge, for the certayne knowledge thereof is grounded on reason, which euery beaste by silence wantethe.⁵⁰

The danger of inaccuracy in reckoning extends beyond the dissolution of friendships, however, to a *self*-alienation that is even more profound. In Peele's first dialogue, a merchant arrives at the house of a schoolmaster of accounts, to whom he makes a personal request:

MARCHAUNTE	... Whearefore, beinge nowe at discorde with my selfe, (I am perswaded that you are the man I seke for) and therfore, I come to craue your ayde.
SCHOLMASTER	Wherin I praye you?
MARCHAUNTE	To helpe me to renewe frendship betwene me and my selfe.
SCHOLMASTER	It is very merilie spoke Sir, but I pray you, how are you fallen at oddes with your self?
MARCHAUNTE	B[e]cause I haue deceaued my selfe.
SCHOLMASTER	It may be: but I doubt rayther you thinke that you are deceaued your selfe [i.e., by someone else].
MARCHAUNTE	By my trouthe I knowe not wheyther I haue deceaued my selfe, or that I am deceaued. But this I am sure, mine expectation is vtterly deceiued. ⁵¹

His lament echoes the very first lines of Shakespeare's play, spoken by Antonio, who suffers from a remarkably similar malady.

However, Antonio's sadness also underscores a second concern in classical ethics, which concerned the need to find a way of submitting the radical particularity of sudden change to a system of rules or principles that could serve as guides for decision and action.⁵² A preoccupation with chance, hazard, and venture is prominent throughout the play, as several critics have noted,

⁵⁰ James Peele, *The Pathe waye to perfectnes, in th'accomptes of Debitour, and Creditour: in manner of a Dialogue, very pleasaunte and proffitable . . .* (London, 1569), sig. *3^r.

⁵¹ Peele, sigs. A1^r–A1^v.

⁵² Nussbaum, 318–342; cf. Pocock's discussion of "fortune," 31–80.

above all, in the plot of Portia and her suitors.⁵³ But it is especially visible as a problem specific to commerce: Salarino and Solanio immediately ascribe Antonio's sadness to the undecidable force of chance, whose fearsome power lies in its unforeseeable nature, its endless ingenuity and variation, and its absolute suddenness:

... but even now worth this,
And now worth nothing? Shall I have the thought
To think on this, and shall I lack the thought
That such a thing bechanced would make me sad?
But tell not me; I know Antonio
Is sad to think upon his merchandise.

(1.1.35–40)

In response, Antonio affirms the power of strategic decision to limit exposure and thus to dominate chance through deliberative reason:

Believe me, no. I thank my fortune for it,
My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,
Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate
Upon the fortune of this present year:
Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.

(ll. 41–45)

For all of Antonio's confidence, however, he cannot be certain that calculation and decision will be able to account for the radical alterity of chance that his friends announce so vividly, and indeed the play insists on this failure by submitting him to the Law of the contract that governs his relation to Shylock before suddenly delivering him in an equally unexpected turn of good fortune.

A similar preoccupation with chance runs throughout Bassanio's speech to Antonio, in which he justifies this second loan by appealing to the practical calculation that is a merchant's only tool against absolute loss:

In my schooldays, when I had lost one shaft,
I shot his fellow of the selfsame flight
The selfsame way with more advised watch
To find the other forth, and by adventuring both
I oft found both. I urge this childhood proof
Because what follows is pure innocence.

⁵³ See esp. Hutson, 229–32; Cohen, 768; Ceri Sullivan, *The Rhetoric of Credit: Merchants in Early Modern Writing* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2002), 53–61, on risk and probability in merchant writing (but without comment on *Merchant*); and Derrida's analysis of chance, "fortune," and the gift in *Given Time*, esp. 127–129, 133, 137, 142, 146–47.

