Imagined Human Beings

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Western literature is full of self-effacing women, although few so extreme as Griselda; but, as Horney observed, “self-effacement has nothing to do with femininity nor aggressive arrogance with masculinity. Both are exquisitely neurotic phenomena” (1950, 247). Horney is talking about essential femininity and masculinity, of course, which have yet to be defined, as opposed to culturally constructed gender identities. Our culture favors submissiveness in women and aggressiveness in men, but even so there are still plenty of dominant women and self-effacing males, both in life and in literature. In Shakespeare, for example, Margaret and Eleanor in the Henry VI plays, Tamora in Titus Andronicus, Elinor and Constance in King John, Goneril and Regan in King Lear, Lady Macbeth in Macbeth, and Volumnia in Coriolanus are ruthless, power-hungry women; and there are others who are domineering in their personal relationships. Beginning with the well-meaning but feeble Henry VI, there is also a rich array of self-effacing men, the most fully developed of whom are the poet of the sonnets, Antonio in The Merchant of Venice, Hamlet, Duke Vincentio in Measure for Measure, Antony in Antony and Cleopatra, Timon in Timon of Athens, and Prospero in The Tempest (see Paris 1991a, 1991b). I shall elaborate here on my brief treatment of Antonio in Bargains with Fate and also on his relationship with Shylock.

Criticism of The Merchant of Venice has given remarkably little attention to Antonio, despite the fact that he is the title character and his relationships with Bassanio and Shylock are at the center of the play. In addition to being the chief protagonist in the action, Antonio exemplifies the values celebrated by the play. He is presented as loyal, generous, unselfish, merciful, the noblest man “that draws breath in Italy” (3.2.294). A psychological analysis of his relationship with Bassanio shows that much of his “noble” behavior is compulsively self-sacrificial and that a contradictory side of his personality emerges in his
treatment of Shylock. His defenses and inner conflicts are reflected in the
drama as a whole and are similar in many ways to those of the Shake-
speare I infer from the play.

Like most comedies, *The Merchant of Venice* deals with the desire of
lovers for union, the forces that block that desire, and the removal of
those forces. Critics usually see Antonio as a blocking force in the Portia-
Bassanio story, but I shall argue that the central love relationship is
between Antonio and Bassanio, that the chief obstacle is Bassanio’s
marriage to Portia, and that the play concludes happily for Antonio
when he becomes part of the Portia-Bassanio relationship. Actually, the
play has an intricate plot that resolves the conflict between love and
friendship in a way that includes everyone. First Portia obstructs the
Antonio-Bassanio relationship, then Antonio obstructs the Bassanio-
Portia relationship, then all blocking forces are removed and a perma-
nent triangle is established.

The opening lines of the play introduce a psychological mystery. Antonio
knows “not why” he is “so sad” and rejects the explanations of his
friends that he is worried about his merchandise, that he is in love, or
that he has too much regard for worldly prosperity. The most common
explanation offered by critics is that he is a continent, perhaps uncon-
scious, homosexual who is melancholy because Bassanio wants to woo
Portia. I find Karen Horney’s description of morbid dependency to be
useful in understanding this character. As has often been noted, Bassanio
is similar to the friend of the sonnets in his higher social status, his
narcissism, and his shallowness; and Antonio is similar to the poet in his
self-sacrificial devotion. Whether Antonio has a sexual attachment to
Bassanio or not, he is clearly the self-effacing partner in the relationship.
Like the protagonists of the tragedies, Antonio is in a state of psychologi-
cal crisis at the beginning of the play. He “only loves the world” for
Bassanio (2.9.50) and is threatened with the loss of his friend.

