



# The Opiate

Your literary dose.

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Cover art: "Muscles of the Hand and Arm" by Jacques Fabien Gautier d'Agoty, 1745

Back cover: "Muscles of the Foot and Leg" by Jacques Fabien Gautier d'Agoty, 1745

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"Go with me to a notary, seal me  
there/Your single bond; and, in a  
merry sport,/If you repay me not on  
such a day,/In such a place, such  
sum or sums as are/Express'd in the  
condition, let the forfeit/Be nominat-  
ed for an equal pound/Of your fair  
flesh, to be cut off and taken/In what  
part of your body pleaseth me."

-Shylock in William Shakespeare's *The  
Merchant of Venice*

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## Editor's Note

If anyone else is feeling like a pound of your "fair flesh" has been summarily extracted by the end of 2020, you're surely not alone. 2021, lamentably, promises to be no different (as the U.S.' recent failed coup has indicated). And, of course, this pertains most patently to matters of the financial. With so many people—particularly those in the artistic community taking a hit—losing their source of income, running out of benefits that have exhausted the proverbial statute of limitations and generally scrambling to squirrel away any kind of sou, the effect has been as painful as what Antonio endured (even if only psychologically) when Shylock emerged from the shadows to collect on his pound of flesh. To that end, if the year of COVID taught us anything, it's that the world could be going up in flames all around us, and the creditor will always—*always*—come to collect. There is no sob story, no circumstance, no extenuating excuse that can make a creditor turn their back on what they believe they're owed. Immediately and with interest. You are not a person, you are a dollar amount (or, in the case of Antonio, a ducat amount).

Alas, as the saying goes, "You can't squeeze blood out of a turnip." If there's nothing to give, there's nothing to give. Or as Antonio puts it, "I shall hardly spare a pound of flesh to-morrow to my bloody creditor." A creditor will never see it that way. To them, you're just another number (that they're still profiting from majorly in interest rates, by the way, and will still get the money they've "lost" from you no matter what thanks to insurance). A silly little number who entered into a contractual agreement that makes you beholden to all of their scare tactics, whims and furiously conveyed frustrations with your negligence; your inability to be a "stand-up" human being who knows better than to let your mouth write a check that your ass can't cash. Shylock, like all creditors, has a nose to sense when a potential borrower will be unable to cash that check with his ass. The ass he likely would have chosen to pull his flesh from were he not thwarted by Portia dressed as a man while posing as a lawyer (because Shakespeare's works, even the dramas, needed to incorporate a bit of gender-bending).

Ironically enough, Antonio is ultimately paying for the financial sins (read: broke assery) of Bassanio. As something of a spendthrift fuckwit of the Renaissance era, Bassanio spent all his dough in order to look his flyest in the most *alla moda* clothing. His plan to gain respect and notice by doing this has clearly backfired, as the one woman he truly wants to impress, Portia, comes along just when he has nary a *centesimo* left. Luckily for Bassanio (though unluckily for Antonio), his homie is willing to serve as the guarantor for any loan he can find in order to come up with the means to project an illusory persona that will attract a woman of the nobility like Portia. The only one willing to give someone with such a sordid credit history a loan—even with a guarantor—is Shylock. The sole Jew in town. Or so the play makes it seem (though that wouldn't be entirely unbelievable considering Italy's uber Catholicism at this juncture, and pretty much any other, in history. Then again, *Life Is Beautiful* later reminded us that there were certainly enough Jews in Italy to be rounded up for the concentration camp).

In the background of everything driving *The Merchant of Venice*, there is this good versus evil tone that suggests, very obviously, that to be "Christian" is good and to be Jewish is evil (nay, to be anything suggesting "the other" is evil). Hence, the grotesque depiction of Shylock representing all the worst possible caricatured stereotypes of Jewish people. To the point that Hitler and co. saw fit to broadcast the play on the radio after Nazi storm troopers and Hitler Youth members ransacked Jewish neighborhoods throughout Germany from November 9-10, 1938. Called Kristallnacht (which translates literally to Crystal Night, which is a bit of a creepy term to label something so horrific), or Night of Broken Glass, the fact that

Shakespeare's play fueled the flames of contempt for an ultra cartoonish version of what Nazis believed "all" Jews embodied is quite telling. And proves, in addition to how effective scapegoating remains as a political practice, that somehow Shakespeare *still* managed to outshine his roundabout "mentor," Christopher Marlowe, even centuries later. Marlowe, who basically wrote the precursor to *The Merchant of Venice* with the far more incendiary title, *The Jew of Malta*. In this particular play, released in 1590, well before *Merchant's* premiere date in 1605, Marlowe takes an altogether different approach to religion. That is to say, he makes it much clearer that he believes it's bullshit, and so is anyone who adheres to it. Thus, our narrator, a ghost named Machiavel, based on, duh, Niccolò Machiavelli, announces, "I count religion but a childish toy,/And hold there is no sin but ignorance." Amen.