I owe you much, and, like a wilful youth,
That which I owe is lost; but if you please
To shoot another arrow that self way
Which you did shoot the first, I do not doubt,
As I will watch the aim, or to find both
Or bring your latter hazard back again
And thankfully rest debtor for the first.

(ll. 140–52)

Bassanio does not in fact offer a justification for his *past* actions (“Nor do I now make moan to be abridged / From such a noble rate” [ll. 126–27]) but directs Antonio’s attention to his *future* ones, since the future is, as Aristotle explains, the domain of deliberation (*bouleusis*), choice (*prohairesis*), and calculation (*logismos*).⁵⁴ Actions already undertaken are subject to neither deliberation nor decision, which for Aristotle is a projective, as well as a practical, mode of intelligence; in a similar fashion, Cicero argues that “people who have better insight into the future” and make decisions according to the exigency of the situation are more prudent than others and thus more fit to rule.⁵⁵ In speaking about the future, therefore, Bassanio must speak *hypothetically* (“had I but the means” [l. 173]), a mode that projects the self into a future state structurally identical to drama as a form: the play, too, requires a hypothetical premise; the play, too, uses future time as a medium of measurement and as a quantum of calculation and wager. The image of the arrow’s trajectory is a beautiful figure for the arc of the play’s total action, which lies through the path described by Antonio’s attempt to calculate the question hanging over the scene: how much is Bassanio’s friendship worth? Like Bassanio, the play holds its answer in reserve by projecting it forward in a performative time that is yet to come; like Bassanio, the play will make its outcome *appear* to have derived from a reasonable decision in accordance with a principle that lies beyond radical chance and outside the time of the human—the principle of justice.

It is important to emphasize again that these problems are not only philosophical and thematic but also formal and metadramatic. The play advances by adding and subtracting the number of actors and the friends that it presents in any given scene, a mimetic operation that Shakespeare would soon describe in explicitly arithmetic terms—the Chorus that opens *Henry V* (ca. 1599) speaks of the “swelling scene” and of the need to supplement the fiction by a mathematical calculation of persons. In terms of staging or performance, therefore, this strategy might be called not simply a “logistic” but a “dramatological,” and it operates from the play’s very first scene, in which

⁵⁴ Aristotle, 6.1.5–6, 6.2.6.

⁵⁵ Cicero, 2.9.33; cf. 1.4.11, 1.23.81.

three friends are added to three (or multiplied twice) to become six friends, two are subtracted to leave four, and two more are then subtracted to leave two—Antonio and Bassanio—who discuss a third (Portia) and, implicitly, the possibility of a tax on their friendship.

Once this equation has been introduced, the need to calculate the relations between the one and the more-than-one structures the rest of the play, through all the different types of relationships that it considers: friendship, economic partnership, marriage, household mastership, paternal authority, public authority, judicial authority, legal authority, and so forth. Indeed, all of Act 5 can be understood as an attempt to work through the permutations of friendship, partnership, obligation, responsibility, and justice that remain once it has become clear who counts as a friend (“A friend—what friend? Your name, I pray you, friend?” [5.1.27]) and who does not. Within the play’s dramatological, the purpose of the final act is to show how the two economies of friendship and of financial value are more than simply homologous: each literally funds the other, since both Antonio and Bassanio gain in money (the sudden return of Antonio’s ships; the gain of Portia’s estate) and in friendship (the addition of Portia herself). No matter what happens, it seems, friendship always gains: the gift always returns, and returns more; once the enemy has been excluded, only friends can, by definition, remain.

