

NETWORKS OF SOCIAL DEBT IN
EARLY MODERN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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This thesis argues that social debt profoundly transformed the environment in which literature was produced and experienced in the early modern period. In each chapter, I examine the various ways in which social debt affected Renaissance writers and the literature they produced. While considering the cultural changes regarding patronage, love, friendship, and debt, I will analyze the poetry and drama of Ben Jonson, Lady Mary Wroth, William Shakespeare, and Thomas Middleton. Each of these writers experiences social debt in a unique and revealing way. Ben Jonson's participation in networks of social debt via poetry allowed him to secure both a livelihood and a place in the Jacobean court through exchanges of poetry and patronage. The issue of social debt pervades both Wroth's life and her writing. Love and debt are intertwined in the actions of her father, the death of her husband, and the themes of her sonnets and pastoral tragicomedy. In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596), Antonio and Bassanio's friendship is tested by a burdensome interpersonal debt, which can only be alleviated by an outsider. This indicated the transition from honor-based credit system to an impersonal system of commercial exchange. Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1608) examines how those heavily in debt dealt with both the social and legal consequences of defaulting on loans.

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INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL DEBT IN EARLY MODERN LITERATURE

Unthrifty loveliness, why dost thou spend
upon thyself thy beauty's legacy?
Nature's bequest gives nothing but doth lend
And being frank she lends to those are free.
Then Beauteous niggard why dost thou abuse
The bounteous largess given thee to give?

Sonnet 4:1-6¹

In Shakespeare's Sonnet 4, the speaker asks the young man about gift giving, service, and obligation, wondering why he abuses the "bounteous largess" that nature has "given [him] to give." The sonnet deals with economic practices of lending, giving, and spending without ever mentioning financial currency. Instead, it formulates a cycle of gift-exchange wherein the young man is expected to reciprocate nature's gift of beauty by producing an heir. His refusal to do so makes him a "profitless usurer" who fails to earn interest on what nature has loaned him (7). The speaker states that nature "gives nothing but doth lend," implying that a debt exists between nature and the young man, and his duty in the exchange is to reciprocate the gift. By neglecting to return nature's gift, the young man strains his relationship with the speaker, as well, creating a network of what I term "social debt."

¹All references to Shakespeare's *Sonnets* are taken from *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Stephen Booth. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

This study explores the concept of social debt in early modern literature. During the early modern period, a proto-capitalist marketplace emerged and transformed the nature of economic transactions. These changes were precipitated by a rapidly expanding population in London, new forms of currency, and a movement away from more traditional forms of exchange (“Debt, Credit” 31-32). An economy that was once predicated on trust and honor among friends and neighbors gave way to one in which creditors and lenders were strangers (*Economy* 40). Often employing questionable business practices, these new lenders lured borrowers into loans they could not hope to repay, resulting in an unprecedented amount of defaulters (Byrne 110-112). This new economy held the influx of insolvent debtors responsible by devising harsher punishments such as debtor’s prison and the Hole – an open dirt pit that defaulters were cast into where they commonly died of starvation and disease (Bailey 54). Many Londoners faced difficulty adapting to the formation, albeit gradual, of an increasingly independent merchant class, which called into question their obligations to their neighbors and communities (*Economy* 173). Thus, the issue of debt became not simply financial but social, as well. Until this point, most of the population consisted of small communities that lent on trust, sealed transactions informally, and kept unofficial debt records. Instead of exchanging precise financial currency, they relied on a sense of duty and social obligation.

This thesis argues that social debt profoundly transformed the environment in which literature was produced and experienced in the early modern period. In each chapter, I examine the various ways in which social debt affected Renaissance writers and the literature they produced. While considering the cultural changes regarding patronage, love, friendship, and debt, I will analyze the poetry and drama of Ben Jonson, Lady Mary Wroth, William Shakespeare, and Thomas Middleton. Each of these writers experiences social debt in a unique

and revealing way. Ben Jonson's participation in networks of social debt via poetry allowed him to secure both a livelihood and a place in the Jacobean court through exchanges of poetry and patronage. The issue of social debt pervades both Wroth's life and her writing. Love and debt are intertwined in the actions of her father, the death of her husband, and the themes of her sonnets and pastoral tragicomedy. In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596), Antonio and Bassanio's friendship is tested by a burdensome interpersonal debt, which can only be alleviated by an outsider. This indicates the transition from honor-based credit system to an impersonal system of commercial exchange. Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1608) examines how those heavily in debt dealt with both the social and legal consequences of defaulting on loans.