Antonio cannot admit, or perhaps even feel, the true cause of his
sadness because this would violate his taboos against selfishness and
make him feel unworthy of love. Instead of resenting Bassanio’s interest
in Portia, he goes to the opposite extreme and does everything he can to
facilitate that which is making him miserable. When Bassanio asks for a
loan to finance his courtship, Antonio assures him that his “purse,” his
“person,” his “extremest means” (1.1.38) are at his disposal, despite the
fact that Bassanio is heavily indebted to him already and admits to
improvidence. Bassanio does him “more wrong,” he protests, in question- ing his “uttermost / Than if [he] had made waste of all [he has]” (1.1.155-57). Antonio’s fortunes are at sea, but he authorizes Bassanio to rack his credit “to the uttermost” in order to furnish himself “to fair Portia” (1.1.181-82). Although he despises Shylock and does not believe in either lending or borrowing at interest, he will ignore both his prejudices and his principles for the sake of his friend. The more he sacrifices in order to help Bassanio leave him, the nobler his love. He even risks a pound of his flesh in order to secure the loan.

Antonio is sad, then, because he is losing the person who has given meaning to his life, but he has powerful taboos against acknowledging this directly, either to Bassanio or to himself. Somewhat like Hamlet, he makes his complaint indirectly, through his suffering. Just as Hamlet arouses the concern of Claudius and Gertrude by his mournful demeanor, so Antonio arouses the concern of Solanio and Salerio, who try to figure out why he is sad, and of Gratiano, who finds him “marvellously chang’d” (1.1.76). Bassanio seems impervious to Antonio’s state, however, and begins immediately to ask him for money, which Antonio is eager to give. Antonio wants recognition of his generosity, but Bassanio seems to take his sacrifices for granted, as Antonio says he should, and Antonio cannot assert his claims.

The dynamics of this frustrating situation are made evident in Salerio’s description of the parting of Antonio and Bassanio:

Bassanio told him he would make some speed Of his return; he answered, “Do not do so. Slubber not business for my sake, Bassanio, But stay the very riping of the time; And for the Jew’s bond which he hath of me, Let it not enter in your mind of love. Be merry, and employ your chiefest thoughts To courtship, and such fair ostents of love As shall conveniently become you there.” And even there, his eye being big with tears, Turning his face, he put his hand behind him, And with affection wondrous sensible He wrung Bassanio’s hand; and so they parted. (2.8.37-49)

Although Solario tells this story to show that “A kinder gentleman treads not the earth” (2.8.35), there is a good deal more than kindness at work
here. Bassanio’s promise of a speedy return seems like a response to Antonio’s distress; but Antonio cannot allow his friend to hurry on his account, for that would diminish his nobility and give him less basis for his claims. In telling Bassanio not to worry about the Jew’s bond, Antonio is reminding him of it and presenting himself as happy to run this risk for his friend. He displays his grief at his friend’s departure but makes a show of hiding it. Antonio wants Bassanio to see how unhappy he is so that he will appreciate his sacrifice, but he also wants him to believe that he does not want him to see it so that he will appear to be nobly unselfish.

At first the other members of Antonio’s entourage respond to his “nobility” far more than does Bassanio, who seems completely self-involved. Although Antonio’s loss of fortune after pledging a pound of flesh to Shylock seems like a disaster, it enables him to get what he wants. He has sought all along to bind Bassanio to him through indebtedness, and he welcomes this opportunity to suffer for his friend and demonstrate his love. He wants to possess Bassanio in the only way he can, by winning his eternal gratitude for this last and most glorious sacrifice. When Antonio is in danger of losing his life, Bassanio finally pays the tribute for which he longs:

The dearest friend to me, the kindest man,
The best-condition’d and unwearied spirit
In doing courtesies, and one in whom
The ancient Roman honour more appears
Than any that draws breath in Italy.

(3.2.290–94)

The fact that the rhetoric of the play as a whole confirms this extravagant praise indicates Shakespeare’s admiration of Antonio’s self-effacing behavior, which resembles that of the poet of the sonnets toward the friend (Lewis 1985; Paris 1991a).

At this point, Antonio becomes a blocking force in the Bassanio-Portia story, since Bassanio leaves his bride in an effort to save his friend. He does so with Portia’s blessing, before the marriage is consummated: “For never shall you lie by Portia’s side / With an unquiet soul” (3.2.303–4). Portia accords Antonio great importance as her husband’s “dear friend” (3.2.289) and says, in effect, that Antonio must be saved if their love is to thrive. In the courtroom scene, therefore, she is seeking to save not only Antonio but also her marriage.