But if the comic resolution of the play ensures that the Christian characters end up on the positive side of the balance sheet in the usury of friendship, this gain is not achieved without a cost. The final act transforms one form of homophilia into another by substituting shared religion and political status for same-sex identification and desire. By replacing Antonio with Portia at Bassanio’s side, the play converts the homophilia that motivated classical citizenship into the heterophilia otherwise known as marriage, which is friendship in a more absolutist form.⁵⁶ As Bassanio and Portia, Graziano and Nerissa, and Lorenzo and Jessica celebrate their new unions, we realize that marriage has arrogated to itself the very power to secure the political community that friendship once enjoyed, and this substitution of marriage for friendship as

⁵⁶ I should note that this substitution is not accomplished without a certain irony, since as so often in Shakespeare a knowing wink at performance conventions undercuts the heterophilia of marriage at the moment of its triumph. Portia does not return the ring to Bassanio directly but instead asks Antonio to give it to him on her behalf, such that the play offers a momentary scene of two male friends exchanging rings and a kind of vow (“Here, Lord Bassanio; swear to keep this ring” [5.1.256]); both Bassanio and Graziano have given their rings away in the first place to other men (“No woman had it, but a civil doctor” [l. 210]; “I gave it to a youth, / A kind of boy” [ll. 161–62]) who are really women in disguise (played by male actors in costume); and the fantasied projection of the young doctor lingers even in Bassanio’s anticipation of his nuptial bed (“Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow” [l. 284]).

a source of political power is arguably the most distinctively (early) modern aspect of Shakespeare's play.

The final positions of Shylock and Antonio in this new political order are more similar than we might expect. Both characters end the play alone, the former as the unbefriendable enemy and the latter as the undesirable friend, and for this reason otherness is never determinable or distributable to any one person, *especially* in the political relation between the one and the more-than-one that drives Shakespeare's play. Is the Other Shylock? Is the Other Antonio? Is Antonio Other to himself, as are all characters? The answer must be yes to all three questions, and the question of the "political" resides solely in the force necessary to decide them. We are led to the unexpected conclusion that early modern democracy is as antithetical to the friend as it is to the enemy, since one can never be friends with everyone, and the bond between two weakens as it generalizes to include the many. Democratic political communities can only be formed through universalizing abstractions such as friendship or marriage, rather than through a relation between singular friends. As we shall see, the final act unfolds within a political order that is no longer legal in any simple sense of the term, and indeed it is essential to grasp this distinction between the legal and the political if we are to understand the analysis of justice that Shakespeare's play offers. For if friendship is finally outside or beyond the law, what name can be given to the relation that the law protects and fosters, a relation with as firm a bond as friendship and with all its attributes (reciprocity, permanence, equality), *except* the attribute of love?

III. SHYLOCK'S BOND

For both Aristotle and Cicero, friendship is always a political and not merely an ethical relation because it depends upon a mode of justice between two that is the same as the justice among the more-than-two and that orders the larger community of persons. As Aristotle points out, the best kind of friendship-in-partnership and partnership-in-friendship is to be found between citizens, as such friendships "seem to be founded as it were on a definite compact," and especially in democracies, "where the citizens being equal have many things in common."⁵⁷

Moreover, friendship appears to be the bond of the state; and lawgivers seem to set more store by it than they do by justice, for to promote concord, which seems akin to friendship, is their chief aim, while faction, which is enmity, is what they are most anxious to banish. And if men are friends, there is no need of justice between them; whereas merely to be just is not enough—a feeling of

⁵⁷ Aristotle, 8.12.1, 8.11.8.

friendship also is necessary. Indeed the highest form of justice seems to have an element of friendly feeling in it.⁵⁸

From the viewpoint of the Aristotelian friend (the one who is *within* the bond of friendship, both between two and among the more-than-two), the formulation is, in short, a simple and comforting one. The friendly relation and justice are coextensive, and friendship requires no justice, for the simple reason that it already *is*, in some sense, justice. At the same time, the two principles are distinct, since friendship *determines* justice: justice alone is insufficient and requires friendship; lawmakers seek to foster friendship even more than they do justice; the best justice is identifiable as such because of the friendliness felt within it.

