

Letter from Shylock

Venice, 1597

My dear friend,

The little news that reaches me here is resplendent with tales of love. Love, how that little word sticks in my throat! I am told that at Belmont, the palace of that fair and gentle Portia, love reigns supreme; such perfect and ideal love. The love of husband and wife, Portia and Bassanio, Lorenzo, and, oh, how that pains me, my daughter Jessica, and the love of friends, Antonio and Bassanio. How they must spend their days in idyllic bliss, without a care in the world. And yet, my dear friend, only I know what all these lovers and friends know themselves but do not dare acknowledge - that love has a price, that love has a cost. And who has paid for their love? Me, Shylock, the one who was once known as Shylock the Jew. And how have I paid? With my money, my religion, and my future. Without exaggeration, I could even say that I have paid for their love, their happiness, with my own life.

And how did this bitter-sweet tale come to pass? This I shall tell you, and in so telling leave out nothing - nothing - including the part I myself played in my own downfall and in their victory.

A few months ago, the noble Bassanio came to visit me. He requested three thousand ducets. Why he wanted them at the time I did not know. It later came to my knowledge that he needed them so as to have the means to court the woman of his heart, Portia. He needed my money for his love! for his happiness! Yet, do you hear a word about this part of the story, about how I furnished him with the money so that he was free to love? About how Jewish money paved the way for that most perfect of loves? Oh, how much more I shall tell you of this association of Jewish money and Christian love.

Needless to say Bassanio, who knows how to spend money, but not how to produce it, was not in a position to make any kind of deal with me. I have since heard it told that, Antonio

the merchant, of whom I shall tell you a great deal more, had already given him - given, do you note, not lent, but given, and given out of friendship, out of love! - had given Bassanio a great deal of money so that he could invest in ventures. Apparently, he had asked Antonio to give him more, but Antonio was unable to.

But, and here lies the first of many infamies, do you know what justification Bassanio, this paragon of virtue, gave to Antonio in requesting yet more of his friend's money? I shall tell you. He pleaded his request by arguing that since Portia had been bequeathed a great fortune, and since whoever won her would gain control of that wealth, both the later gift and the earlier one would be repaid a hundred fold. So much for the purity of love. These Christians, these merchants, they treat the affairs of the heart as if it were a business deal. Yet, it is the Jew that bears the weight of that assumption!

Be that as it may, Antonio was not in a position to give his friend the funds he needed so as to satisfy his heart's desire. His money was idle, tied up in goods sitting on ships in the middle of the ocean. The two were left, despite themselves, to come to me. To ask *me* for the money, to ask *me* to furnish the cost of Bassanio's love.

When they came to see me, Bassanio did not mention even a word in my presence about his love, nor about the potential return that such love was to furnish. I suppose that they thought that love was an alien notion to me. What little they know! I know only too well about love, but I keep it in its place. Unlike those noble compatriots, Bassanio and Antonio, who speak of love in the same breath as profit, I keep the two firmly separated. Love is for the heart, money for the pocket.

Bassanio, perhaps because of the intensity of his feelings, his need to stand a chance to win his hearts' prize, was pleasant enough toward me in asking me to lend him the sum. True, I heard in his voice his hatred with which he treats a Jew, but, what's the news in that! As I have said, I do not lend out of love, but out of calculation. But my calculating mind knew that his coffers were empty. On his own, I would have refused him without a second thought. But, and such a small word for such a great consequence, he then assured me that Antonio would stand surety.

Antonio, Antonio. Oh, how long I had waited to catch him on the hip. He was not like the other Christians that I have dealt with, either as friend or client. He hated me, but he hated me in a novel and original way. He is unlike those Christians who hated me for their usual reasons, killing their Lord, and for refusing the truth of the "one true religion", etc., etc.. That is their only reason for despising me, even while they knew that I was necessary for them.

I was necessary to give them money to live, since in the way they lived, they could make none of their own; they used money to consume - no more, no less. Apparently, it goes against their Church for them to make money make money. Even in their hatred of me and my people, we remained a part of their lives and their world. But, not so to Antonio and his new breed of merchants.

Antonio and his kind believe that they have found a way around their Church's prohibitions. Instead of money making money through interest, money makes money for them through profit. A fine distinction! Tell me my dear friend, what is the difference between buying cheap and selling dear and charging interest on money lent? Is it not true that in both ways the recipient gives back more to the provider than the provider has laid out? Ah, you might say, but the man who provides the goods still needs us Jews to give those that buy the money to purchase what is supplied them in this way. That is not the case. And why is that not the case? I shall tell you.

The merchant faces those that come into contact with him in two ways - as a buyer and as a seller. First, he buys what they have made with his own money; then he takes those goods and exchanges them with others that a another merchant has acquired in the same way, and - this part is so clever that I do not know why a Jew did not think of it - he sells those goods back to the same people who made them originally, but this time for a far greater price. In this way, money constantly reproduces itself through the work of people who make things themselves, but who then buy those things back as if they did not make them or had ever

seen them before. The trick of the merchant is to keep the people blind in this way, so that they can take the difference between the price at which they buy and that for which they sell.