While the term social debt has been around since the nineteenth century, it is generally used to describe what an individual owes to the larger society in which he or she lives. One of the first philosophers to theorize a system based on social obligations was Auguste Comte, who claimed that when we come into this world, we are obligated to everyone before us, around us, and after us. In order to honor these obligations, Comte claimed, we must devote ourselves to helping our society (Graeber 70). Later, Leon Bourgeois used the term in a more political sense, claiming that the rich were obligated to pay taxes to the state to help provide institutions for the poor, which contributed to the formation of socialism. While these ideas operate well on a larger societal scale, my use of the term social debt focuses on interpersonal relationships among friends, lovers, and artists in early modern England. I use the term social debt to refer to the obligation one person owes to another that transcends financial currency. Friends, lovers, and artists exist in networks of reciprocity that create and sustain their relationships. The commodities transacted within these networks take the form of protection, gifts, services, and

duties. All human interactions, in fact, can be studied in terms of exchange: debts and repayments, gifts and reciprocation, love and obligation. In this sense, social debt is the center of every human relationship. Social debt can never be repaid with money, although some parties make the attempt in several of the texts examined here. Often, this debt is never settled, a condition necessary to the survival of the relationships. Once locked into a cycle of perpetual debt, the involved parties – friends, lovers, relatives, patrons, artists – are unable and/or unwilling to break their bonds. While this form of debt can severely damage a relationship if no attempt at repayment is made, it can also maintain one. The aforementioned social and financial transitions in the early modern economy provide a compelling context in which to examine how social debt enables some relationships and destroys others.

While social debt is repaid through non-monetary means, there are many intersections between social and financial obligations. Social and financial debt are not mutually exclusive. However, as many of the case studies in this thesis will prove, there are debts that money cannot repay. While money is involved in both the literature and the lives of the authors, it often fades into the background of more urgent social debts that must be repaid lest the partners' relationships are comprised. The authors and characters look for ways to repay debt incurred from their interactions through gifts of praise, services of love, or favors of friendship. These debts prove difficult to repay due to their immensity and intangibility, creating a drastic inequality that the characters and authors strive to balance.

This study is heavily indebted to David Graeber whose comprehensive anthropological study *Debt: The First 5000 Years* examines the history of debt in detail. I employ Graeber's formulations to frame many of my discussions of debt throughout this thesis. For Graeber, debt exists when a person lends money, privileges, favors, or even livelihoods, and in turn the

borrower, usually within a set timeframe, must pay the lender back. Oftentimes, this debt cannot be repaid monetarily, but rather socially or artistically. Graeber challenges the notion that debt is based on money and that obligations, including those of a social nature, are excluded formally from the definition. As he expands his argument on debt and its basis as a financial system, he demonstrates that contrary to the prevailing belief, monetary exchange did not precede credit in most early societies. Historically, most transactions in pre-modern cultures took place without the exchange of currency. This means that the notion of debt transcends the concept of money, and that people can be placed under debt in many ways that may never involve money (Graeber 23). What debt becomes, then, is a promise to pay something that is the equivalent of the loan. In turn, currency becomes not the “value of an object, but the measure of one's trust in other human beings” (Graeber 47). Just in being born, we are in debt to our parents, society, and the cosmos itself, but as soon as we reciprocate, we become creditors as much as debtors.

Most early modern scholars have approached the issue of debt from the perspective of bondage and imprisonment or credit relations. Amanda Bailey, in her book *Of Bondage*, explores how debt bonds transformed “the human body” into a “new species of money,” and how these bonds “created the conceptual conditions for realizing the body as a form of property” (146). She examines the defaulter’s plight when legal institutions favor the creditor, and when prison conditions are drastically unfair for the imprisoned debtor. Throughout her study, she considers how the debt bond might lead to institutions such as indentured servitude and slavery. Drama concerning debt, then, becomes “invested in expounding the meaning of self-ownership” (147). Craig Muldrew’s *The Economy of Obligation* analyzed the “micro-economics of individual chains of credit” to see how they inform larger needs to “maintain markets by maintaining trust, and how this resulted in a complex relationship between individual behavior, morals, legal, and

commercial institutions” (“Debt, Credit” 11). Muldrew's extensive monograph explores the history of credit and debt in early modern England and examines how notions of trust and honor adapted to the continuing changes in the marketplace. In his book *Theater, Finance, and Society in Early Modern England*, Theodore Leinwand approaches credit from a “pedestrian financial sense” and studies how a “practice within the economy” affects “social, psychological, and affective realms” (7). He looks at how individuals “withstand loss” through their venturing efforts to profit (7). While this thesis draws upon many of these studies, it differs from previous scholarship in that it focuses less on strict financial interactions and more on the abstract notion of social debt that transcends monetary exchanges. These authors' ideas form the critical context out of which I will develop the category of social debt and demonstrate how the effects of this debt transcend finances, credits, bonds, and commercial exchanges.