One might well ask where this comforting formulation leaves Shylock. For if "all associations are parts as it were of the association of the State,"⁵⁹ then Shylock would appear to be at the threshold of the political community, a man with whom Antonio will grudgingly engage in limited partnership but not in friendship, and thus a man who is also denied the peculiar economies of love and justice that friendship funds. But is he then truly a "man" according to Aristotle, who draws a limit around friendship and those with whom it is possible? He maintains that in a tyranny there can be no friendship between ruler and ruled, since there is nothing in common between them. Nor is there any justice.

It is like the relation between a craftsman and his tool, or between the soul and the body or between the master and slave: all these instruments it is true are benefited by the persons who use them, but there can be no friendship, nor justice, towards inanimate things; indeed not even towards a horse or an ox, nor yet towards a slave as slave. For master and slave have nothing in common: a slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave. Therefore there can be no friendship with a slave as slave, though there can be as human being: for there seems to be some room for justice in the relations of every human being with every other that is capable of participating in law and contract, and hence friendship also is possible with everyone so far as he is a human being.⁶⁰

Insofar as the relationship between Antonio and Shylock is a legal and contractual one, Shylock can claim justice and limited participation in the political community; but as there is no friendship between them, he remains not simply outside justice but on the edge of the human: he is like an animal or a slave or

⁵⁸ Aristotle, 8.1.4.

⁵⁹ Aristotle, 8.9.4.

⁶⁰ Aristotle, 8.11.6–7.

a “living tool.” And since those who make and keep the law “promote concord, which seems akin to friendship,” and it is this concord, *rather* than justice, that “is their chief aim,” as Aristotle explicitly argues, it can come as little surprise that within the Duke’s court, the friendly feelings of the many finally outweigh the contractual demands of the one, especially since “the political association . . . it is believed, was originally formed, and continues to be maintained, for the advantage of its members: the aim of lawgivers is the good of the community, and justice is sometimes defined as that which is to the common advantage”⁶¹—the *common* advantage rather than the singular one.

The more-than-one, therefore, possesses a kind of weight that presses against or *around* the one: this is the weight of the *polis* or the political community. Bassanio, Antonio, and Portia participate in the symbolic economy of a political community that construes loans as gifts and reaps interest only as the usury of friendship, which they are obligated to gather as Christian and Ciceronian citizens. If Shylock is to be denied both financial interest and the usury of kindness that originates in friendship, as Antonio stipulates, then he can offer only “kind” in return: an action, a gesture, a substance heterogeneous to what it requites but which is appropriate within the terms of the transaction (a return offered “to them who prosecute vs in honest good will,” as Brinsley construes Cicero’s Latin). This response, poised at the very knife-edge of a concept of proportion essential to the definition of justice from the *Nicomachean Ethics* onward,⁶² will make the bond a *just* relation, but not a *friendly* form of justice. It will be an “instant of madness” in the eyes of a community that can only calculate parts *into* wholes—one into one, and then into one—and that cannot reckon with a remainder.⁶³

The terms of the contract as declared by Shylock at the beginning of the play speak only of an “equal pound” to be taken from any “part” whatsoever:

. . . let the forfeit
Be nominated for an equal pound
Of your fair flesh to be cut off and taken
In what part of your body pleaseth me.
(1.3.145–48)

The contract translates the substance of Antonio’s body in the technical, sixteenth-century sense of changing form, providing a method for abstracting and measuring qualitative singularities into a quantitative equivalent, “flesh” into

⁶¹ Aristotle, 8.9.4.

⁶² Aristotle, 5.5.1–16.

⁶³ Cf. Derrida, *Given Time*, 147: “pure and without possible reappropriation, the surprise names that instant of madness that tears time apart and interrupts every calculation.”

