“When shall we laugh?”: Gratiano and the two faces of comedy in William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*
Abstract

Comedy is an inherently pleasurable phenomenon with beneficial psychological functions, but its potential to bring on undesirable and socially destabilizing consequences is less intuitively obvious. In this essay, I argue that one of the hitherto under-recognized features of William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* is its covert problematization of the phenomenon of comedy itself, and that the play invites its audience to become more aware of in what situations laughter is constructive and appropriate. I apply psychological and cultural-historical theories of humor—specifically, Freudian *relief theory* and Bakhtinian thought on laughter and festivity—as a framework for interpreting the play, with a particular emphasis on the secondary protagonist called Gratiano. I argue that Gratiano serves as a personification of comedy, whose function is to problematize it and demonstrate its positive as well as negative attributes in relation to seriousness and restraint. Gratiano’s laughter-inducing antics compels audience members to sympathize with him in the dialectic which Shakespeare sets up between him and other characters, but the play also portrays his jovial behavior as concomitant with less desirable traits which his comedy successfully obscures. While the character presents comedy as attractive and instinctively preferable to propriety and decorum, he also shows how the allure of laughter and comedy may be used by disingenuous actors to provide an attractive veneer for immoral or abhorrent behavior.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare; *The Merchant of Venice*; Freud; Bakhtin; comedy; relief theory
When faced with William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, it is not easy to know the extent to which one is meant—or even allowed—to laugh and have fun. While technically a comedy in the sense that its protagonists achieve a happy resolution, the play deals with serious issues in a restrained and serious manner, and one of the many questions it poses is whether it is appropriate to find any comedic enjoyment in it at all. Modern audiences will certainly find little that is funny about a central conflict in which a group of Christian protagonists are set against Shylock the Jew, through whom Jews are portrayed as harsh and unyielding to a literally murderous degree. What is worse, the play’s ostensibly comedic resolution is predicated on the impoverishment and forced conversion of the Jew at the hands of the Christian majority. The play’s treatment of Judaism has dominated its appraisal as a cultural artifact ever since its composition in the late 16th century, with “every major study focusing in some way on the anti-Jewish themes” (Coonradt 76), and the anti-Semitic elements have led to calls for the play’s permanent banning in the post-Holocaust era (Mahon 1). Nonetheless, it continues to attract worldwide audiences. Thus, if any single work by William Shakespeare is relevant in the current social space—where the line between the humorous and the offensive is not always clear—it would appear to be *The Merchant of Venice*. I therefore approach this problematic comedy at the level of character, in order to uncover its hitherto under-recognized treatment of a question which is perennially relevant but seldom consciously considered: the value of comedy and laughter relative to seriousness and restraint.
If any one character in *The Merchant of Venice* is associated with comedy in the colloquial sense,¹ the minor protagonist called Gratiano is the primary candidate. Critics rarely discuss him at length—perhaps because he is seen as peripheral to the heavier topics which critics tend to highlight—but his irrelevance in terms of plot development demands a closer investigation into what purpose he serves in the play. Moreover, Gratiano’s characterization invites a problematization of comedy as a phenomenon, because existing scholarship reliably refers to him either as the play’s principal source of joviality, or malevolence, or both. For example, Michael Skovmand describes him as “gratuitously cruel [and] constantly jeering and sneering” (89), and Robin Russin dubs him the play’s “coarsest and most malicious character” (126), while Leo Rockas rejoices in Gratiano’s “lively lines of comeuppance against Shylock” (341). John Cunningham and Stephen Slimp merge the two perspectives by arguing that anyone “who objects to Gratiano’s raillery [against Shylock] might think how bland this patch of the action would be without it” (251). Harold Bloom expresses the mixture of entertainment with malice rather more pointedly, noting that Gratiano’s railings remind him of “Hitler’s favorite newspaper editor” while simultaneously calling him an audience surrogate whose opposition to Shylock means that he “must be taken as a good fellow” (*Invention of the Human* 173). Bloom solves this seeming contradiction by judging the play “a profoundly anti-Semitic work” (171), but quite enough has been written on its seeming mistrust of the Christians² for that conclusion to feel somewhat simplistic. This essay will apply psychological and cultural-historical theories of humor—Freudian *relief theory* and Bakhtinian thought on laughter, specifically—as a framework for interpreting Gratiano as an embodiment of comedy in *The Merchant of Venice*, whose characterization problematizes the innate human desire for comedy and demonstrates its positive as well as negative attributes in relation to seriousness and restraint. The analysis relies on a set of scenes in which Gratiano plays a prominent part, and focuses on a dramatized dialectic that Shakespeare constructs between him and three other, more prominent characters in the play. We begin, however, with a brief overview of the psychological and socio-

¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives “[h]umour; humorous invention; the action or quality of being funny or amusing” as one of the definitions of ‘comedy’, and this paper therefore treats ‘comedy’ as synonymous with ‘humor’ unless the technical sense of a happily resolved theatrical composition is implied through context.