For his part, Antonio has little wish to be saved. He seems to have
no interest in fulfilling his needs for intimacy through a heterosexual relationship, but his devotion to Bassanio connects him to the world. When this is taken away, he describes himself as "a tainted wether of the flock, / Meetest for death. The weakest kind of fruit / Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me" (4.1.114–16). "Wether" is usually glossed as "castrated ram." Because of his sense of defectiveness, Antonio feels there to be no place for him in the human community. He presents his breast to Shylock’s knife and "beseech[es] the court / To give judgment" (4.1.241–42).

Antonio does not simply want to die, however; he wants to do so in the presence of his friend: "Pray God Bassanio come / To see me pay his debt, and then I care not!" (3.3.35–36). He writes to Bassanio saying that "all debts are clear’d" between them "if I might but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your pleasure. If your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter" (3.2.316–19). This strange message contains both a bribe—the forgiveness of debts—and an appeal for love. Antonio has been trying to buy Bassanio’s love all along, but he has needed to feel that Bassanio loves him for himself. Now he both offers Bassanio a financial inducement to witness his death and structures his message in such a way that he can interpret his presence as a free expression of love. His bargain has been that if he makes great sacrifices for his friend, Bassanio will love him in return. Nora, Rennie, and Griselda have similar bargains and, like Antonio, are ready to die for their love. So far, Antonio has lived up to his end of the bargain, but Bassanio has not reciprocated.

Bassanio responds to his letter exactly as Antonio desires. He leaves Portia, rushes to Venice, and professes readiness to do anything for his friend: "The Jew shall have my flesh, blood, bones, and all, / Ere thou shalt lose for me one drop of blood" (4.1.112–13). Antonio says he is ready to die and urges Bassanio "to live still, and write mine epitaph" (4.1.18). By saddling his friend with a debt of gratitude that even Portia’s money cannot repay, Antonio will assure himself of a hallowed place in his memory.

In his farewell speech to his friend, Antonio reminds him of his debt—"Grieve not that I am fall’n to this for you" (4.1.264)—and also tells him how it can be paid:

Commend me to your honourable wife;
Tell her the process of Antonio’s end;
Say how I lov’d you, speak me fair in death;
And when the tale is told, bid her be judge
Whether Bassanio had not once a love.

(4.1.271-75)

After Antonio gives his life for his friend, even Portia will have to acknowledge the superiority of his love. Because of the lengths to which he is willing to go for Bassanio, Antonio feels that he deserves to be first in his friend’s affections, and his bargain finally works when Bassanio honors this claim:

Antonio, I am married to a wife
Which is as dear to me as life itself;
But life itself, my wife, and all the world
Are not with me esteem’d above thy life.
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.

(4.1.280-85)

Antonio cannot wish for more than this, since his friend is expressing a readiness to do his uttermost similar to what he himself has been expressing all along. His extreme gesture has been reciprocated. Bassanio is prepared to sacrifice not only his life but Portia as well. Nothing is more important to him than Antonio.

After he is freed as a result of Portia’s legal maneuver, Antonio seeks a reaffirmation of his primacy. When Bassanio insists that Portia (disguised as the lawyer Balthasar) accept “some remembrance” (4.1.420), she asks for the ring that she gave Bassanio as a token of her love (3.2.171-85), motivated, perhaps, by her own need for reassurance. Bassanio refuses, explaining that the ring was given him by his wife, who made him vow that he “should neither sell nor give nor lose it” (4.1.441); but after Balthasar leaves, Antonio persuades Bassanio to change his mind: “Let his deservings, and my love withal, / Be valued ’gainst your wife’s commandement” (4.1.448-49).