This study is divided into four chapters organized into two sections. The first section examines how financial and social debt were intertwined in the lives of authors Ben Jonson and Lady Mary Wroth. In the first Chapter, I argue that Ben Jonson placed patrons in his debt with his poetry. Poets relied on patronage for their livelihoods during this period, and with the accession of King James I to the throne, patronage expanded into a competitive and multi-tiered structure. Ben Jonson navigates this system adeptly through his panegyric poems that extoll the generosity of high-ranking nobles within the court. By crediting his potential patrons with generosity, Jonson obligates them to return a gift be it praise, protection, or money. This chapter also considers various theories of gift-giving and debt from anthropologists Marcel Mauss and David Graeber and philosopher Jacques Derrida as a framework for examining the nature of Jonson's exchanges. Lastly, it employs examples from Jonson's *Works* (1616) to demonstrate

how this system of gift-giving and patronage helped produce, disseminate, and influence his literary works.

The life and works of Mary Wroth comprise the second chapter. Wroth was the first English woman to publish a piece of long prose and a sonnet collection; she also composed a pastoral tragicomedy. Niece to the famous Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke, she was born into a family of accomplished authors. She was also a member of Queen Anne's intimate circle of friends, and participated in aristocratic court life, appearing frequently in masques and entertainments. Though she came from a prestigious family and enjoyed a noble status, her life was plagued by unhappiness and debt, particularly in her marriage to Sir Robert Wroth. Sir Robert died early and left Wroth in great debt that she battled for the rest of her life. These encounters with debt influenced her writings, in which she explores the obligations of love, particularly the prolonged suffering a lover must endure to reach happiness. I examine various poems, songs, letters, and the play *Love's Victory* (circa 1620) to see where the social and financial debt in Wroth's life manifests itself in her writing.

The second section focuses on two plays, *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare and *A Trick to Catch the Old One* by Thomas Middleton. These final two chapters examine the early modern cultural conditions of debt by exploring how creditors operated in the emerging marketplace economy and how defaulters were punished. The third chapter examines friendship and debt in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The majority of critical attention to the play has focused on issues of usury and the caricature-like portrayal of Shylock. This chapter explores the role of debt and obligation in Antonio and Bassanio's friendship, particularly how the debts Bassanio incurs from Antonio strain their relationship. When Bassanio requests a substantial sum of money to court Portia, he burdens his relationship with Antonio

with a potentially fatal debt. In order for their friendship to survive, Bassanio and Antonio must transfer the debt to a third party. This third party takes the form first of Shylock and then of Portia, both of whom are able to alleviate the tension between the two friends because of their status as outsiders.

The final chapter explores Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, one of the playwright's most successful city comedies. The conventions of the new marketplace compel the characters in *A Trick* to concoct outlandish plans based on deception in order to survive the transition from a trust-based to a credit-based economy. Witgood, a disenfranchised nobleman, seeks to reclaim his lost lands from his usurious uncle. He devises a scheme with Jane, his mistress, to trick his uncle into giving him money and restoring his lost lands. The trick consists of Jane pretending to be a rich country heiress whom Witgood intends to marry. In the process of deceiving his uncle, Witgood becomes part of the corrupt economic system of which he was a victim. In so doing, he uses his powers of deception against Jane, creating a substantial social debt between them.

Taken collectively, these chapters provide a new paradigm in which to view the evolving commercial landscape of and changing interpersonal relationships in early modern England. They draw from poetry, drama, and personal correspondence, as well as modern theories of gift-giving, debt, and exchange to posit the new category of social debt. This category encourages us to revisit and reimagine the social, political, economic, and biographical frameworks through which we approach Renaissance literature.