² For a helpful overview, see Mahon.
cultural function of humor, which will then be used to contextualize specifically Shakespearean comedy.

One of the most commonly espoused theories of humor, called the relief theory, argues that humor functions as a relief mechanism for psychological tensions which arise when a person is compelled to adhere to social codes and norms. In Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious, Sigmund Freud writes that the “repressive activity of civilization brings it about that primary possibilities of enjoyment, which have ... been repudiated by the censorship within us, are lost to us” (145), and argues that jokes—the verbal expression of humor—provide pleasure by releasing excess amounts of psychic energy built up by the repression of natural desires and impulses (185); a release which manifests itself in the form of laughter (200). From a cultural-historical perspective, Mikhail Bakhtin contends in Rabelais and His World that laughter enables a healthy venting of repressed impulses and has historically provided temporary relief from the pressures of the official culture of society, characterized by an “intolerant, one-sided tone of seriousness” with overtones of “fear, religious awe [and] humility” (73). According to Bakhtin, seriousness inspired popular mistrust in medieval Europe, because it “was infused with elements of fear, weakness, humility, submission, falsehood, hypocrisy [and] violence, intimidation, threats, prohibitions” (94). Laughter, on the other hand, could overcome fear, inhibitions and the guilt associated with the forbidden and the taboo (90). Because medieval laughter represented “the social consciousness of all the people” (92), it resulted in a boisterous and festive folk culture, expressed through popular festivals such as Carnival, which provided a counterweight to reigning official cultures and moral systems which demanded repression and self-denial. Bakhtin’s focus was on cultural expressions in early modern France, but his concepts are applicable to Shakespeare’s socio-cultural context given how the late Elizabethan era is described in the Norton Anthology of English Literature:

In the space of a single lifetime, England had gone officially from Roman Catholicism, to Catholicism under the supreme headship of the English king, to a guarded Protestantism, to a more radical Protestantism, to a renewed and aggressive Roman Catholicism, and finally to Protestantism again. Each of these shifts was accompanied by

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3 Other notable theories, superiority theory and incongruity theory foremost among them, are not necessarily mutually exclusive and will not be expounded upon in this short essay.
danger, persecution, and death. It was enough to make people wary. Or skeptical. Or extremely agile. (“Introduction” 12–13)

In such an environment, the release offered by laughter would have been both necessary and appreciated. Respite from the weariness of daily life in late 16th century England was provided by the theater, where Shakespeare’s plays offered a particular kind of comedic escape.

Specifically Shakespearean comedy is not straight-forwardly definable, but one of its signature properties is its close association to the kind of folk culture described by Bakhtin. François Laroque maintains that Shakespeare’s comedy was distinguished by the unique importance it ascribed to popular festivity (25), and Michael Bristol argues that Shakespeare’s comedy arose as a professionalized theatrical expression of festive folk culture (637). In this view, theater is intimately tied to the cultural phenomenon of Carnival and the plebeian language of the *carnivalesque*, characterized by the overturning of social norms, raucous feasting and the wearing of “costumes and masks” (641). C.L. Barber’s *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy* describes the related *saturnalian pattern*, which denotes a multitude of dramatic structures that involve “inversion, statement and counterstatement, and a basic movement … through release to clarification” (2). Inversion of social structures and release for pent-up impulses were often achieved by temporarily placing the characters in a liberating ‘holiday’ setting where social rules and hierarchies do not apply—“a place of escape from the constraints of the law and of everyday life”, in Laroque’s words (29)—but they could also be expressed through the figure of the clown or fool, “a recognized anarchist who made aberration obvious by carrying release to absurd extremes” (Barber 3). Clown figures often acted as foils to more important characters, and their burlesque and exaggerated imitations of the earnestly performed actions of their betters provided “release for impulses which run counter to decency and decorum, and the clarification about limits which comes from going beyond the limit” (12). The clown’s comedic antics were thus simultaneously used to satirize and clarify the established social rules. To summarize, comedy and humor are psychological mechanisms which allow a healthy release for impulses which are normally suppressed for the purpose of social cohesion. However, the fact that humor creates pleasure through the breaking of social taboos means that it may provide an attractive veneer for immoral or abhorrent behavior. As we will see, this description applies just as readily to Gratiano and his role in the play he inhabits. He is rarely
identified as the clarifying clown or fool of *The Merchant of Venice*, but he continually portrays himself as a standard-bearer for comedic fun. This contrasts starkly with much of the rest of the play, and especially against the characterization of the pious Antonio.