In act 4, Antonio defeats Portia twice in the competition for first place in Bassanio’s affections, but she remains as an obstacle to their relationship. Indeed, many critics see Portia as triumphant in act 5, while Antonio is left a sad and lonely figure. Although it is true that Portia’s claims are reestablished, it is also true that Antonio secures a place in Bassanio’s world that restores his enjoyment of life. When Portia castigates Bassanio for giving away her ring, Antonio becomes uncomfor-
able at having provoked the tension between husband and wife. Neither he nor Portia can bear for Bassanio to be unhappy, and both are too self-effacing to cut off a rival or refuse to share Bassanio’s affection. When the news arrives that Antonio has forfeited his bond, Portia offers enough gold to “pay the petty debt twenty times over” and tells Bassanio to “bring [his] true friend” back with him (3.3.305–6). When Antonio blames himself for the quarrel over the ring, Portia tries to reassure him: “Sir, grieve not you. You are welcome notwithstanding” (5.1.239). Some feel this to be merely a formal gesture, but I think that Portia genuinely wants to include her husband’s true friend.

The reconciliation is brought about by the joint action of Portia and Antonio. Having broken his oath once, Bassanio has difficulty convincing his wife that he will not do so again, and Antonio comes to his rescue:

Antonio: I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which, but for him that had your husband’s ring,
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly.

Portia: Then you shall be his surety. Give him this,
And bid him keep it better than the other.

Antonio: Here, Lord Bassanio. Swear to keep this ring.

(5.1.249–56)

Just as he had made Bassanio’s courtship possible by risking his body, Antonio now cements the marriage by risking his soul. He is once again doing his “uttermost,” employing his “extremest means,” to further the happiness of his friend. Since his soul is far more valuable than his body, his gesture is all the nobler. Portia’s acceptance of that gesture ends her quarrel with Bassanio and gives Antonio a position of great importance in the marriage, since it is not only the ring but also Antonio’s bond that joins husband and wife. Portia has never wished to defeat Antonio, for she does not believe that her marriage can thrive unless her husband is faithful to his friend.

At the beginning of the play Antonio tells Gratiano that the world is “A stage, where every man must play a part, / And mine a sad one” (1.1.78–79). His part is sad because he can neither marry nor form a permanent relationship with Bassanio, but he is remarkably fortunate in his friend’s wife and becomes part of the family at the end. His problem has been resolved as well as it possibly could be. There is a falling off
from the triumphs of act 4, but no one is ever treated as well as when he is facing death. Antonio has had his proof of Bassanio's love. When Antonio learns of the safety of his ships, he responds enthusiastically: "Sweet lady, you have given me life and living" (5.1.286). This is in marked contrast to his demeanor in act 1, when his wealth gave him no pleasure. He can enjoy the restoration of his fortune because his psychological crisis has been resolved.

Antonio is, like Shylock, a character whose psychological complexity tends to subvert his functions in the play. Shylock is rendered too vividly as a wronged and suffering human being to be simply a symbol of vindictiveness and greed or the stock villain whose discomfort is a source of delight, while Antonio is too manipulative and self-destructive to be the ideal friend and gentleman that the rhetoric presents. The play's glorification of him is undermined also by his conduct to Shylock, which some find to be inconsistent with the rest of his character. Antonio is driven by two intense emotions—love of Bassanio and hatred of Shylock—both of which evoke a kindred response. Much attention has been given to Shylock's side of the relationship but little to Antonio's. An understanding of the interaction between these two characters illuminates them both.

Antonio's behavior toward Shylock is depicted mostly through Shylock's complaints when Antonio's request for a loan frees him to express his resentment. "Many a time and oft" Antonio has berated him about his "moneys and [his] usances" (1.3.101-3). He has called him "misbeliever, cutthroat dog," has "spet upon [his] Jewish gaberdine," has "foot[ed him] as you spurn a stranger cur / Over your threshold," and has "void[ed his] rheum upon [his] beard" (1.3.106-14). When Shylock asks if "for these courtesies" (1.3.123) he is expected to lend money, Antonio replies: "I am as like to call thee so again, / To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too" (1.3.125-26). He urges Shylock to lend the money not as to a friend but as to an "enemy, / Who if he break, thou mayst with better face / Exact the penalty" (1.3.130-32). In view of his need to sacrifice for Bassanio, we can understand why Antonio invites Shylock's harshness, but as Shylock says, he called him "dog before [he had] a cause" (3.3.6), and we must ask why "good Antonio" (2.8.25) treats Shylock with such unprovoked cruelty in the first place.