"pound." It equalizes Shylock and Antonio by substituting one physical substance ("flesh") for another ("spit" and "rheum upon the beard" [ll. 109, 114]). It gives a publicly recognized form—a legal language and institutional support—to a private feeling of (mutual) hate.⁶⁴ The bond would thus seem to grant a measure of justice to Shylock, as everyone in Venice recognizes; for Cicero, too, the paramount concern of the ruler must be "the conservation of organized society with rendering to every man his due, and with the faithful discharge of obligations [*rerum contractarum*] assumed."⁶⁵ Justice requires "faith" and "truth and constancy to promises and agreements."⁶⁶

And yet for Cicero as for Aristotle, the "common interests" finally outweigh even the demands of the contract. For there are some situations

when those duties which seem most becoming to the just man and to the "good man," as we call him, undergo a change and take on a contrary aspect. It may, for example, not be a duty to restore a trust or to fulfil a promise, and it may become right and proper sometimes to evade and not to observe what truth and honour would usually demand. . . . When these [fundamental principles of justice] are modified under changed circumstances, moral duty also undergoes a change, and it does not always remain the same. For a given promise or agreement may turn out in such a way that its performance will prove detrimental either to the one to whom the promise has been made or to the one who has made it. . . . Promises are, therefore, not to be kept, if the keeping of them is to prove harmful to those to whom you have made them; and, if the fulfilment of a promise should do more harm to you than good to him to whom you have made it, it is no violation of moral duty to give the greater good precedence over the lesser good.⁶⁷

There are undecidable occasions in which it is difficult, but necessary, to determine where the just, the right, the proper, and the equal lie. In a contract that remains unfulfilled, one party must benefit and one must not: how is the judge to decide between them? He cannot, since the decision cannot be calculated. The irreducible particularity of these occasions exceeds the formulation of a principle, which suddenly turns into its opposite; the standards that we might use to measure virtue and the just distribution of resources—whether of kindness, power, or wealth—dissolve into the utter singularity of persons, all of

⁶⁴ Derrida has touched on the problem of calculation and economy with specific reference to *The Merchant of Venice* and the problem of "translation" (although without reference to the sixteenth-century meaning of the term) in "What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?" trans. Lawrence Venuti, *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001): 174–200, esp. 179–80, 183–84.

⁶⁵ Cicero, 1.5.15.

⁶⁶ Cicero, 1.7.23.

⁶⁷ Cicero, 1.10.31–32.

whose qualities, actions, and counteractions may be equally legitimate. The friends look too similar to one another, and too similar to the enemy.⁶⁸

The Duke's difficulty, of course, is that he lacks the legal authority to decide a question that cannot, in the name of Christian and Ciceronian political order, remain undecidable, and so he turns to someone who at least *pretends* to have this authority:

DUKE Are you acquainted with the difference
That holds this present question in the court?
PORTIA I am informèd throughly of the cause.
Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?
(4.1.168-71)

The role of Portia-as-Balthasar is to decide the undecidable problem and in this way to heal the wound opened in the political body by Shylock's demand. And she does so not by invalidating the bond itself but by accentuating its mortal intent over its commercial purpose, designating for the first time in the play a specific part of Antonio's body:

PORcia . . . this bond is forfeit.
And lawfully by this the Jew may claim
A pound of flesh, to be by him cut off
Nearest the merchant's heart. . . .
SHYLOCK Ay, his breast.
So says the bond; doth it not, noble judge?
"Nearest his heart"—those are the very words.
(ll. 227-30, 249-51)

Nearest the heart: the trial scene has now sharpened the terms of the contract, and with it the distinction between friend and enemy, even as Shylock's demand has begun to appear increasingly disproportionate.⁶⁹ The pound of flesh, moreover, is meaningless because it is too literal, *too* quantitative but without qualification, too detached, too removed—in a word, too "apart":

Tarry a little; there is something else.
This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood;
The words expressly are "a pound of flesh".
Take then thy bond. Take thou thy pound of flesh.
But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods

⁶⁸ Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" trans. Mary Quaintance, *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1990): 920–1045, esp. 949, 951.

⁶⁹ On the significance of the demand as a symbolic circumcision, see James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 113–30, esp. 121–27.