CHAPTER 1

PAYING FOR ONE'S WORDS: PATRONAGE, POETRY, AND SOCIAL DEBT IN THE COURT OF JAMES I

“If thou be such, I make thee my patron; if not so
Much, would I had been at the charge of they better literature.”

-Ben Jonson²

The complex system of patronage in King James's court was built upon a culture of gift-giving. In this Jacobean courtly network, artists presented their works as gifts to patrons, hoping to secure financial support. This presentation of gifts inaugurated a lasting relationship wherein the patron and client continually traded favors. Social debt governed the principles of these exchanges. While many discussions of patronage focus on the artist's struggles to maintain these relationships, this chapter will explore how the artist actually placed the patron in his debt through gift-giving. This chapter argues that, more than any other artist, Ben Jonson placed his patrons in his debt through his poetry, epistles, and *Epigrams*. The recipient of Jonson's praise felt obligated to live up to the compliments in the works presented to him, to prove his character and authority through patronage. This exchange became a cycle of perpetual debt that actually imprisoned his patrons.

This chapter will first examine gift-exchange theories from the anthropologist Marcel Mauss and the philosopher Jacques Derrida in order to frame how Ben Jonson placed patrons in a pattern of reciprocal debt. After considering these theories and demonstrating how the early

² All quotations from Ben Jonson are from the Cambridge University Press Print Edition of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*.

modern world anticipates the patterns and problems found therein, I will deal specifically with patronage and gifts in Jacobean court culture. Finally, I will explore Ben Jonson's work in the context of Jacobean patronage. I will argue that Jonson's adept navigation of the increasingly complex world of patronage, gift exchange, and debt secured him a significant advantage over both his peers and his patrons by placing his benefactors in his debt through his *Works* (1616).

The Theory of Gift Giving

To understand how Ben Jonson placed his patrons in debt by bestowing gifts, I will employ the principles set by Marcel Mauss in his work *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* to examine the culture of gift-exchange. Mauss's work, originally published in 1923, is the seminal text on the nature of gift-giving, and many critics still use the work as a guide when examining the motivations of gift-exchange. Mauss analyzes gift giving in archaic cultures in Polynesia, Melanesia, and northwest America, and later applies his findings to various legal systems (i.e.: Roman, Indian, and German). Although Mauss examines very specific cultures, he concludes that the principles he has established constitute the "human foundations on which our societies are built" (Mauss 4). Thus, his observations about debt and gift-exchange extend beyond the cultures he specifies in *The Gift*; it is for this reason that his formulations are useful in the present discussion of early modern English culture.

Mauss claims that giving is an exchange rather than a one-sided bestowal. This exchange differs from the market exchange in its intimacy. A relationship predicated upon gift-exchange is lasting, shifting, and obligation-based. Mauss proposes three core ideas involved in this exchange. First, to give a gift creates "reciprocities and obligations to give and reciprocate in return" (Ben-Amos 5). Second, the passage of time between giving and reciprocation prolongs the exchange, endowing the relationship with durability. The timing of the reciprocation can

create anxiety, uncertainty, and even hostility in the relationship. Lastly, the exchange occurs within a social relationship that becomes tangled in the cycle of offering and reciprocation. This cycle generates rewards and motives for repeated exchange and lasting relationships. Implicit in these exchanges are issues of “power and status, social compacts and alliances” (Ben-Amos 5). The Jacobean system of patronage relied on these exchanges wherein a patron significantly affected “the extent, duration, and security” of the poet’s “social power” (“Frozen Maneuvers” 115).

Mauss claims that the gift is not the selfless, generous thing it appears to be (Mauss 3); rather, it possesses the power to harm the recipient by trapping her or him in impossible debt and obligation. In his book *The Early Stuarts*, Roger Lockyer describes King James I and Lord Buckingham as being “prisoners of patronage” in a system of gift-exchange reminiscent of Mauss’s formulation. A charitable gift has the power to destroy the receiver’s self-esteem. A gift not returned makes the recipient feel “inferior” when he or she accepts the gift with no thought of returning it (Mauss 65). This shame stretches further when the recipient lacks the means of returning something of equal value. Mauss describes the potlatch, a ceremony where North American Indians competitively exchange gifts and destroy their collective wealth to demonstrate their socioeconomic superiority. This ritual communicates the idea that the hosts possess so much that they can afford to destroy what would be substantial wealth to another party. The ceremony shows “how abundant and excessive gift giving puts the recipient in a position of almost impossible indebtedness” (Komter 28).