You can see, my dear friend, why, for them, there is no place for the Jew. Our money, even when lent out for interest, merely remains as money and comes back to us as money. Unlike these Christian merchants, money does not suddenly turn into something else that pretends it is not money. Antonio calls our money, our Jewish money, "barren". How can it be barren if it breeds in the way of more money?

For all his talk of refusing to be "neither a lender or borrower", he came to me for a loan. A loan, not for business you understand, but for love! How fragile is *his* new practice! He talks of money "breeding", but how successful is the intercourse when his money, or as he calls it, "his goods" sit nowhere other than in the bright blue sea, at the mercy of the heavens and of the pirates? No, he still needs us Jews and our money. Or so I thought....

Yes, he needs our money, but all of it....and now. His new way of making wealth depends on all the people buying and selling. Because all people do not do this, he is limited. He also runs the risk that all his money could disappear in one rough night on one rough ocean. If only I would have understood his merchant's situation. I would have acted so differently.

In the end Antonio robbed me. He and his like robbed me of all my money. If they had come like thieves in the night and taken it, at least that would have been open and, dare I say, honest. But such an action they would see as unchristian. Instead, they stole it with deceit; they stole it in the name of love - they stole it in the name of their Lord; and I was a party to it.

When I saw Antonio come into my house ready to make an agreement, my heart leapt. "Now I have him", I thought, and I did. But, oh, how I missed my chance; how stupid I was. If only I had acted as a Jew! Instead I acted as a Christian; can I now complain that I was judged like a Christian?

As you know, I lend money free of favour. What do I care about the person who stands in front of me; what do I care if he is Jew, Christian or Moor, whether he be left-handed or right-handed. All I care is that the person is good; and by "good", all I mean is that he is good for the debt. I sit as with an equal and discuss the agreement, and sign, seal and deliver it within the bond. If the debt cannot or will not be met when it is due, then I go to court, appeal to the law and expect, nay, demand, that the law treat me as I have treated it, with respect and with justice. That, as you more than other know, my dear friend, is the Jew's greatest and most magnificent achievement - the creation of the law, and the subservience of all in the face of it. Where, I ask you, would the world be, without this greatest of miracles?

If I had acted under the law in my dealings with Antonio, what a different story could now be told. Knowing that his ventures were at the mercy of the gravest of risks, and knowing the desperation of his love for Bassanio, I could have charged whatever interest I wanted with such a forfeit that, had his ships been a day late, he would have been ruined, and it would have been my satisfaction to see that day.

But, oh, what a fool I was. In front of me I saw, not a man like all others, not a man of more or of less means, but Antonio - a Christian and a merchant who had made enemies of me and my and my people. My passion obstructed my vision and my thought.

I could not see that in baiting him, it was he who set the trap and that I walked into it as I said, blindly but with my eyes wide open. These Christians, what do they know of setting prices and charging interest justly, according to the law, free of personal involvement. No, they sneer at interest (as if it were different from profit!) and, so he tells me, they give money in the spirit of friendship and love. Indeed, in their new merchant's corporations they set their prices in agreement one with the other and measure it not by justice in the face of the law, but by love in the face of their Lord. Oh, how this elite and the rabble act in the same way.

That was the next step in my own undoing. I, Shylock the Jew, blasphemed against our own law, and acted as a Christian. In place of the justice inherent in our law, I was willing to use

the cover of the law to wreak vengeance, but under the thin veneer of kindness, friendship and love. It was only later that I realised just how strong was the relation of Christian love to Christian vengeance.

I told Antonio that I would deal in kindness with him, contrary to my legal and just habits. And, in this so unjewish way of dealing, I thought I would be better at being a Christian than Antonio! What a mistake I made.

I told him that in the spirit of friendship I would forsake all interest and, should the debt not be met, merely ask for a pound of his flesh. Of course, I knew that this would mean his death; what I did not realise was that I was staking my life as well.

The day of the forfeit finally arrived. In the meantime, my daughter Jessica eloped with a Christian and took on his religion. This event compounded my desire for vengeance to that which I felt toward that Christian-merchant Antonio.

I went into court that day with vengeance in my heart, but, of course, to me and to the court I pleaded that vengeance in the name of justice. After all, I argued, the date for repayment had arrived, the money could not be returned to me, so, as the law demands, I must be allowed to take my pound of flesh from him as was written in the bond to which Antonio agreed and signed as a freeman.

The judges, those trained in the law, and only the law, despite some whining for clemency, had no alternative but to agree that I was in the right. All victory was to be mine. It is then that Portia arrived on the scene; asked by the court to arbitrate. Why could not they themselves decide? Surely, the law is the law?

Oh, how Christian love appears! Did she come into court dressed as that which she was - love and virtue? No, she came in (as did I) as a charade; she came disguised as a lawyer. What chance did law and justice, those noblest of Jewish values, stand in the face of her Christian values of love and revenge?