Are by the laws of Venice confiscate
Unto the state of Venice.

(ll. 302–9)

In the terms of the contract as read through Portia's eyes, the pound of flesh, like the Jew who demands it, would remain too separate. The demand is senseless within the logic of incorporation that founds the Ciceronian and Christian state because it fails to associate itself with the body in its bodiliness, its blood and tissue.⁷⁰ Portia has in fact adopted a perfectly Ciceronian logic: when confronted with an undecidable legal situation, the judge must observe two "fundamental principles of justice . . . first, that no harm be done to anyone; second, that the common interests be conserved."⁷¹ This principle of corporate integrity extends beyond persons to the corporate entity that is the commonwealth: the governor must protect the common good but also "care for the welfare of the whole body politic."⁷²

Suppose, by way of comparison, that each one of our bodily members should conceive this idea [of individual profit] and imagine that it could be strong and well if it should draw off to itself the health and strength of its neighbouring member, the whole body would necessarily be enfeebled and die; so, if each one of us should seize upon the property of his neighbours and take from each whatever he could appropriate to his own use, the bonds of human society must inevitably be annihilated.⁷³

Shylock's demand, after all, is precisely for a pound that both *is* and *is not* "body," a pound that can be measured out, removed, and separated from Antonio in his political capacity as a citizen bound by the laws of Venice, but a pound that assumes its significance precisely by remaining "part," by remaining integrated *and* distinct from the corporeal whole at the same time. It is Antonio's flesh that is demanded, the whole person Antonio in his status representative of the Christian political body, and Shylock will accept nothing less. His demand must be revised, denied, and cancelled because it is too *explicit*: it shows too clearly the position of the Jew in the community of Venice, who will be either incorporated through conversion or put to death so that the political body may heal itself by distributing resources equally among all its members. But Shylock himself cannot remain: he cannot be incorporated as a *singular*

⁷⁰ Cf. Shapiro, quoting James Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656): "to 'receive the Jews after any other manner into a commonwealth were to maim it; for they of all nations never incorporate but, taking up the room of a limb, are of no use or office unto the body, while they suck the nourishment which would sustain a natural and useful body'" (180).

⁷¹ Cicero, 1.10.31.

⁷² Cicero, 1.24.85.

⁷³ Cicero, 3.5.22.

member who is at the same time one and more-than-one, both part of and apart from the whole.

In literalizing the terms of the contract, Portia has converted into corporatist terms the problem of the political properly speaking, since, as Derrida has argued, "the political would precisely be that which thus endlessly binds or opposes the friend–enemy/enemy–friend couple in the drive or decision of death, in the putting to death or in the stake of death."⁷⁴ Portia's subsequent speech emphasizes this very point:

Therefore prepare thee to cut off the flesh.
Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more
But just a pound of flesh. If thou tak'st more
Or less than a just pound, be it but so much
As makes it light or heavy in the substance
Or the division of the twentieth part
Of one poor scruple—nay, if the scale do turn
But in the estimation of a hair,
Thou diest, and all thy goods are confiscate.

(ll. 320–28)

The calculating logistic of the Christian and Ciceronian corporation has begun to turn the "just pound" against Shylock, and with it the very concept of justice itself: "Soft! The Jew shall have all justice" (l. 317). The specifically political aspect to the Venetian commonwealth distinguishes itself from mere society in the moment that this just power to decide between life and death assumes a generalized, impersonal form, a "hostility without affect," as Derrida has described it,⁷⁵ that is difficult for the Christian to experience but which may always be found in the justice of the Law:

Tarry, Jew,
The law hath yet another hold on you.
It is enacted in the laws of Venice,
If it be proved against an alien
That by direct or indirect attempts
He seek the life of any citizen,
The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive
Shall seize one half his goods; the other half
Comes to the privy coffer of the state,
And the offender's life lies in the mercy
Of the Duke only, 'gainst all other voice.