Antonio is the wealthy merchant of the play’s title and also a God-fearing Christian, which makes him representative of official culture in both a religious and a secular sense. It is my view that he embodies such culture in both its positive and negative facets—which explains the disparate critical interpretations of the character as either the “embodiment of Christian love” (Lewalski 329) or as a “bigoted, selfish, manipulative conniver and masochist … who kicks Jews” (Mahon 3)—and he also exemplifies the Freudian notion of internalized self-censorship stemming from the repressive activity of civilization. Antonio sets a serious mood for the play in the opening lines, when he complains about his low spirits to his friends Salerio and Solanio: “In sooth, I know not why I am so sad. / It wearies me; you say it wearies you” (1.1.1–2). These lines are followed by prolonged theorizing by Salerio and Solanio about what might be causing Antonio’s sadness—hardly the stuff of liberating comedic theater—before Bassanio and Gratiano (together with Lorenzo) arrive to ask a pertinent question which might as well be asked by the audience at that point: “when shall we laugh?” (1.1.66). Gratiano then berates Antonio for having “too much respect upon the world” (1.1.74), and declares his own intention to grow old in “mirth and laughter” (1.1.80) before begging: “let my liver rather heat with wine / Than my heart cool with mortifying groans” (1.1.81–2). Quite literally from the very beginning, then, Antonio’s proper life-style is portrayed as wearisome, stultifying, and—to put it bluntly—boring, while Gratiano’s carefree attitude is painted as energizing, liberating and fun. In Bakhtinian terms, the dynamic between the two characters recalls the social dialogue between folk and official culture, and it is not hard to guess whose side would be taken by Elizabethans seeking temporary refuge at the theater. Indeed, Harold Bloom’s observation that he “never met anyone who much likes Antonio” (180) is telling, though admittedly removed from the play’s original context. Gratiano also counters Antonio’s lamentation that his sadness makes him a “want-wit” (1.1.6), when he expresses a wish to “play the fool” (1.1.79) and berates

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4 This role is by convention awarded to Launcelot Gobbo (e.g. Laroque 36), whose relation to outright laughter is far less clear.
pensive restraint as a mere attempt at being “reputed wise / For saying nothing” (1.1.96–7). In this way, Gratiano presents his own way of life as a path to wisdom and clarity, but his potential as a source of wisdom is undercut shortly after, when Bassanio claims that he “speaks an infinite deal of nothing” (1.1.114). Even as audience sympathies are drawn towards him at the expense of Antonio, the scene thus also establishes Gratiano’s limitations as a clarifying fool character. These shortcomings, however, are obscured for much of the play. In fact, if one reads The Merchant of Venice as a rhetorical battle between Gratiano’s liberality and Antonio’s restraint for the affections of the audience, it takes some time before the latter gains any ground at all.

Gratiano’s dialectical opposition to official culture continues outside of his direct interactions with Antonio. It is further reinforced by his next appearance in Act 2, Scene 2, when he appears seemingly at random to ask that Bassanio bring him along to Belmont to help in his courtship of Portia, its rich mistress. That his intention is to be of any help is far from clear, however, as he neglects to provide any motivation; he simply states, “I must go with you to Belmont” (2.2.166). The subsequent exchange between the two elaborates further on Gratiano’s opposition to official culture, as Bassanio grants his request with a qualifying admonition:

> Thou art too wild, too rude and bold of voice –  
> Parts that become thee happily enough,  
> And in such eyes as ours appear not faults;  
> But where thou art not known, why there they show  
> Something too liberal. Pray thee, take pain  
> To allay with some cold drops of modesty  
> Thy skipping spirit; lest through thy wild behaviour  
> I be misconst’red in the place I go to  
> And lose my hopes. (2.2.168–76)

Propriety and modesty are once again put in conflict with spirited liberality, but the perspective is different from that presented in Gratiano’s interactions with Antonio. Bassanio does not stand in opposition to Gratiano’s wild and rude personality—in fact, he considers it a beneficial quality among friends—but he nonetheless recognizes that it must be kept in check for the purely pragmatic reason that it risks provoking rejection and condemnation among strangers and in polite society. As a sign of the play’s original societal context, Gratiano then re-frames the issue in explicitly religious terms:

