TWO VIEWS OF MONEY

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(1) Shakespeare exhibits two worlds in The Merchant of Venice, each with its distinct philosphical perspectives on a variety of topics, including money, and each in conflict with the other. The first world, Belmont, is filled with warmth, softness, light, hope, trust, romanticism, generosity; it worships love and promotes friendships. Venice, the second world, is filled with coldness, harshness, darkness, lost hopes, greed, mistrust, hatred, selfishness; it worships profits and fosters adversarial relationships. Money, however, is one commodity at home in both of these contrasting worlds; in fact, it bridges the two worlds in the play. Money also has two distinct dimensions which parallel the two worlds of the play. Like an apothecary's potion, money can be used positively to heal and aid people in life or it can be misused and lead to ruin. Money is a "double-edged sword," like many other things in the range of human experience Shakespeare presents.

(2) In the world of Belmont, money is a positive means through which greater and more important goals can be achieved. The characters of Belmont believe that money has no intrinsic value and see it merely as a medium of exchange. Bassanio, for instance, is willing to hazard all his personal wealth and at least a portion of his friend Antonio's fortune in order to compete with Portia's other suitors. As he puts it to Antonio, "O my Antonio, had I but the means/To hold a rival place with one of them" (I.I.173-74). Bassanio expresses his willingness to give up his wealth and even go into debt in the noble pursuit of love, believing that with a great enough fortune, his courtship of Portia will be successful. Such is the only value money has, to Bassanio. This attitude, particular to the world of Belmont, is reinforced when Antonio tells Bassanio, "My purse, my person, my extremist means/Lie all unlocked to your occasions" (I.I.138-39). Bassanio directly comments on the value of money when, in the process of choosing among the three caskets, he calls gold "hard food for Midas" (III.II.102). Silver, of which money is often made, is a "common drudge/'Tween man and man" (III.II.103-04). In the end, the seemingly valueless lead casket holds the ultimate value, love, more precious than the outwardly valuable gold and silver caskets. Through these images Shakespeare clearly suggests that monetary value and the really important things in life are not necessarily related.

(3) If, in the world of Belmont, money is not the paramount concern, still, neither is it the least priority. For example, when Jessica and Lorenzo are

about to elope, she says, "I will make fast the doors and gild myself/With some more ducats, and be with you straight" (II.vi.49-50). Even in the excitement of eloping, money entered Jessica's mind; even true love recognized the importance of money in achieving a good life. Here, however, money held a position subordinate to love and happiness.

(4) In short, to the world of Belmont, money is a tool through which greater goals are attained. Feelings, friendships and love outweigh monetary concerns in the minds and hearts of the inhabitants of Belmont.

(5) In sharp contrast to this view of money is the Venetian perception of the value of money. Venice is the business world where all talk is of bonds, payment of bonds, the gain and loss of fortunes. Shylock, the chief representative of the Venetian monetary perspective, views acquisition, possession and protection of money as the most important part of life. A jealous guardian of his money, his ducats, and his business, he hates all those who threaten his wealth, his "well-won thrift" (I.iii.50). Chiefly, he hates Antonio, "I hate him for he is a Christian;/But more, for that in low simplicity/He lends out money gratis, and brings down/The rate of usance here with us in Venice" (I.iii.42-45).

(6) The self-professed usurer's mind is so occupied with dreams and thoughts of his wealth that he has a semi-prophetic ability to sense the welfare of his possessions. For instance, on the night of Jessica's elopement he tells her that he is reluctant to leave his home because, "There is some ill a-brewing towards my rest/For I did dream of money-bags to-night" (II.v.17-18). So concerned is Shylock about his money that he commands Jessica to close the doors of his home, adding, "Fast bind, fast find--/A proverb never stale in a thrifty mind" (II.v.54-55).

(7) Shylock ranks his money greater in value than his own daughter. Solanio describes Shylock's reaction to Jessica's theft of his property: Shylock runs through the streets yelling, "A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,/Of double ducats, stolen from me by my daughter!/And jewels--two stones, two rich and precious stones" (II.viii.18-20). Even in the excitement of the loss of his own daughter, Shylock is aware of exactly what was taken from him, unlike the merchant Antonio, who is unsure how much wealth his ships carry. Shylock, having lost his closest and possibly only relative, estimates his greatest loss as that of his coins and jewels--his possessions--not his daughter. He goes even further, "I would my daughter were dead at my feet, and the jewels in her ear, would she were hears'd at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin." (III.i.88-90).

(8) Finally, Shylock connects his possessions, his money, to his very existence: if his possessions are lost, so is his life. This is seen in the following passage when the Duke tells Shylock that he will have to give up all his wealth,

> Nay take my life and all! Pardon not that:
> You take my house when you do take the prop
> That doth sustain my house; you take my life
> When you do take the means whereby I live.
> (IV.1.374-77)

(9) Money is present in both worlds, Shylock's Venice and Bassanio, Jessica and Antonio's Belmont; but in the former perverted world view money is the focus of life, while in the latter it is only one component among many.