(ll. 342–52)

⁷⁴ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 123.

⁷⁵ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 124.

No sooner has Portia switched the legal ground to a separate statute—one that construes Shylock as the alien outsider who threatens the life of the Venetian citizen, as Julia Reinhard Lupton has argued—than the Duke rises as the fully empowered representative of a state that measures the distinction between friend and enemy by means of the death penalty. This penalty becomes an act of aggression in a perpetual civil war waged against an enemy who suddenly appears to be both inside and outside the state at the same time.⁷⁶ And it is the peculiar economy of execution that renders it so valuable to the state, since the act extinguishes the very enemy (within) who is constituted as such in and through that very action, as a structural necessity of the (friendly) state's own existence.

By the end of the trial scene, all of Venice will have been forced to decide between two rival definitions of justice: between a justice as rule of law, equity, and reasonable proportion and one that, in Derrida's terms, "requires us to calculate with the incalculable" of the absolutely singular one and that preserves "a sort of essential disproportion" at its heart.⁷⁷ This dilemma implies a decision between two rival definitions of the common good: on the one hand, a notion of the more-than-one that includes only friends and excludes those who have been judged incapable of being befriended; and on the other, a notion of the more-than-one that expressly includes those who are never befriendable and that extends the necessity of ethical obligation beyond friendship to the enemy—to the absolutely singular one who may even desire my death.

The fully political dimension in *The Merchant of Venice* emerges most clearly in the way the play stages the decision between two possibilities of determining the friend-enemy relation by asking the question in an open form ("Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" [l. 171]) and by providing a grammar in which the friend may come to occupy the place of the other and vice versa. For the duration of a scene, the play suspends any decision between two possibilities of determining the friend-enemy relation, as one lingers "over the heartbeat of another" and forces the many who surround him, and the many more who surround them in silence, to experience a moment in which "my gaze, precisely as regards me . . . is no longer the measure of all things," according to Derrida—to experience an undecidable moment in which we cannot decide between friend and enemy or where true justice lies.⁷⁸ Finally, the play relaxes this suspension, allowing the law to designate an enemy who can be subtracted into a negativity, a privation of rights, freedoms, and fortune, in order that the life of the many

⁷⁶ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 121–26; Lupton, *Citizen-Saints*, 96–97; and "The Pearl Fishers."

⁷⁷ Derrida, "Force of Law," 947–61, esp. 947, 955; and *Politics of Friendship*, 199–224.

⁷⁸ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 69; and *Gift of Death*, 27.

can continue to multiply according to its own friendly arithmetic—and, in a final insult, call that justice “mercy.”⁷⁹

This “dramatology” of (in)justice unfolds practically in and as *theater*, performing, displaying, and showing how the political community makes itself through acts of calculation, even as one remains backstage as an invisible structuring absence, seeing us but unseen by us, gazing upon us from an utterly incalculable position. For Derrida, this position makes all responsibility possible: a position of “paradox, heresy, and secrecy,” of “conversion and apostasy,” of a responsibility founded on “a dissident and inventive rupture with respect to tradition, authority, orthodoxy, rule, or doctrine.”⁸⁰ However uncomfortable it may be and however difficult to calculate, this responsibility owed to an Other who may demand nothing less than our own heart cannot be dismissed, neither at the end of a sixteenth century trembling before the prospect of religious and civil war, nor at the beginning of the twenty-first in the face of the uncivil wars waged in the name of democracy.

⁷⁹ See Derrida’s discussion of mercy and justice in the play in “What Is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?”, 191–98, 200n11.

⁸⁰ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 24–26, esp. 27 (see also 43–48, 59–68, 84); “Force of Law,” 947–73; and *Politics of Friendship*, 64. Derrida is drawing, of course, on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, especially *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriarity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969); and *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1998). See also Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*; and the discussion of responsibility and absolute ethics in *Timon of Athens* by Jackson, esp. 51–53, 65–66.