> Signior Bassanio, hear me:  
> If I do not put on a sober habit,
Talk with respect, and swear but now and then,
Wear prayer-books in my pocket, look demurely,
Nay more, while grace is saying hood mine eyes
Thus with my hat, and sigh, and say amen,
Use all the observance of civility
Like one well studied in a sad ostent,
To please his grandam, never trust me more. (2.2.176–84)

When considered in conjunction with his suspicion of those who hide their foolishness behind “a wilful stillness” (1.1.90), this statement makes Gratiano’s views on official religious decorum quite clear: in his mind, it amounts to little more than sanctimonious theatrics on the part of those who uphold it, while those who are subject to it enact it largely out of fear of judgment or condemnation; as Bassanio has just tacitly agreed. This sentiment agrees with Bakhtin’s description of official culture, and it is not difficult to imagine that many an audience member would sympathize with Gratiano in this moment, given the state of English Christendom at the time of the play’s composition. Bassanio certainly agrees, as he immediately calls for Gratiano to postpone the adoption of a tempered façade and instead put on his “boldest suit of mirth, for we have friends / That purpose merriment” (2.2.189–90); a possible meta-theatrical reference to the audience. Whether restraint and self-repression have positive value or not, the exchange thus conveys the sympathetic message that it is both healthy and natural to slacken such constraints in private settings. As his next appearance reveals, Gratiano is quick to take such advice to heart.

This next appearance occurs in Act 2, Scene 6, and the languages of Carnival and saturnalian mirth are here expressed more directly than at any other point in the play; perhaps because it is the only time at which Gratiano appears without the moderating influences of Bassanio or Antonio. He is instead paired with Lorenzo, whose inability to restrain his anarchic friend has been hinted at in his admission that “Gratiano never lets me speak” (1.1.107). The scene is performed in a carnivalesque mode, with Gratiano, Salerio and Lorenzo wearing masquerade disguises and Shylock’s daughter Jessica cross-dressing. As Barber points out, this circumstance dresses the morally dubious actions they perform in an artificial veneer of harmless frivolity, and their act of robbery against Shylock wins audience sympathies “partly because it is done in a masque, as a merriment” (187). However, this interruption in the form of festive merriment does not last long. Rather fittingly, it is brusquely cut
short by the sudden arrival of Antonio, who wastes no time in re-establishing a mood of somber restraint:

Fie, fie, Gratiano, where are all the rest?  
’Tis nine o’clock; our friends all stay for you;  
No masque to-night; the wind is come about;  
Bassanio presently will go abroad;  
I have sent twenty out to seek for you. (2.6.62–6)

In accordance with his untroubled nature, Gratiano claims to be glad of this disruption (2.2.67). Nonetheless, Antonio’s language in the quoted passage is particularly patronizing and paternalistic, and he is strikingly effective at sweeping away any trace of festive atmosphere. His initial finger-wagging, pedantic reminder about the time, and abrupt notice that the planned feast and masquerade have been cancelled, all remind the audience of the adversarial relationship that exists between festivity and propriety. It is also a sobering reminder that they have been distracted from the seriousness of the main plot for the duration of the scene; a state of affairs which cannot last. As in real life, the fun escapade must inevitably give way to more constructive action. As Gratiano accompanies Bassanio to Belmont while Antonio is left behind to become imprisoned for forfeiting his debts to Shylock, the relationship between the former two men takes over as the primary mechanism through which the attraction of comedy is problematized.

If Gratiano is the play’s comedic audience surrogate, Bassanio may be described as its ‘Everyman’ protagonist. Bassanio’s irresponsible wastefulness is what necessitates his venture for Portia’s hand and puts Antonio in debt to Shylock, but he is a dynamic character who ostensibly manages to “attain the ideal of Christian mercy as represented by Portia” (Wynne-Davies 369). Gratiano only appears without Bassanio for the single aforementioned scene, and most of his substantive actions are variations of actions already performed by Bassanio, leading to the impression that Gratiano and his comedy externally represent Bassanio’s childish and prodigal side; unconstructive traits which he must either reject or rise above. Were Gratiano’s acts of mimicry performed in any kind of extravagant or burlesque way, they might be identifiable as instances of saturnalian clarification through release as described by Barber. However, his comedy is almost entirely verbal and not particularly absurd or extreme, and so his mimicry of Bassanio may more aptly be described as the vacuous

