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*The Merchant of Venice* and the Paschal Moon

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**Abstract:** *The Merchant of Venice* contains a puzzling passage by Lancelot Gobbo that refers to Ash Wednesday and Easter Monday, two dates in the Christian religious calendar. The passage is nonsensical, yet it is a commonplace that the utterances of Shakespeare’s clowns are often noteworthy. This paper notes that Lancelot refers to an unusual four-fold coincidence of Passover with Easter Monday, the former on the correct Gregorian calendar, the latter on the outdated Julian calendar. The interpretation is tested and leads to the determination of the dramatic time of the play which with other evidence from the script suggests that the paschal moon of 14 Nisan 5357 (April 2, 1597) is a crux of the play. The resulting timeline is consistent with events in the script and leads to a new interpretation for Old Gobbo’s dish of doves. The timeline leads also to a solution for a question on equity and the law.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Merchant of Venice, calendars, Passover, Easter

1 Introduction

*The Merchant of Venice* (herein *MV*) contains many biblical allusions and is perennially an object of debate in matters concerning ethnic and religious bigotry and the law. This essay shows how a jumbled passage uttered by the rhetorically inept clown Lancelot Gobbo, coupled with the consecutiveness of events from the script, establishes Passover and Easter as fundamental temporal markers. This in turn allows a new interpretation of events occurring at the end of *MV*.

As Shylock debates whether to accept an invitation to supper that will start at or before five o’clock (2.2.110–11), Lancelot utters a seemingly incoherent babble. He tells Shylock, “I will not say you shall see a masque, but if you do, then it was not for nothing that my nose fell a-bleeding on Black-Monday last, at six o’clock i’ th’ morning, falling out that year on Ash-Wednesday was four year in th’ afternoon” (2.5.22–7). Editors gloss the passage as nonsense, mockery, or

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parody, but it warrants closer examination because the utterances of Shakespeare’s clowns are sometimes revealing.

Lancelot mentions two Christian observances related to Easter. “Black-Monday” is Easter Monday,¹ the day after Easter, and Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. The excerpt, “Black-Monday last ... falling out that year on Ash-Wednesday,” where “falling out” means “coinciding with,” is nonsense because a Monday cannot fall on a Wednesday, and because Ash Wednesday always precedes Easter by forty-seven days. However, Easter is a movable feast because it derives from the time of the first Full Moon after the (northern) Vernal Equinox (the paschal moon),² so perhaps the dates could coincide if Lancelot is referring to their occurrence in different years. However, in any given year Easter Monday falls anywhere from 23 March to 26 April and Ash Wednesday falls no later than 10 March, so in different years Ash Wednesday’s latest date is always thirteen days before the earliest possible date of Easter Monday and no coincidence is possible.

Steve Sohmer has pioneered the study of celestial timings and of calendrical anomalies in Shakespeare’s plays brought about by the rival Julian and Gregorian calendars.³ The Julian calendar proposed by Julius Caesar in 46 BCE did not keep up with the seasons and its accumulated error of ten days was corrected in 1582 during the papacy of Gregory XIII for whom the Gregorian calendar is named. In the sixteenth century, Julian calendar dates lagged Gregorian calendar dates by ten days, but this difference is insufficient to close the thirteen-day gap mentioned above since it succeeds only in reducing the minimum discrepancy to three days. Instead, we sought a solution based on the proposition that a play in which a Jewish moneylender is a leading character might make use of the Hebrew calendar. Lancelot refers to two Christian observances related to Easter whose date derives from the same celestial events that set the date of Passover, so we investigated the role of Passover itself. Passover always occurs on the fifteenth of the first month Nisan of the Hebrew ecclesiastical calendar. Hebrew calendar days commence at sunset, and the modern

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² In this essay, astronomically determined events are capitalized (e.g. Full Moon) but not their ecclesiastical equivalents (e.g. full moon). Easter is the first Sunday after the paschal moon, which is the full moon that occurs on or next after 21 March, and Passover begins at sunset immediately after that full moon. Easter is a luni-solar feast day whose date could be determined from complex astronomical calculations, but instead an ecclesiastical algorithm uses the mean motion of the Moon and a fixed date, 21 March, for the equinox.
convention assigns Passover to the civil (Julian or Gregorian) calendar day that contains Passover’s sunlit hours, which is the day after the assignations made in this paper, viz. the Gregorian or Julian calendar day that corresponds to the start of Passover, 15 Nisan, is the day that contains the remaining evening hours of that day.\(^4\)