Through debt, the giver gains power over the recipient, which creates a tense and hostile relationship. French philosopher Jacques Derrida comments on the potential for the gift to turn toxic through debt: “...it remains the case that this ‘good’ can easily be reversed. We know that

as good, it can also be bad, poisonous...and this from the moment the gift puts the other in debt, with the result that giving amounts to hurting, to doing harm” (12). Mauss found that many people actually hoard their riches in order to give greatly to others with the intention of putting them in a position of near slavery:

They hoard, but in order to spend, to place under obligation, to have their own ‘liege men.’ On the other hand, they carry on exchange, but it is above all in luxury articles, ornaments or clothes, or things that are consumed immediately, as at feasts. They repay with interest, but this is in order to humiliate the person initially making the gift or exchange, and not only to recompense him for loss caused to him by ‘deferred consumption.’ (75)

People with power and riches use gift-exchange strategically to attain power over others and to conscript them into a long relationship that they can never leave. This relationship ensures that the giver is always surrounded by people who are loyal and indebted to him or her, which echoes the idea that patrons built a system of dependent followers. Conversely, poets accrued as many patrons as they were able to in the Jacobean court, in much the same way that patrons accrued dependents. Ben Jonson, for example, produced a large amount of works or “gifts” within this system, the scale of which correlates to Mauss’s formulation of the hoarding of riches.

Derrida critiques Mauss’s account of the gift-exchange by questioning how a gift can be exchanged and given. He claims that Mauss is concerned with “everything but the gift,” meaning that Mauss’s account of the economics of exchanges destroys the very idea of the gift itself (Derrida 24). Derrida states that “From the moment the gift would appear as gift, as such, as what it is, in its phenomenon, its sense and essence, it would be engaged in symbolic, sacrificial, or economic structure that would annul the gift in the ritual circle of debt” (Derrida 23). The gift

disappears in the cyclical obligation. Derrida also complicates the idea of the gift by questioning its relationship to economics:

Now the gift, *if there is any*, would no doubt be related to economy. One cannot treat the gift, this goes without saying, without treating this relation to economy, even to the money economy. But is not the gift, if there is any, also that which interrupts economy? To which, in suspending economic calculation, no longer gives rise to exchange? (7)

Derrida is dealing with what appears to be a contradiction within the idea of exchange, namely the difference between a gift and a commodity. He puts forth the idea that a gift, if it exists, actually interrupts economy and exchange rather than participating in it. For an actual gift to exist, Derrida claims that it must avoid circulation in an economical fashion:

It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange, by the movement of circulation of the circle in the form of return to the point of departure. (7)

For Mauss, the gift depends on rituals of exchange and reciprocation. In order for a gift to exist for Derrida, there must not be obligations or debt. The circle of reciprocity annuls the concept of the gift. The two theorists' approaches to what the gift is appear mutually exclusive. However, early modern literature produced via patronage provides a model for reconciling the seemingly disparate views. Under the system of Jacobean patronage, poets present their gifts as unselfish while recognizing that the reciprocal gift (i.e.: the patronage secured by their writing) enables the primary gift (i.e.: poetry) to exist at all (*Selfish Gifts* 16). Without patronage, poets would be unable to support their work, but without poetry, there would be no opportunity for patronage. The system of patronage is one where the giver solicits to receive, but faces the

conundrum of endeavoring to produce an authentic, honest gift that allows a lasting relationship to develop. To challenge Derrida's restrictive definition of the gift, I propose that the system of Jacobean patronage treats the gift as many things at once, which can exist under various, if contradictory, conditions while sustaining important relationships.

Patronage in the Jacobean Court

To survive at the court, poets had to navigate the complicated and shifting networks of early modern patronage. This system encompassed clients and patrons operating at various levels of power, prestige, and influence within the court. A poet would present the gift of poetic talent to someone in a financially and socially superior position in return for such things as “money, lodging, or political protection” (*Selfish Gifts* 84). The gift-exchange also benefited the patron. A patron's status determined and was also to some extent determined by how much support he was able to provide the artists and which artists he could afford to support. By sponsoring many artists, a patron proved his wealth and contributed to his community. When he received a gift in the form of a poem or painting, for example, it confirmed his “status and prestige” (Ben-Amos 205). The quality of the gift reflected not simply on the artist who produced it but on the patron who commissioned it as well. Thus, the works of art produced via patronage had the potential to showcase the patron's superior taste and aesthetic judgment. Conversely, bad poems or inferior paintings would indicate poor taste and might diminish a patron's social standing. Though the patron held financial power, the poet had the ability to alter his social status through the quality of the work produced. The poet's offering of a gift, then, is not an uncomplicated gesture but a movement toward entrapping a patron in a cycle of social, financial, and artistic debt.