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5 Masquerade.
actions of a man who relies on humor to sanitize behavior which would otherwise be condemned. This is signaled in the introductory scene, where Gratiano hints at familiarity with prostitutes by claiming that silence is commendable in “a maid not vendible” (1.1.112), and it begins to be more fully displayed once Bassanio and Gratiano reach Belmont. In Act 3, Scene 2, Gratiano is present on the stage as a silent observer while Bassanio solves the riddle which he must solve in order to claim Portia’s hand in marriage, and subsequently steps forward to offer his congratulations. It is a strange moment, indeed, as he says, “I wish you all the joy that you can wish, / For I am sure you can wish none from me” (3.2.190–1). Superficially, this is a charmingly self-deprecating acknowledgement that Gratiano’s opinion must be of little overall significance to his triumphant friend. However, it is also a statement of equivocation in which he manages to nullify his own polite wish for his friend’s marital joy.6 Furthermore, by claiming that Bassanio and Portia mean to “solemnize / The bargain of [their] faith” (3.2.92–3; emphasis added), Gratiano openly admits to conceptualizing marriage as a materialistic arrangement coated over with ceremony. He seems to simultaneously exemplify and contest Laroque’s assertion that Shakespeare’s comedies “stage repressed or forbidden desires which are ultimately liberated and expressed in marriage” (25), because while he swiftly declares his own intention to marry Portia’s hand-maiden Nerissa, the scene unfolds in a way which casts significant doubt on the sincerity of his intentions.

Gratiano’s sincerity in marrying Nerissa is questionable for a number of reasons, the first of which is the abrupt nature of its announcement. Secondly, the phrasing of said announcement is revealing:

My eyes, my lord, can look as swift as yours:  
You saw the mistress, I beheld the maid;  
You lov’d, I lov’d; for intermission7  
No more pertains to me, my lord, than you. (3.2.197–200)

Gratiano’s primary motivation appears to be to present himself as equivalent to Bassanio, and he projects his own impulsivity onto him whilst implying that loving someone is equivalent to liking their appearance. He also attempts to share in Bassanio’s success by exclaiming: “We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece” (3.2.240; emphases added). Bassanio may well be interpreted as a mythical hero in

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6 As an analogy, consider whether an offer of food to someone who certifiably does not want any is in fact a generous offer or merely polite posturing.
7 A temporary state of inaction.
the vein of Jason, but one wonders whether Gratiano even qualifies as an Argonaut given his lack of active contribution. Nonetheless, he clings to the metaphor wherein marriage is represented as material gain, which he borrows from the prodigal Bassanio of the first act (1.1.170–2). The play is ambiguous about whether exposure to Portia and Belmont has truly caused Bassanio to transcend his initial prodigality, but Gratiano’s continued reliance on the ‘golden fleece’ analogy makes clear that no such character development has occurred in his case. Moreover, while Bassanio has passed a difficult test to prove his worth, Gratiano has won Nerissa’s promise of marriage by nagging his way to it; a circumstance which he appears to somewhat resent, describing it as a physically arduous task of “woooing here until I sweat again, / And swearing till my very roof was dry” (3.2.203–4). Furthermore, when asked whether he means “good faith” (3.2.210) in this endeavor, Gratiano incriminates himself by removing the adjective and replying “Yes, faith, my lord” (3.2.211). Perceptive audience members might be expected to ponder what faith is worth when it is not good, especially given Gratiano’s previous observation that “All things that are / Are with more spirit chased than enjoy’d” (2.6.12–3), but Gratiano relies on his comedy to prevent further indictment of his character. He jokes that the couples should place a bet on who will have the first son, and follows up with a lewd comment: “we shall ne’er win at that sport, and stake down” (3.2.216; emphasis added); a rather crude pun on the male sexual organ. Audiences may well be amused by this bit of ribaldry, especially as Gratiano’s interjections interrupt the rather long and pretentious affirmations of love between Portia and Bassanio, but it also demonstrates the power of humor to deflect from dubious behavior. These moments represent a turning point in the play, because it is at this stage that the dialectic between Gratiano’s liberality and the propriety of the other Christians begins to shift. The comedic release which Gratiano embodies has hitherto been a source of refreshing mirth and levity—leading the audience to sympathize with his perspective—but the play will henceforth accentuate the detrimental and downright destructive consequences of living one’s life in thrall to licentious impulsivity. Nowhere is this more clearly displayed than at Antonio’s trial in Act 4.