Some passages in Shakespeare are “individual puzzles to be solved”\(^5\) and to aid clarity of the present exposition I summarize an earlier work\(^6\) that deciphers the riddle. Table 1 lists the dates of Passover and Lancelot’s two Easter-related days on both the Julian and Gregorian calendars derived from programs available online.\(^7\) The first line entry of Table 1 pertains to the first year 1583 that contains the Easter/Passover season following the Gregorian reform that began on October 15, 1582. The last line entry is for the latest year in which Shakespeare could have completed the **MW** manuscript, which follows from its entry in the Stationers’ Register of July 22, 1598. The four underlined entries in Table 1 indicate four years when the Julian date of Easter Monday is nominally the same as the Gregorian date of Passover, and this is the only pattern of coincidence. Perhaps, therefore, Lancelot’s “was four year” refers to these four years, 1589, 1592, 1593, and 1596. Table 1 has no coincidences involving Ash Wednesday, so when the error-prone clown says “Ash Wednesday” he may mean “Passover.” A malapropist like Lancelot could well commit such an

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4 E. G. Richards, “Calendars,” in *Explanatory Supplement to the Astronomical Almanac*, eds. Sean E. Urban and P. Kenneth Seidelmann (Mill Valley, California: University Science Books, 2013), 585–624, 591. Christian holy days and civil calendar days start at midnight, and following Shakespeare’s convention, this paper uses “p.m.” to denote times from midday to midnight. Times of sunrise and sunset depend on geographical coordinates whose values for Europe in the late sixteenth century are sufficiently accurate for Shakespeare’s purposes. When the script does not supply times, they are from ephemerides calculated by modern algorithms (e.g. Jet Propulsion Laboratory). Note that times of day in *Merchant* are integral hours, which are sufficiently accurate for dramatic timeline that this paper uncovers, but when Salarino says “His hour is almost past” (2.6.2), he is telling time to fraction of an hour. This could be due to his innate sense of the passage of time, or to public clocks with rotating hour hands or dials. By 1500, it was common to find clocks in prominent places like towers and monastery walls, attended by timekeepers who set local time by the stars, and by 1559, clocks on the Continent were sufficiently sound mechanically that they kept time to about 15 minutes per day; Dava Sobel, *Longitude* (New York: Walker, 1995), 35–36.


error, as right before his jumble and seemingly as a forerunner to it, he confuses “reproach” and “approach” (JH, 2.5.20n). Thus, when he says that “Black-Monday last” coincides with Ash Wednesday in one of the four years stated above, it seems likely that he means that it coincides with “Passover” in that year. The first of the coincident years is 1596, but if Shakespeare had intended Lancelot to speak in that year he would have written, “falling out this year,” and if he were referring to a prior year of the group, he would have identified it with additional information of which there is none. Therefore, Lancelot must be speaking in 1597, but before the next Easter Monday, which falls on April 7, 1597 (Gregorian).

Consider whether other calendars might help explain the Ash Wednesday coincidences in Lancelot’s utterance. A likely possibility is Venice’s unique More Veneto that retained the old Roman tradition of starting the year on 1 March but otherwise followed civil calendar dating (SS, 108). Venice held to this practice up to the Napoleonic conquest of 1797, but from 1583 as part of the Gregorian reform, the ecclesiastical New Year began on 1 January. Lancelot’s jumble concerns religious days and dates, so the approach above seems sound, but