While patrons enjoyed high social status and access to political and economic resources, they remained indebted to a system built "upon the distribution of gifts," and their reputations depended on how much they could provide for their client; they could not stop giving and maintain their standing in the court (Lockyer 91). This system of gift-exchange marked "political and social relationships" and provided access to "political favor" (*Consuming Splendor* 26). The structure benefited patrons by expanding their power and followers. By giving rewards, patrons accrued a number of dependents, which attested to their wealth and power. The gifts of praise they received from their clients reinforced their authority and confirmed their positions (*Court Patronage* 48). As opportunities to engage in patronage became increasingly common, patrons sought out new ways to set themselves apart from one another. The nobility distinguished itself from the burgeoning gentleman class through its taste in art, choices in patronage and participation in extravagant activities such as masques, a form dominated by Jonson (*Court Patronage* 31). Poets exploited this trend through panegyric poetry designed to put patrons into a cycle of debt.

For the poet, giving a gift is overtly a compliment and covertly an enticement. It encourages the patron to receive and then reciprocate the poet's praise in a timely and grand fashion. Once the recipient accepts the gift, he places himself in position of debt to the giver. Gift-exchange revolves around honor, and in the context of patronage, honor is key to sustaining the relationship between patron and client. Debts of honor accrued through gift-exchange allow the nobility to create support systems of followers, which patrons needed to gain influence in the court, and this, in turn, allowed poets to lock the nobility into relationships of mutual support.

The marketplace of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period changed so swiftly that both poets and patrons faced difficulty adapting their methods of exchange to the new economy. This

complicated the established system of gift-exchange, rendering it increasingly difficult to distinguish gifts from commodities. The sale of titles was one such aspect of this shifting marketplace that altered the nature of courtly gift-exchange. During the reign of King James I, there was such a demand of suitors that he and his advisors were forced to find ways to cut costs.³ Since James believed that it was the duty of the king and the sociopolitical elite to bestow honors upon his subjects, and since there was such a large pool of suitors, James expanded offices and other benefits to accommodate the demand. However, this did not reduce the number of suitors or demands for offices. In response, James began to sell titles. As Linda Levy Peck notes, "the Crown's sale of titles, however, brought honor and market too closely together" (*Court Patronage* 38). This mixture of honor and economy decreased the symbolic value of the royal gift. Since gift-exchange was essential to patronage, this created confusion between gifts and bribes, as well as loss in the "symbolic capital" of the court (38).

Gifts have been traditionally been treated as distinct from commodities because gift-exchange is personal whereas commercial exchange occurs in the marketplace between strangers whose relationship is void as soon as the transaction is complete. This binary is, however, too rigid as it does not take into account the shifting nature of commodities like that which occurred in the early modern period. A commodity might gain "personal significance and value," compromising its identity as a commodity; conversely, that which is considered a non-commodity may be sold (Komter 18). Mauss resists the idea of the gift existing in a marketplace, much like Derrida objects to the gift existing in an economy. Derrida writes that "gift-exchange contrasted with a market mode of transaction and as such it was incompatible with market

³ I borrow the term "suitors" to mean poets courting patrons in the hope of securing their patronage from Linda Levy Peck's *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England* (1990).

institutions and mechanisms” (8). However, the system of patronage in early modern England demonstrates that “gift giving, support and the personal interactions underlying them penetrated and at times became enmeshed or identified market transactions and state policies” (Ben-Amos 9). The complex and shifting identity of the gift raises the question: is it moral to use a gift for profit or return? There is a strong argument that it is not moral; however, it seems that the gift gains value if its returns come at multiple levels. If both the poet and patron both stand to gain – the poet in his or her marketplace value and the patron in his or her notoriety and legacy – then this constitutes the durable relationship between giver and receiver that is one of Mauss’s principles of gift-exchange. A gift to a patron becomes many things at once, embodying the political, social, and personal spheres of exchange. Just as the gift has the ability to entrap both patron and client in debt, it possesses the power to elevate both giver and receiver (Ben-Amos 207).