The trial is the climax of the play, at which Shylock claims Antonio’s life as payment for his debts; before Portia’s machinations put Shylock on trial, instead. The dialectic between Gratiano and Antonio continues to play out but is presented rather differently, as the trial also introduces a new dynamic in which Gratiano becomes a
moral counterpart to the antagonistic Shylock. We should start, however, by noting just how out of place Gratiano is in the setting of the courtroom. He is given eleven pieces of dialogue during the trial, and none of them signify any constructive attempt to affect the proceedings—in contrast to Bassanio, who is equally powerless in executive terms but attempts to sway Shylock with money (4.1.84) and implores the Duke to set the law aside for Antonio’s sake (4.1.212–5). It is also striking how bereft Gratiano is at the trial of his characteristic lightheartedness, as he makes the transition from uninhibited to unhinged. His dialogue in the scene invokes images of a riled-up mob, with each of his lines being broadly categorizable into either of three major categories: dehumanizing slurs directed at Shylock (4.1.128–38, 290), boorish parroting of celebratory outbursts by Shylock (4.1.311, 315, 321, 331, 338), and bloodthirsty calls for Shylock to be hanged (4.1.362–5, 377, 396–8). Shylock himself notes how frivolously unconstructive Gratiano’s demeanor is in the setting of a court:

Till thou canst rail the seal from off my bond,
Thou but offend’st thy lungs to speak so loud;
Repair thy wit, good youth, or it will fall
To cureless ruin. (4.1.139–42)

Spoken as it is by the play’s antagonist, the truth value of this statement should not be accepted at face value. However, Shylock’s sentiment parallels Bassanio’s previous judgments that Gratiano “speaks an infinite deal of nothing” (1.1.114) and that his behavior is both inappropriate and unconstructive outside of private company. In his Bakhtinian distrust of seriousness and decorum, then, Gratiano has failed to recognize any positive function in the order it imposes. Conversely, while his own anarchic lifestyle has its place, the courtroom is not one of them.

This circumstance is linked to the aforementioned shift in the dynamic between Antonio and Gratiano, and thus on a shift in the relative values placed on official and folk culture. As the trial unfolds, Antonio’s bland sobriety is revealed to be concomitant with desirable qualities such as mercy and self-sacrifice, while Gratiano’s festive joviality morphs into aggression and blood thirst. Consider his reaction to Shylock whetting his knife, which incidentally is his one piece of dialogue that does not fit into the aforementioned three categories:

Not on thy sole, but on thy soul, harsh Jew,
Thy mak’st thy knife keen; but no metal can,
No, not the hangman’s axe, bear half the keenness
Of thy sharp envy. Can no prayers pierce thee? (4.1.123–6)
Compared to his other outbursts, this is relatively subdued. However, it notably reveals a conceptualization of prayers as offensive weapons to be directed at one’s enemies; a problematic notion in a Christian society which prided itself on its purported capacity to—in Portia’s words—“render / The deeds of mercy” (4.1.189–200). Additionally, the end of the trial puts Gratiano in direct opposition to the mercy argued for by the likes of Antonio and Portia, when he twice calls for Shylock to be hanged:

Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself;
And yet, thy wealth being forfeit to the state,
Thou hast not left the value of a cord;
Therefore thou must be hang’d at the state’s charge.

…

A halter\(^8\) gratis; nothing else, for God’s sake! (4.1.362–5, 377)

Gratiano here expresses the same murderous intent that makes Shylock a villain, and contrasts himself starkly with the other Christians in the process. This circumstance is never explicitly acknowledged within the play itself, but it is too overt to be unintentional. It therefore becomes necessary to re-visit Harold Bloom’s claim that Shylock’s murderous villainy means that Gratiano is meant as “a good fellow, cheerful and robust in his anti-Semitism” (173). He is certainly steadfast in his animosity—and could be portrayed as cheerful depending on the actor—but the outbursts quoted above effectively turn him into a moral counterpart to Shylock, and a fair bit of mental gymnastics is required to exempt him from moral condemnation if one agrees with John Mahon that Shylock’s “behavior, far more than his race or religion, makes him a villain” (3; emphasis added). It is certainly possible to argue, as Bloom does, that the likes of Portia and Antonio are not as virtuous as they seem, but discard mercy even as a purported value seems to me to be a step backwards. Accordingly, I would argue that it is not Gratiano’s behavior nor his opposition to Shylock that makes him a good fellow—to the extent that he is perceived as such—but rather the sympathetic affect afforded him by the comedic persona he has displayed in previous scenes.