Oh, what pretence of justice she made! I should have seen what was about to be visited on me. In the guise of Justice she asked, not Justice's question, who was defendant and who was plaintiff? Instead, she asked who was merchant and who was Jew? As if she did not know the answer! She continued her masquerade as the blindness of law when she pretended not to see the difference between me in my gabardine and the merchant in his finery.

Still masked, in this court of law, she then, with eloquent words, pleaded with me in the name of mercy and charity. Oh, those vile Christian virtues through which their love of man is met. What have I, a man of the law, to do with love or mercy? What does a Jew know of love. I do not love my fellow man, I have too much respect for humanity to love a man. I treat a man with respect, as my equal, no matter who he is. Because of my lack of love, a lack I am proud of, can I, a Jew, show mercy? Nay, to show that noble, Christian virtue, you need to be above another, to patronise him with your pity. If I am above a Christian, it is in the name of justice. I demand justice, I expect to be judged according to it, not according to love.

But, if the truth be known, what justice could I demand? Had I not given up my right to justice when I bargained with Antonio in the name of friendship, but with a heart of vengeance? Had I not made a mockery of law when I attempted to force into it what does not belong there? Can I complain that I was treated in the same way?

How quickly, Christian mercy turns to vengeance, yet all in the name of love! At my refusal to show "love for my fellow man", how speedily, love turned to hate. How fast I was to suffer the violence of love spurned.

Using legal arguments full of spite and malice, Portia, that gentle lady, spat out her decision. I may take my flesh, but not a drop of his blood must be spilled. The flesh was mine, the blood was his - as if the two could be separated. One of us had to yield, and, in the face of this court of love and vengeance, it was to be me. And so the precedent was set.

Not content with permitting her to make judgement, they then left it to Portia to speak of punishment. And what punishment. Not the punishment of law and of justice, such notions had flown out of the room, chased by the spirit of love! It was the punishment of love: all I had was to be its own. One half was to the state, to Venice, the other half to Antonio. I had been robbed in Portia's court of all I possessed.

Once dispossessed in this manner, what use did they have for a Jew? To show the measure of my new worth, they told me who I really was and who they really were. I was told that I was an alien who had threatened the life of a citizen, and must pay accordingly. An alien! All my life I had lived in Venice, entering into contacts, paying taxes, yet, I was called an alien. But was I an alien of the state, or was I an alien of a community of love? Or had one become the other? Love and vengeance had overcome law and justice, and, dressed in its mantle, continued to act. but with such a different heart.

In this name of love, so unlike that of justice which stands between the wrongdoer and the wronged to temper the feelings of vengeance, in love's own name, the one wronged, Antonio, was to extend further humiliation. In his blend of Christian love and merchant avarice he made me the trustee of my own money. For whom was I to hold this money so it earned all the more, but without its true owner becoming visible? I was to hold it for my Christian daughter and her Christian husband until my death. If for no other reason, how I desire to live forever!

Finally, Antonio confronted me as the victor faces the vanquished. I lay before him and waited. He could take my life if he so desired. After all, what is a Jew to him after his money and his law has been stolen. And took my life he did; but in a oh, so gentle, Christian way! Speaking out of mercy he killed me by bading me become Christian. By this simple act of death and resurrection, was I no longer to be a Jewish alien in a Christian world?

I could stand no more and left that room of deceit, trickery and hypocrisy.

How, I wonder, my dear friend will this tale be told to those not present?

Will Portia and Bassanio lying in their bed of sublime love, readily admit the tricks they played? Will they acknowledge the role of the Jew of whom they so kindly disposed, in allowing them their peace and happiness? And will Bassanio ever tell the fair Portia that he sought to woo her, not only for her love, but so as to use her wealth to repay Antonio for his first "gift"?

When Antonio is thanked by Lorenzo and Jessica for the money he has procured for them, will he tell them, will he tell himself, of the cost to himself that lay behind that gift of love? Or will he see the Jew in himself even as he congratulates himself for killing Shylock, the old Jew?

And will all of the nations of Christianity ever realise that for them to live in ideal love and communion among themselves, as one perfect community, so as to create their Christian heaven on earth and call it the "world of justice"; that for such a prize somebody else will need to be seen to pay for their earthly sins, including, of course, the sins of human necessity? And pay we do! Will it now always be us, my dear friend, will it from this day, be the Jews, who pay this cost of Christian love, and who will be the water in which they cleanse their vengeance when they find, time and time again, that they themselves must wash their dirty Jewish hands so as to keep their Christian hearts clean.

As for me, I left the court and found that I had done as they willed. I had already become a Christian. But tell me, am I, now with a simple act of baptism, with the rule of a Christian court, more of a Christian or less of a Jew than I was before. As I walk with a cross around my neck, speaking to my noble fellow Christians in words of love and mercy, I shall never forget what else has been taught me - that vengeance is love by another name. Yes, my friend, I was killed as a Jew, but no more than Antonio a Christian. Who now can separate the flesh from the blood?