Table 1: Data on religious holidays after October 15, 1582 on three contemporary calendars. Nominally coincident dates are underlined and in bold type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>civil year</th>
<th>Julian calendar dates</th>
<th>Gregorian calendar dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Easter Monday</td>
<td>Ash Wednesday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1583</td>
<td>Apr 1</td>
<td>Feb 13</td>
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<tr>
<td>1584</td>
<td>Apr 20</td>
<td>Mar 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>1585</td>
<td>Apr 12</td>
<td>Feb 24</td>
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<tr>
<td>1586</td>
<td>Apr 4</td>
<td>Feb 16</td>
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<tr>
<td>1587</td>
<td>Apr 17</td>
<td>Mar 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1588</td>
<td>Apr 8</td>
<td>Feb 21</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1589</strong></td>
<td><strong>Mar 31</strong></td>
<td>Feb 12</td>
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<tr>
<td>1590</td>
<td>Apr 20</td>
<td>Mar 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>1591</td>
<td>Apr 5</td>
<td>Feb 17</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1592</strong></td>
<td><strong>Mar 27</strong></td>
<td>Feb 9</td>
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<tr>
<td>1593</td>
<td><strong>Apr 16</strong></td>
<td>Feb 28</td>
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<td>1594</td>
<td>Apr 1</td>
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<td>1598</td>
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</table>
we should examine whether the *More Veneto* might affect conclusions and whether Shakespeare intended secular dates to resolve the challenge at hand. Inspection of Table 1 reveals that the only dates affected are those when Ash Wednesday occurs before 1 March, in which case the year numeral decreases by one, but again there are no Ash Wednesday coincidences.

## 2 Dramatic time

The present interpretation is worthy of test to see whether its consequences are mutually sustaining and lead to greater understanding. From Table 1, Easter Monday (Julian) in 1596 allegedly coincides with an Ash Wednesday, but as argued above, the clown means that it coincides with the date of Passover on the Gregorian calendar of 1596. Use of the past tense ("fell a-bleeding ... falling out that year ... was four year") signifies that he must be speaking on or before the next Passover, i.e. on or before 15 Nisan 5357, which lasts from sunset to sunset on 2–3 April, 1597 (Gregorian). Therefore, this limit narrows the time of Lancelot's utterance to that time or earlier the same year.

Lancelot’s epistaxis could well have occurred “at six o’clock i’ th’ morning” as he states, yet a similar marker “in th’ afternoon” is unaccounted for at the end of the muddle. In order to explain it, let us suppose that it is an afterthought – a correction perhaps to the previous time that he claimed was in the morning. If so, “six o’clock” needs to precede “in th’ afternoon” and the nosebleed would have occurred at six o’clock in the afternoon. Afternoon is not evening, so on this interpretation, from Table 1 his nose bled on April 12, 1596 (Gregorian) at 6 p.m., which is about 30 minutes before sunset in Venice and shortly before Passover begins that year. This interpretation means that all temporal components of Lancelot’s ramble are put to use, and Section 2.2 below makes further use of it.

### 2.1 Passover

To determine even more closely the timing of Lancelot’s riddle, consider the sequence of events in acts 1 and 2. Briefly, in scene 1.1, Bassanio is aware that competition for Portia’s hand is keen and he feels driven to court her, and in scene 1.2, news arrives that a suitor, the Prince of Morocco, will arrive that night. Bassanio’s impetuosity makes it likely that he and Antonio seek money and engage Shylock in scene 1.3 on the same day. Call this Day 1. Between acts 1 and
2, Shylock meets with Tubal and then loans Tubal’s money to Antonio to give to Bassanio.

In scene 2.1, the Prince of Morocco has arrived, so act 2 must open on Day 2. In scene 2.2, Bassanio prepares to sail for Belmont to court Portia. He orders a celebratory supper to begin at 5 p.m. and in scene 2.3, Jessica asks Lancelot to deliver a letter to Lorenzo to inform him of her plan to elope. Graziano plans a masque, and scene 2.4 sees the plans finalized. Bassanio has invited Shylock to supper, and in scene 2.5 Shylock contemplates attending. Lancelot encourages him to do so, in the course of which he utters the riddle quoted in section 1.

Day 2 also sees Lancelot speaking in scene 2.5 at a time constrained by temporal markers from the preceding and following scenes. From the preceding scene 2.4, Lorenzo says “‘Tis now but four o’clock” (2.4.8), which means that scene 2.5 occurs later than that, and from lines 2.4.25–6, he plans for the masquers to meet at 5 p.m. From the following scene, Salarino’s statement, “His hour is almost past” (2.6.2) tells that Lorenzo has not arrived, which sets the time of scene 2.5 as earlier than 5 p.m. Thus, Lancelot speaks in scene 2.5 between 4 and 5 p.m., and thus before the Sun sets at about 6:30 p.m.