As the early modern economy shifted away from feudalism towards a proto-capitalist marketplace, poets had to compete for patronage in new ways. They faced the dilemma of trying to secure gifts from patrons without debasing their work by associating it with “a marketplace conceptually connected with flattery, beggary, and prostitution” (*Selfish Gifts* 19). To compete successfully in this marketplace, poets had to appear authentic in their praise; a patron would not accept work that amounted to flattery and, by extension, depicted him as undeserving. Since the value of the gift depended on the patron’s reaction, the poet walked a thin line between praise and flattery. While poets maintained the integrity of their gift, they wrote praise to “induce a counter-gift, favor, or reward, or else to create a debt” (“Marketing” 140). To remain marketable, poets altered their writing to compete with their peers, emphasizing the sincerity of their own work while discrediting the work of their rivals. The emergent marketplace created a climate that

encouraged poets to attack each other's talent in order to compete for patronage. For this reason, poetic rivals became an audience in their own right. Each poem could be viewed as a "threat", and poetic rivals would scrutinize its "rhetorical straggles and micropolitical tactics" to formulate a counterattack ("Frozen Maneuvers" 123). Thus, the onset of a proto-capitalist economy transformed poetry into a market-based commodity that created intense rivalries amongst poets.

Alongside the economic changes in the early modern period, new powers emerged in the court, which altered the relationships between patrons and clients. James's accession to the throne affected the nature of patronage, shifting the networks of gift-exchange away from classical notions to "bribery and corruption" (*Selfish Gifts* 125). James infamously selected royal favorites from lower social standings and elevated them to powerful positions in the court. These new favorites merged the roles of client, patron, and patronage broker. Often, these new players in the court found themselves in the midst of a convoluted network of exchanges. They acted simultaneously as patrons and clients, providing support to chosen artists while receiving support from James. James's handling of favorites such as Robert Carr and George Villiers created jealousy amongst those who were noble by birthright, and disrupted the traditional system of patronage based on "honorable giving and social order" (*Selfish Gifts* 126).

Suitors seeking patronage from James often had to go through his favorites. This caused instability in the royal hierarchy, and blurred the line between King and subject. Since the King's favorites acted as intermediaries between James and potential clients, they were often paid doubly. Clients presented the favorites with gifts in the hopes of attaining James's favor, while James paid his favorites in the hopes of avoiding unnecessary contact with clients. Clients often reaped greater rewards from the favorites than they did from the King. Despite the obvious disruption this caused, James maintained that the cycle of gift-exchange was pivotal in

reinforcing social hierarchies and power structures within the court. Displays of wealth and gift giving confirmed the authority of the patron, whose careful selection of clients increased the competitive nature of the poetry produced through patronage (*Selfish Gifts* 131). The selection of clients, then, created resentment, judgment, controversy, and perhaps most importantly, competition across social, political, and economic boundaries.

The gift-exchange between a patron and a client was paradoxical; although the client appeared to offer the gift freely, he was, in fact, using it as a “symbolic currency within a highly codified and political system of exchange” (*Selfish Gifts* 138). Writing, particularly poetry, was used to purchase aristocratic favor by securing sponsorship. Though patronage relied on exchanges, the participants fought against forming a marketplace relationship, which was limited in scope and duration. Poets aimed to create an ongoing source of livelihood whereby the debt into which they placed their patrons and into which they themselves entered could never be fully settled. David Graeber points out that “debt is what happens in between when the two parties cannot yet walk away from each other, because they are not equal...because achieving that equality...destroys the very reason for having a relationship (122). Debt is an incomplete exchange, and in patronage, the hope of the client is that the exchange is never brought to completion, lest he or she lose the sought-after financial support. These paradoxes that exist in debt, patronage, and gift-exchange form the foundation of sociopolitical relationships in early Stuart England. Gift-exchange, in particular, creates complex arrangements and guidelines that shape the lives of its participants.

Gifts, Debt, and Ben Jonson

Ben Jonson epitomizes the complicated system of Jacobean gift-exchange and social debt because, as Robert C. Evans says, "more than any other writer of his time, Ben Jonson can be

called a poet of patronage" ("Inviting a Friend" 113). Evans notes that Jonson's career and livelihood depended on patronage associations, and that the quantity of poems addressed to nobility is evidence of his reliance on wealthy, well-connected patrons. Evans asserts that, "every Jonsonian poem is in some sense a poem of patronage," ("Inviting a Friend" 114). Jonson wrote poems "conceived as gifts" for patrons that paid him for "who he is" rather than "the line or the stanza" (Maus 261). Instead of relying on the commercial theaters to make a living as many of his contemporaries did, Jonson depended almost exclusively on the "financial backing of powerful people," returning only to playwriting when he felt his patronage endangered ("Inviting a Friend" 113). He once told the poet William Drummond that he never made two hundred pounds from any of his plays (Helgerson 166).