The answer, I think, is that Antonio and Shylock are opposite psycho-
logical types, each of whom represents what the other despises and fears in himself. Antonio and Shylock have more in common than Antonio likes to admit, since both are engaged in the pursuit of wealth through their investments. Antonio, however, sees himself not as acquisitive, but as a generous man who places his fortune at the disposal of his friends. He lends money recklessly, without interest, and seems ready to forgive debts, as with Bassanio. Shylock embodies values that Antonio consciously abhors and from which he distances himself through his overgenerous behavior and his abuse of Shylock. He scorns Shylock because seeing another act out his own forbidden impulses threatens to stir up those impulses in himself and to activate the self-hate he would feel if he allowed himself to behave as the other is doing. His moral indignation reinforces his idealized image of himself as an uncompetitive, generous man who would never behave like Shylock.

We can infer a hidden aggressive side of Antonio from his overreaction to Shylock, and we can see it directly in his abusive behavior. This noblest of men spurns, kicks, and spits upon Shylock and "rails" at him in the Rialto (1.3.43): "He hath disgrac'd me, and hind'red me half a million; laugh'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, scorn'd my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies" (3.1.47-50). "His reason," says Shylock, is that "I am a Jew" (3.1.50-51). Antonio does not scorn Shylock simply because he is a Jew, but his being a Jew frees Antonio to act out his aggression. Shylock's appeal to a common humanity ("If you prick us, do not we bleed?"—3.1.56) is very much to the point, even though it is part of his justification for revenge. Because Shylock is a Jew, Antonio does not regard him as a fellow human. He behaves toward him much as the equally "noble" Prospero behaves toward the supposedly subhuman Caliban (Paris 1991a).

Antonio abhors Shylock, then, because Shylock's arrogant-vindictive value system (Greenberg 1985) clashes with Antonio's self-effacing one and arouses his need to reinforce his repressions. He feels free to treat Shylock with scorn because he does not see him as part of his moral community. Since no one blames him for baiting a Jew, his idealized image is not at risk and he is not constrained by his Christian values. Shylock becomes a scapegoat, moreover, on whom Antonio can innocently discharge the rage that he feels toward his Christian brethren. Antonio is so frustrated by Bassanio's behavior that he is in despair about his life, but he cannot express resentment toward his friend.
Instead, he bends over backward to be “the ultimate of helpfulness, generosity, considerateness, understanding, sympathy, love, and sacrifice” (Horney 1950, 220). He manages his anger partly by turning it against himself and feeling depressed, even suicidal, and partly by displacing it onto Shylock, whom he eventually destroys.

Given the insulting way he has been treated, it is no wonder that Shylock hates Antonio. There are practical reasons as well, since Antonio’s generosity deprives him of customers, delivers debtors “from his forfeitures” (3.3.22), and brings “the rate of usance” down in Venice (1.3.40). A less evident but equally powerful motive for Shylock’s animosity is that he is psychologically threatened by Antonio, even more, perhaps, than Antonio is threatened by him. Antonio represents an opposite set of values by which Shylock stands condemned. His constant railing against Shylock’s business practices threatens to rouse Shylock’s self-effacing tendencies and expose him to self-condemnation. Shylock’s elaborate justification of charging interest—through the story of Jacob and Laban (1.3.66–85)—indicates inner conflicts, and he defends himself, like Antonio, by scorning the character and behavior of his adversary. Antonio is a fool who does not understand the ways of the world; in his “low simplicity” he “lends out money gratis” (1.3.38–39). Shylock gets Antonio to agree to his “merry bond” (1.3.168) by imitating his self-effacing behavior: “I would be friends with you and have your love, / . . . Supply your present wants, and take no doit / Of usance for my moneys” (1.3.133–36). Since Antonio himself uses money to buy love, he is taken in by Shylock: “The Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind” (1.3.173). Not having Antonio’s blind spot, Bassanio is more skeptical.