In scene 2.6, Antonio declares that Bassanio and his entourage shall sail for Belmont that night, the night of Day 2. Morocco makes his casket selection in scene 2.7, which oddly should follow scene 2.1 (JH, 2.7.0n). Scene 2.8 confirms that by the next day, Day 3, Bassanio has arrived in Belmont, whereupon in scene 2.9, his courier arrives at Portia’s doorstep to report that another entrant is on his way. Context informs us that that suitor is Bassanio. The messenger lauds the new entrant by saying, “A day in April never came so sweet” (2.9.92), and Portia calls his praises “high-day [i.e. holy day] wit” (2.9.97). The conversation takes place on Day 3, during daylight hours and on a holy day, and since Passover is the only holy day of note in April 1597 on or before the third of the month, it follows that April 3, 1597 is the only calendar day that contains the daylight hours of Passover.

Thus, the sequence of events predicated upon the assumption of the impetuosity of Bassanio, indicates that Lancelot speaks on Day 2, Wednesday April 2, 1597 between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m. The continuity of events through acts 1 and 2 indicates that Days 1–3 are Tuesday through Thursday, 1–April 3, 1597, and the next section supplies evidence in support of this timeframe.

### 2.2 Corroboration

Scene 1.1 occurs in the morning of Day 1 and contains many allusions to gullibility and foolishness, which is not surprising as Day 1 is All Fools’ Day,
Tuesday April 1, 1597. Shakespeare would know of April Fools’ Day if only from a comic poem of 1561 by Eduard de Dene⁸ about a servant sent on foolish errands on 1 April.

Morocco arrived at Belmont on 1 April, and in scene 2.1 on the morning of Wednesday April 2, 1597, he asks to go to the site of the lottery, but Portia tells him, “First, forward to the temple. After dinner/Your hazard shall be made” (2.1.44–5), where “dinner” refers to the meal taken in the middle of the day (compare the German, *Mittagessen*). The luncheon delay seems contrived, and moreover as remarked in section 2.1, Shakespeare describes Morocco’s choice in the misplaced scene 2.7. These two oddities draw attention to a cogent temporal marker, which is that modern calculations show that the Moon’s phase turns Full on April 2, 1597 shortly after noon local time in England and at about 12:50 p.m. in Venice. Astrologers at least were capable of making such calculations (SS 5, 24), and in the present case they could do so with sufficient accuracy to place the time of alignment around lunchtime. The date of Full Moon is the same as that of the paschal full moon from which the time of the start of Passover follows at sundown the same day.

Scene 2.2 takes place the same day Wednesday April 2, 1597, which is four days before Easter Sunday April 6, 1597. The “dish of doves” (2.2.129) that Lancelot’s father Old Gobbo plans to give to Shylock could be a plate of Easter dove cakes (*Colomba Pasquale*).⁹ According to legend, these are associated with the end of hostilities in Lombardy that the Peace of Venice ratified in 1177. If the impecunious Old Gobbo bakes the cakes himself, he could better afford the gift.

As derived above, Lancelot speaks in scene 2.5 on April 2, 1597 before 5 p.m., and since Passover begins at about 6:30 p.m., he speaks on 14 Nisan, over an hour before Passover begins. Parallelism supports this time since from section 2 above, Lancelot’s nose bled before the start of Passover in 1596, and he speaks shortly before Passover in 1597 as well. His time of speaking in scene 2.5 also explains why he is unsure whether Shylock “shall see a masque” (2.5.22–3). In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* 5.1.32–34, 5.1.40, Theseus refers to a post-prandial evening masque, but in *MV*, Lancelot is unsure whether one will occur. Even if it were to, he is uncertain whether Shylock will see it since he might wish to return

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Scene 2.6 occurs on April 2, 1597 and features Jessica’s elopement with Lorenzo. The couple dashes off to meet the masquers at Graziano’s lodgings at the appointed time of 5 p.m. A rhyming couplet often marks the end of a scene, but after Lorenzo’s couplet in 2.6.58–59 and his departure with Jessica, Graziano dallies and to his (and the auditors’) surprise, Antonio enters. Another surprise awaits as four lines later, playgoers discover that the time is 9 p.m. Temporal leaps are not uncommon in the canon, and the one here raises many issues of timing and interpretation which in this essay we limit to those that relate to Passover.