Indeed, the accordance in moral character between Gratiano and Shylock is obscured mainly by the difference in personality between the two. Shylock’s guarded frugality and insistence on literalist interpretations of law—not to mention his

\(^8\) A rope used for hanging criminals.
understandable sense of grievance as part of a persecuted minority—makes him at least as serious-minded as Antonio, in stark contrast to Gratiano’s hedonistic liberality and disregard for social restrictions. The latter may be more intuitively attractive to audiences, but the trial stages how both can result in an inclination towards callous mean-spiritedness. This alignment is subtly conveyed by several pieces of dialogue during the trial, as several admonishments against Shylock could theoretically be directed at Gratiano as well. Early on, for example, the Duke laments that Shylock is “void and empty / From any dram of mercy” (4.1.5–6), to which Antonio responds “I do oppose / My patience to his fury” (4.1.10–1); statements which could equally be applied to the furiously merciless Gratiano. The same can be said of when the Duke later asks Shylock: “How shalt thou hope for mercy, rend’ring none?” (4.1.88). But perhaps most telling is that, once Portia manages to turn the proceedings against Shylock, the Duke spares his life in order that he “shalt see the difference in our spirit” (4.1.366). This follows immediately upon one of Gratiano’s calls for Shylock’s hanging, and can justifiably be interpreted as a veiled comment on the fact that the value placed on mercy varied considerably among Christians themselves.

The way the trial ends also deserves special attention, because it is book-ended not by the seeming mercy of the collective Christians but by Gratiano’s callousness. Once the trial is over and Shylock’s life has been spared—albeit at the unconscionable cost to modern eyes of his forced conversion and impoverishment—Shakespeare makes a point of having Gratiano blurt out his own ruling: “Had I been judge, thou shouldst have had ten more [godfathers] / To bring thee to the gallows, not to the font” (4.1.397–8). While such an outcome would no doubt provide the audience with a certain catharsis, it could only be achieved through brazen disregard of the moral lesson which Portia, Antonio and the Duke have spent the trial trying to convey, and of the value which grants the Christians their moral superiority over Shylock. As Shylock is immediately dragged off-stage and out of the play, Gratiano’s hypothetical judgment compels the audience to consider which outcome they would prefer, not to mention what would transpire were they in the position to judge. In the event, the trial ends on a superficial note of triumph for the merciful Christians, who have—as Barber puts it—successfully resolved the play’s conflict by expelling the scapegoat character who embodies the potential evils embedded in their social organization (190), and can now enjoy the complete harmony that rules at Belmont (212). However, the harmony orchestrated at Belmont in the final act is not as
complete as Barber suggests. In fact, it contains a discordant note which covertly sours the whole symphony, with Gratiano as the errant player.

Portia’s home at Belmont “figures forth the Heavenly City” (Lewalski 343) in allegorical readings, and the denouement in Act 5 brings the Christian protagonists there for a superficially harmonious resolution. However, Gratiano’s behavior at Belmont signals disharmony, and he is further portrayed as symbolic of unbecoming traits that Bassanio has supposedly risen above. The scene deals heavily with the resolution of the ‘ring subplot’, and Gratiano’s attitude when confronted about misplacing Nerissa’s betrothal ring leaves much to be desired from a moral perspective. While Bassanio—whose actions Gratiano has once again vacuously imitated by giving away the ring he had sworn to keep safe—has the good sense to be ashamed if not outright remorseful, Gratiano’s boisterous nature makes him dismissive and aggressively unrepentant throughout the entire exchange. He begins by reminding the audience of his entirely worldly mindset and disregard for oaths, by stating that Nerissa is merely upset

> About a hoop of gold, a paltry ring  
> That she did give me, whose posy was  
> For all the world like cutler’s poetry  
> Upon a knife, ‘Love me, and leave me not’. (5.1.147–50)

Gratiano cannot conceive of a ring as signifying anything apart from its physical substance, and oaths of fidelity apparently amount to nothing more than trite poetry in his mind. What is more, he shows no moral qualms about self-serveingly revealing Bassanio’s transgression in order to deflect from his own (5.1.179), thereby robbing his friend of the chance to confess and ask forgiveness on his own terms. When Portia and Nerissa—who solicited the rings after the trial while disguised as a law doctor and his clerk—jokingly suggest that they will invite the men they masqueraded as into their beds as revenge, the divergent reactions of Bassanio and Gratiano are telling. While the former begs forgiveness and swears to never again break an oath (5.1.246–8), the latter aggressively threatens to castrate his purported rival (5.1.237) and casts himself in the role of aggrieved victim by asking: “are we cuckolds ere we have deserv’d it?” (5.1.265). Gratiano’s vulgar irreverence in the final act re-establishes the comedic personage which he abandoned for the trial, but he repeatedly demonstrates his fundamental mismatch with the kind of Christian Paradise that Belmont is often taken to represent. Importantly, however, his transgression is forgiven and the moral inconsistencies of both official and folk culture thusly demonstrated: while Shylock’s
undesirable traits earn him shunning and expulsion, Gratiano’s flaws bring about no such repercussions. Indeed, he is pardoned twice over: by the plot because he belongs to the in-group, and by the audience because his flawed nature happens to be entertaining.