The eponymous Jew of Malta is Barabas. He is no "peripheral character" the way Shylock is, but, as the title indicates, the star of the show. So Marlowe wastes no time in presenting him in his counting-house, because naturally all any Jew does all day is sit around counting their money. Breathing heavily in eroticized ecstasy as they finger each bill and coin individually to prolong the "orgasm." Oh wait, that's Jeff Bezos (and now, Elon Musk). In any case, Barabas is already feeling the weight of discrimination as he reckons with the loss of his fortune, plucked from him by the Maltese government to pay for a war against the Turks. Like Jafar with Iago, Barabas has his stooge as well: Ithamore. As Barabas sets about his vengeance upon Malta, it is far more than just a pound of flesh he seeks. He wants everyone else to suffer for his own misery. At one point, this involves poisoning an entire convent, murdering a friar and then getting another friar framed for that murder. Once again, it's not a warm and fuzzy depiction of a Jew, least of all with those many mentions about Barabas' nose. Yet some scholars have argued that Marlowe's intent was not anti-Semitism, but rather, to show the absurdity of all three religions involved in the narrative: Christianity, Islamism and Judaism. Alas, any Jew reading this text would likely not agree that Marlowe achieved his supposed intent by painting such a monstrous portrait of Jewish people rolled into one amalgam of a character.

The most biblically poetic outcome in both plays is that the trap set by each man ends up being the one they're forced to fall into. In Shylock's scenario, this is more metaphorical, whereas in Barabas' final act, it becomes very literal indeed. To add insult to injury, Portia's famed speech about mercy posits, "It is an attribute to God Himself..." Ummm, *girl*, one would definitely have to object. If God is so "merciful," why the fuck are we in this place? Tangibly *and* philosophically.

It is worth underscoring that when Bassanio initially appears on the scene, he tells Antonio, "Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing, more than any man in all Venice. His reasons are as two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff: you shall seek all day ere you find them, and when you have them, they are not worth the search." This, in a nutshell, is a lot like religion itself. Yet people appear to be turning to it more than ever (see: every superspreader choir event that has transpired this past year). Religion, too, comes in the form of false idol worship (e.g. The Orange One and his coup-attempting disciples). There is more comfort in the utterly implausible than the reality laid bare to us every single day.

Anyway, I hope no one somehow takes my own interpretation (which calls out anti-Semitism) of these texts as somehow anti-Semitic itself. Because, speaking from experience, for me, it's odd when you're always simultaneously "in trouble" with people for writing something perceived as affronting, yet at the same time, no one actually gives a shit what you're saying.

Whatever one's religious beliefs may be, at this moment, there can be no refutation that money is everyone's God. No matter how fitfully they've fought to avoid that cruel fate. Maybe what I'm trying to say, in the end, is that I know how hard it is to be a writer. Not even just to write, but to know in your bones that being creatively liberated was what you were meant to do, yet instead you are forced by the hand of society's iron fist to focus on bullshit endeavors like money-making. To worry tirelessly about repaying your debts, where the next amount required is going to come from. And how will you kill another brain cell in order to get it?

I don't know what the answer is for those of us left still writing for the joy of it (not, conversely, to make money from it by other forms of bastardized writing for pay). For the belief we have in ourselves that we know we are good. I wish there could be a patron for every writer who is in this for pure reasons, as seemed to be the case in the "olden days" (provided you were a white man). Instead, all they want is any remaining "tissues" we have to give of ourselves, as we continue to be left with no choice but to allow them to pull away at our artist's flesh. Pecked at by the vultures that are this seemingly unshakeable economic system. Will someone please try to overthrow *that* instead?

On such a note, please enjoy the following fiction and poetry from some who are still fighting the good fight for the sake of art.

Sincerely,

Genna Riviuccio

January 2021, the month of an attempted government takeover. But the French these Americans are not. And rather than revolution, it was just another sign of devolution.

P.S. Does it look like any of the Capitol rioters have ever read a book to you? Even if only *The Art of the Deal*. No. And that's a rather significant core problem of the United States to consider. Such a rampant de-emphasis on literature and learnedness that it's no wonder we've got the creatures from Middle-earth running amok with slack-jawed outrage. Not knowing anything of critical thinking, let alone "basic" thinking. Hence, a decision to show up without wearing balaclavas.