On this day, Passover starts at about 6:30 p.m. local time, well over an hour into the 5 to 9 p.m. range, and the anomalies draw attention to it. Antonio declares that Bassanio awaits Graziano and will soon set sail for Belmont, and since he shall do so on Passover, his journey parallels the biblical story of Exodus which Passover commemorates as in both cases, people seek better lives.

Bassanio sails for Belmont on Passover night, Wednesday April 2, 1597, and the next day in scene 2.9 during the high holy day of Passover Thursday April 3, 1597, a messenger announces Bassanio’s wish to enter the lottery. In scene 3.2 later the same day, Bassanio opts for the elementally correct choice of the lead casket, and significantly, he makes his choice on the first day of Passover.

Scene 3.1 occurs on Thursday April 3, 1597, the day after Shylock had publicly bemoaned the loss of his daughter and his valuables. Tubal encounters him, and the ensuing dialogue presents a rhetorical challenge which I have addressed at length in a previous paper. The challenge stems from Shylock’s greeting, “What news from Genoa? Hast thou found my daughter?” (3.1.75–6). Shylock’s first question is a standard mode of greeting, but two questions that follow one another are not necessarily related. Tubal’s reply, “I often came where I did hear of her, but cannot find her” (3.1.77–8), leaves the impression

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10 Talmudic law is lenient in this matter. The tractate Shabbat (p. 34a) states, “The status of twilight is uncertain, as it is unknown whether it is day, or night, or both, and uncertainty in the case of a rabbinic ordinance is ruled leniently.” According to section 261:1 of Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim by Yosef Karo published in 1565, the precise time when the Sabbath or a Holy Day begins is an unresolved question. www.sefaria.org/Shabbat.34a?lang=bi; www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3447043/jewish/Shulchan-Aruch-Chapter-261-Time-to-Kindle-Shabos-Lights.htm. I thank Rabbi Shimcha Bart of the Chabad organization for help and guidance.

11 E.g. The Comedy of Errors, 2.1.3, 4.2.53; The Winter’s Tale, 4.1.1–7.

that he has just returned from seeking Jessica in Genoa. Genoa is a week’s journey away but there is no evidence that the resolute suitor Bassanio dilly-dallies for a fortnight before selecting a casket in the very next scene 3.2, and following Sohmer, this paper does not subscribe to the popular notion that Shakespeare plays fast and loose with time. Tubal turns the conversation to merchant ship losses in order to lead Shylock into believing that Antonio’s merchant ships have foundered, that he is in peril of bankruptcy, and that he could default on his loan.

As I have argued, Tubal spreads rumors on the Rialto that all of Antonio’s ships are lost, and both Antonio and Shylock are duped. Shylock despises those who lend out money gratis (1.3.38–49) and Tubal would know this of his co-religionist, so rather than abet a crime, Tubal has coerced Shylock into taking Antonio to court in order that he might legally attempt to exact the prescribed penalty for forfeit. He would excise a pound of Antonio’s flesh near his heart and thus kill him, but instead with the connivance of the Duke, Shylock goes on trial for threatening a citizen’s life.

Shylock’s yearning for revenge prompts him to ask Tubal to have Antonio arrested two weeks before the bond is forfeit. In Venice, rumor is sufficient reason to initiate a trial, and corrupt judges brought cases to trial prematurely. The Duke bends the law in service to a greater cause, and schedules Antonio’s trial promptly lest even one of Antonio’s ships return to port and derail Tubal’s scheme.

In scene 3.2 late on Passover day, Thursday April 3, 1597, after Bassanio has chosen aright, Salerio delivers a letter from Antonio reporting that Shylock insists on adhering strictly to the terms of the bond, and he asks him to be present at his death. Portia promptly plans to defend her husband’s dear friend. No court convenes the next day, Good Friday, so Portia has time to go through with her wedding, which is likely to be an elaborate affair occupying most of the day. Even as she plans nuptials, she gathers information in a lawyerly fashion, starting with questioning Bassanio who was present in scene 1.3 when the antagonists agreed to the loan.

Portia plans her strategy. At her behest, Bassanio must first “dispatch all business” (3.2.320), which means he must answer all her questions and then tie the marital knot. He is to leave for Venice with tens of thousands of ducats to deface the bond, and then return to Belmont with Antonio. It is still Good Friday when in the next scene 3.3 the jailed Antonio prays that Bassanio will “come/To see me pay [my] debt” (3.3.35–6), i.e. forfeit a pound of flesh. He knows that his

trial will occur “tomorrow” (3.3.34), which is Saturday April 5, 1597, and that Shylock will demand a pound of his flesh.