Gratiano’s presence at Belmont is in fact not only permitted but emphasized, as he gets to speak the closing lines. This circumstance is further evidence of his importance to the play, and that he merits more attention than collective scholarship appears to believe. The lines are significant not only for the fact the he speaks them, but even more so for what he says:

Let it be so. The first inter’gatory
That my Nerissa shall be sworn on is,
Whether till the next night she had rather stay,
Or go to bed now, being two hours to day.
But were the day come, I should wish it dark,
Till I were couching with the doctor’s clerk.
Well, while I live, I’ll fear no other thing
So sore as keeping safe Nerissa’s ring. (5.1.300–7)

On the surface, Gratiano celebrates the dawning of a new day and promises improvement. One might be tempted to agree with the conclusion that “the play ends on a light note of sexual banter by a relatively peripheral character, [and] the general sense of Shakespeare elaborately constructing a final movement towards comedic closure” (Skovmand 95). However, the comedic closure is somewhat muddled, as the hopeful metaphor of a coming dawn is contrasted with Gratiano’s admission that he would prefer to remain in the dark of the bed chamber; reminding spectators of comedy’s connection to impulses which we might prefer to keep out of the light, and setting up an incompatibility with the pristine virtue of Belmont. Furthermore, the sexual banter in the closing moments is meta-theatrically significant, because it takes the form of a sexual pun wherein ceremonial rings—for which Gratiano has already demonstrated complete disregard—are likened to the female sexual organ. It is light by modern standards, but Shakespeare’s original audience ended their respite at the theater by sharing a sacrilegious laugh with a character whose opposition to repressive official culture has been demonstrated throughout. The play may superficially have served as a victory for the purported ideals of Christian doctrine—and in so doing given spectators a comforting sense of their own moral superiority over the scapegoated ‘Other’—but these final comedic beats send the audience back out into the world with one last reminder of just how fun and liberating it can be not
to live up to them. In this way, the final beats of the play beg the difficult question of how much we value those social codes that stifle individual impulses so as to bring order to collective interactions. As long as such codes are broken in an entertaining fashion, there would appear to be a scant price to pay for such transgressions.

In conclusion, I have laid out the case for interpreting Gratiano as a personification of the comedic impulse; an interpretation which I believe can increase our awareness of the necessary balancing act between the innately felt benefits of humor and its less obvious potential for creating social discord. Indeed, Gratiano’s comedy challenges us to question our attitudes towards the official moral ‘rules’ of our social systems relative to the inherent pleasures of breaking them. Because his free-spirited and jovial nature is contrasted with the far less entertaining conduct of the selfless but morose Antonio, and because he is presented as a more entertaining version of the Everyman protagonist as found in Bassanio, audience members are initially encouraged to empathize with Gratiano and relate to his merry and earthly demeanor. As the play progresses, however, that same audience is forced to reckon with the fact that his likeability stems largely from his disregard of some of the highest ideals to which society claims to aspire, and are then made to watch as the character to whom they have most related becomes morally aligned with the antagonistic figure from whom they feel most estranged. Furthermore, his somewhat paradoxical presence at the play’s resolution implies that the impulses he represents neither could nor should be gotten rid of. Such a lesson would no doubt have been a healthy thing to learn in Shakespeare’s own time, but it is hardly as temporally limited as that. In an age where political populism is given fuel by a wide-spread aversion to ill-defined notions of ‘political correctness’, Shakespeare reaches out across time to show us that relief from decorum and socially imposed restraint—while perfectly healthy and natural—could potentially have undesirable social consequences. The treatment of Judaism in *The Merchant of Venice* will no doubt continue to dominate critical discussions, but the play’s particular employment of raucous comedy also offers a dire warning about what might happen should the desire for entertainment be allowed to lead us off the path of decency. Laughter does indeed have its time and its place, and its importance to a healthy society cannot be overestimated, but the question of when and why it is appropriate to laugh is one which—perhaps now more than ever—should be taken seriously.
Works Cited


