

The ubiquity of contract in the merchant of  
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## The Ubiquity of Contract in The Merchant of Venice

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **Contract in *The Merchant of Venice***

*Samuel Ajzenstat*

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*The Merchant of Venice* is widely interpreted as a Christian parable about the power of selfless love to raise us above the loveless inflexibilities of

the legal and commercial orders.<sup>1</sup> The account I shall offer is the precise opposite of this interpretation: *The Merchant* makes more sense as a play about love's *inability* to allow us to dispense with a loveless realm of hard necessity and, even more, about love's dependence on a loveless realm for its own survival. But the rejection of the idealistic account does not make *The Merchant* a cynical play. It remains a romantic comedy because it shows that love does not require the myth of its invulnerability and all-conquering power to remain meaningful both in the here-and-now and as a pointer to something beyond it.

*The Merchant* intertwines two distinct stories, a very pleasant and a very unpleasant one. The pleasant story takes place in the beautiful estate of Belmont where the young Venetian nobleman Bassanio wins Portia's hand by passing the test specified in her father's will, picking from among a golden, a silver and a lead casket the one which contains her picture. The unpleasant story takes place in a dark, ugly Venice where the merchant Antonio, in order to finance his beloved friend Bassanio's trip to Belmont, puts himself under the power of Shylock, the Jewish moneylender whose hatred he has earned by reviling him as a Jew and a usurer. Antonio risks his life, pledging a pound of his flesh if the debt is unpaid. Shakespeare brings the two stories together by having Portia, disguised as a man, go to Venice to defend Antonio in the law courts. Shylock is defeated and forced to convert to Christianity and the victors return to Belmont. Shylock's daughter Jessica, having run away to marry the Christian, Lorenzo, is also allowed to make the passage from Venice to Belmont. **[End Page 262]**

To idealistic critics, the two stories work against each other. However compassionate the Christians may think they are being by making Shylock convert, it is clear enough to us in the modern audience that they are destroying him. It takes something away from the beautiful triumph of pure love—which such critics think must be the point of the play—to see it purchased at the price of the destruction of someone for whom we have come to have considerable sympathy. Consequently, the play seems either to fall apart dramatically or to be a unity only if anti-semitic.

Such critics adopt a number of expedients, trying to get us to see Shylock as a simple, generalized villain, or viewing the play as anti-semitic but falling back on the historicist, Shakespeare-couldn't-have-known-any-better line, or else arguing that the play's incoherence is praiseworthy because Shakespeare's human sympathy overcame his skill as a playwright. But once we recognize, as I shall argue, that the ubiquity of something less than love is as present in the love story taken by itself as it is in the Shylock story, the sense of incoherence disappears. As for anti-semitism, it is surely an element in the play. But when we see it as a consequence of the Christian characters' attempt to separate themselves from what the play shows us to be an inseparable aspect of human life, we can understand that the play not only opposes anti-semitism but offers an astute philosophical analysis of it.

The play's fundamental opposition, often characterized as between love and commerce, is more revealingly seen as an opposition between a need for unconditional commitments and the equally pressing need to fence our commitments with conditions. The conditional is rooted in that aspect of ourselves—part of what we call justice—that tells us it is only fair for us to be self-interested enough to expect a return for what we give, reward for good, punishment for bad, measure for measure. Its basic metaphor is the contract. The unconditional is rooted in our sense of the grandeur of being able both to give and to...



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