To mollify Shylock and aid Tubal’s scheme, the Duke sets the trial date at the earliest permissible time of noon on Saturday when Lent and Holy Week end. The proximity in time of Antonio’s request received in scene 3.2 and his prayer in scene 3.3 inclines belief that the Venetian judiciary is not above reproach and that Shylock’s (and Tubal’s) campaign for the earliest possible trial has succeeded.

From the information that Salerio delivers in scene 3.2, Portia correctly assesses the urgency of the need to defend Antonio and realizes that his trial could start as early as noon on Saturday. Early that morning she dispatches Balthasar to borrow lawyerly garb from her cousin Bellario in Padua, whereupon she and Nerissa plan to travel the five miles to Fusina by coach, thence by ferry for Venice across Laguna di Venezia going east to Venice and the Judicial Courts. Portia shall cover twenty miles that day (five miles to Fusina, five by ferry or a two-man gondola to Venice, and return). For Balthasar to meet her in Fusina, he must cover thirty-five miles (fifteen to Padua and twenty to Fusina). Portia tells him to do so speedily and not to waste time talking. Balthasar leaves before sunrise, secures the garments, and delivers them to Portia in time for her to be in Venice before noon.

In act 4, Portia masquerades as a male judge and after Shylock declines to be merciful, after refusing tens of thousands of ducats to deface the bond, and after brandishing a knife, Portia convicts him for threatening the life of a citizen. The trial proceeds speedily and afterwards the Duke invites Portia to lunch, which “he” declines. Soon Portia receives another invitation to lunch, this time from Graziano, which “he” declines as well. She tells Nerissa to make haste to complete the last remaining task, which is to secure Shylock’s signature on the


15 In endurance races at the World Equestrian Games, horse and rider cover a hundred miles in twelve hours or less for an average speed of over eight mph, which includes veterinary examinations every seventeen miles; Coree Reuter, “World Equestrian Games: Endurance,” The Chronicle of the Horse, August 11, 2010; www.chronofhorse.com/article/world-equestrian-games-endurance (accessed 2/7/2018). By comparison, Balthasar covers 35 miles over level, well-traveled terrain, riding a well-kept horse from a good stable, and rests his horse at Padua after fifteen miles.
deed of gift stemming from the verdict of the trial, and then to join her where she waits, presumably at the docks. She tells Nerissa, “We’ll away tonight/And be a day before our husbands home” (4.2.2–3). They traverse the lagoon to Fusina on the mainland where her coach has been waiting all day, and they return to the monastery late on Saturday. In effect, they arrive “home,” since “home” means broadly and “without an article or possessive,” a “region to which one naturally belongs or where one feels at ease” (OED I.2.b, 4). The hermitage is only a couple of miles from Belmont and could even be part of Portia’s estate, and the temple to which she and Morocco had gone after scene 2.1 could be nearby as well.

Meanwhile, Bassanio and Antonio go to the latter’s home where Antonio gathers his belongings, and joined by Graziano they set out late on Saturday to take the ferry to Fusina. Bassanio had told Antonio that “in the morning early will we both/Fly toward Belmont” (4.1.452–53). “Fly” means to “move swiftly” or “rush along” (OED I.7.a), which is as descriptive of propulsion over water as locomotion on land, so Bassanio probably refers to their travel after they alight at Fusina late on Saturday night. The able-bodied men walk the five miles to Belmont even when burdened by Antonio’s baggage. Portia had arrived at the monastery late on Saturday, but the lateness of the men’s departure from Venice means that they arrive in Belmont early on Sunday morning, in fulfillment of Portia’s prediction that the women would return home (nominally) a day before their husbands. Both parties present themselves at Portia’s house in the early hours of Easter Sunday April 6, 1597 in the light of the erstwhile Full Moon, which is now 84 % illuminated and bright enough to cast visible shadows.

Further corroboration of this timeline follows from a recent paper that argues from wholly different premises yet reaches the same temporal endpoint – that act 5 ends with “the dawning of Easter Sunday.” However, that paper does not specify the present chronology or the date of Easter.