Shylock shows no mercy to Antonio in part because he needs to demonstrate that his way is right. He needs to show how Antonio’s self-effacing behavior has led to his downfall, much as Iago must destroy Othello, Cassio, and Desdemona in order to justify himself (Paris 1997a). Shylock cannot show mercy, moreover, without hating himself for behaving like those whom he scoffs: “I’ll not be made a soft and dull-ey’d fool, / To shake the head, relent, and sigh, and yield / To Christian intercessors” (3.3.14–16). If Shylock allowed his self-effacing side to emerge, he would be caught in a cross-fire of conflicting shoulds. His arrogant-vindictive side would despise his foolish softness, and his self-effacing side would condemn his entire way of life. It is not only his hatred of Antonio but his dread of self-contempt that makes him so
intransigent. In seeking to cut out Antonio's heart, Shylock is trying to cut out the last of his own self-effacing tendencies.

Shylock loses our sympathy when he insists on his bond, despite Bassanio's offers of money and Portia's plea for mercy. He justifies his behavior by a perfectionistic, Old Testament appeal to the law. When Portia asks how he can expect mercy if he renders none, Shylock replies that he does not need mercy because he has done no wrong. The conflict is not only between mercy and revenge, but also between mercy and justice; and here, as in Measure for Measure and elsewhere, Shakespeare favors self-effacing values over perfectionistic ones (Paris 1991a). Mercy must season justice because "in the course of justice, none of us / Should see salvation" (4.1.197–98). Shylock is found to be deficient in both mercy and justice and can be savagely punished as a result.

The Merchant of Venice dramatizes the threat of the arrogant-vindicative person by which Shakespeare seems to have been haunted and glorifies the self-effacing Antonio, who has much in common with the Shakespeare we infer from his writings (see Paris 1991a). The play is about greedy, vindictive characters and unselfish, forgiving ones, and about which set of characters is going to prevail. Bassanio wins Portia because he chooses the lead casket, which stands for sacrifice, while his competitors choose silver and gold. It looks as though Antonio will be destroyed as a result of his generosity, but Shylock is undone by his vindictiveness instead. In a last-minute reversal, Antonio is rescued and experiences enormous triumphs—economic, moral, and emotional. This is a wish-fulfillment fantasy in which the self-effacing strategy works.

The various defensive strategies are related to each other as they were, I suspect, in Shakespeare's personality. The arrogant-vindicative solution is disowned and punished, and the self-effacing and perfectionistic solutions are favored, with the former being superior to the latter. There is much aggression, however, in the characters and in the author. Shylock's vindictiveness is condemned, but it is also made understandable as a reaction to having been wronged. Antonio's aggression comes out in his behavior toward Shylock, where it can be expressed without violating his self-effacing shoulds. As I have tried to show in Bargains with Fate, the Shakespeare we can infer from the plays is a predominantly self-effacing person who is constantly looking for ways to express his sadistic and vindictive impulses without violating his stronger need to be noble.
and loving (Paris 1991a). His solution is to create situations that permit disguised or justified aggression and innocent revenge, as he does for Antonio.

The play as a whole supports Antonio’s behavior. Because Shylock has refused to be merciful, Antonio and others can treat him with great cruelty at the end. Their vindictiveness is concealed by the fact that Shylock seems to have deserved his fate, that it is less severe than the law allows, and that it is being meted out in the name of mercy. Portia encourages Shylock’s insistence on his bond by giving him the impression that the law is on his side, and after she springs the trap, she refuses to allow him to relinquish his claim. According to the law, Shylock’s wealth is forfeit and his life is at the mercy of the Duke, but his life and half his wealth are spared when he accedes to Antonio’s demand that he convert to Christianity. He says he is “content” (4.1.392), but he leaves the stage a broken man: “I pray you give me leave to go from hence. / I am not well” (4.1.393–94). “If a Jew wrong a Christian,” Shylock had asked, “what is his humility? Revenge” (3.1.59–60). Despite Portia’s glorification of mercy and the appearance of generous treatment, the play bears out Shylock’s observation. Shakespeare’s rhetoric conceals this from us because, like his characters, he is at once celebrating self-effacing values and enjoying disguised and justified aggression.