3 On Antonio’s slurs

With the dramatic time of MV limned and the date of Easter Sunday established, we may ponder questions left unanswered at play’s end. One of these is Antonio’s entrenched ethnic and religious bias that becomes evident in scene 1.3 and prior to knowledge of Shylock’s murderous intent. Both are hateful, yet Shylock pays a steep price while Antonio lands in the lap of luxury. Certainly,

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the antagonists are unequal as Shylock is homicidal, yet Antonio’s barbs are cruelly pointed and we wonder whether it is Shakespeare’s intent to let them stand.

Once all have gathered in her house, Portia promises interrogatories by which to “answer all things faithfully,” where “faithfully” is biblical in origin (OED 1.a, 2.a) arising appropriately in both Old and New Testaments (2 Chronicles 31:12 and 3 John 5). Shakespeare’s choice of words signals the potential paramountcy of religious faith during the proceedings, which fits an implied metaphysical theme of an ever-virtuous father watching over a daughter who never did repent for doing good, and of the overall biblical theme of the play. Much needs explaining, and Portia is surely up to the challenge, but how does Shakespeare deal with Antonio’s deep-seated prejudices?

In announcing the pending arrival of Portia and Nerissa from the monastery, Stefano says that a holy hermit accompanies them, yet the women enter alone. The hermit may simply be an escort, but soon thereafter and possibly as a clue to the hermit’s absence from the stage, Lancelot is unable to make out Lorenzo in the moonlight even though, judging by Lorenzo’s irritation, he should have been able to. The hermit, duly chosen and primed by Portia, could remain aloof in the shadowy wings ready to preside over matters of spiritual significance once everyone is indoors. Portia promises that answers shall emerge “at full” (5.1.297), so the topic of ethnic and religious hatred is bound to arise, either spontaneously or by design. Shylock’s conviction occurs under secular jurisdiction, but in early modern times, ecclesiastical injunctions hold sway as well. Shylock is not forgotten in act 5, for his conviction in act 4 adumbrates a parallel difficulty for Antonio. In keeping with the abundance of biblical allusions in MV, the hermit might preach that “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Leviticus 19:18).

4 Concluding remarks

Lancelot’s contorted rhetoric is an authorial puzzle solved in consonance with the rubric of Mowat and Werstine. Within the riddle lie references to the dates of Passover and Easter, and evidence from the script supports the conclusion. Shakespeare compliments the Hebrew calendar because it keeps pace with the Sun and has existed essentially unchanged from the fourth century AD,17

whereas in 1597 the solar-paced Gregorian calendar had existed for only fifteen years. Through Lancelot’s commentary we are led to the realization that Shakespeare supports the two scientifically correct calendars regardless of pious persuasion, and celebrates the common debt of Christianity and Judaism to the paschal moon. In England, church leaders and Queen Elizabeth opposed adoption of the Gregorian calendar for ecclesiastical and political reasons, and the mere fact of that opposition suggests that writers would have been prudent not to declaim on the topic (SS, 21). The relationship between Jews and Shakespeare is complex and multifaceted, and deserving of a fuller treatment than is possible here. It suffices to note that Shakespeare’s key inclusion of the Hebrew calendar in one of his plays occurred at a time of widespread persecution of Jews, for despite Jewish communities existing in European cities such as Venice, Jews were regarded with suspicion and suffered discrimination, torment, and even death. England in 1290 was the first country in Europe to evict Jews, and although their readmission began only in 1655, in the interim “they were not forgotten ... as ballads and other literature indicate” (JH, 4). A notorious case is that of a Portuguese Jew, Roderigo Lopez, Queen Elizabeth’s physician and a professed Christian, whose conviction of complicity in a plot to poison her led to his execution in 1594. In the same year, Thomas Nashe wrote of Jewish viciousness in The Unfortunate Traveller, and Marlowe’s The Jew of Malta with its titular villain Barabas was revived to popular acclaim. With these events in recent memory, it is reasonable to suppose that Shakespeare would not be openly philosemitic. Rather, he creates Shylock to be no more villainous than evil-doers like Aaron the Moor or Richard III, and withal, his co-religionist Tubal is an unsung hero. This distinction between appearance and reality is a challenge “most persistent in Shakespeare” and in MV it manifests itself in Bassanio’s “concern for reality behind the superficial” (WM, III.2.127–8n, 134n) and his election to “choose not by the view” (3.2.131).

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