More than any other early modern English poet, Ben Jonson exemplifies use of poetry to place powerful patrons in debt. He rose through the court system by befriending nobility and gaining their patronage, which allowed him to improve his social status and increase his literary fame. Jonson's patrons, in turn, benefited from the prestige of his poetry. This friendship of mutual exchange closed the social gap between Jonson and his aristocratic patrons (Woods 19). Though he praises the character of his patrons and gratefully accepts their support, he considers himself their equal. For Jonson, patronage provides a path to becoming poet laureate, which would attest to the quality of his work and elevate him above his peers (Helgerson 166).

Jonson navigated this murky system of Jacobean patronage with considerable success. He competed for patronage, published and sold his work, and managed relationships with several patrons "without annulling the spirit of the literary gifts he continued to bestow" (*Selfish Gifts* 120). One of Jonson's strategies in handling the increasingly competitive patronage marketplace focused on devaluing the work of poetic rivals by making them appear sycophantic and

unworthy. Although Jonson repeatedly tries to separate praise from flattery, he struggles with the distinction. The need to differentiate praise from flattery arises from the fierce competition for patronage, and while Jonson dismisses rival poets as base flatterers, he still perceives them as enough of a threat to warrant a calculated attack (“Inviting a Friend” 115-116).

Jonson often composes didactic poems that impart moral lessons to the recipient. He incorporates this didacticism into panegyric poems to his patrons by establishing a timeline for the reciprocity he anticipates. These particular poems contain instructions or advice on how to achieve timely repayment of the artistic gift his writing represents. According to Mauss’s theory of gift-exchange, the passage of time between bestowing and reciprocating a gift affects the health of the relationship between the giver and the receiver. Jonson addresses both debt and the timing of repayment in his “Epistle to a Friend.” The epistle begins with the statement that those who pay their debts late do not damage their character or friendship with the creditor:

They are not, sir, worst owers that do pay
Debts when they can: good men may break the day,
And yet the noble nature never grudge. (1-3)

Here, Jonson is making a seemingly paradoxical case for returning a favor later than expected. Even though Jonson owes his unnamed friend and cannot repay the debt in an acceptable amount of time, he hopes that his character will remain intact, as “good men may break the day.” He goes on to say:

‘Tis then a crime when the usurer is the judge,
And he is not in friendship. Nothing there
Is done for gain; if’t be ‘tis not sincere. (4-6)

By comparing calling in a debt to usury, Jonson is suggesting that his friend's demand for timely repayment would render their relationship commercial rather than interpersonal. A gift, Jonson argues, should be given out of the sincerity of friendship – an allusion to classical ideas about friendship and gift-giving based on the writings of Seneca (*Selfish Gifts* 141).

The epistle shifts to a paradoxical and defensive tone when Jonson invokes the patrons who have been negligent in their support of him:

Nor should I at this time protested be,
But that some greater names have broke with me,
And their words too, were I but break my band. (7-10)

Jonson claims that he should not be “protested” at this time, meaning that he should not be “formally recorded as [having] not paid” his debt to his friend (OED 2a). At the same time, he formally charges “greater names” (i.e.: his patrons) for having “broke” with him or failed to pay him. Worse even than their failure to compensate Jonson is his patrons’ failure to uphold their “words” or promises; they have forfeited not only the financial obligation but the honor debt, as well. Jonson emphatically states “were I but break my band” to show that whereas he has failed to repay his “band”, or a legally executed deed or debt (OED 11), his patrons have failed to fulfill their oaths – a “crime” that, by the poet’s estimation, is far more serious. The argument he offers for the forgiveness of his own debts to his friend are, therefore, somehow not applicable to the debts his patrons owe him.

Jonson continues:

I add that ‘but’ because I understand
That as the lesser breach; for he that takes
Simply my band, his trust in me forsakes

And looks unto the forfeit. If you be
Now such a friend as you would trust in me,
Venture a longer time, and willingly:
All is not a barred land doth fallow lie.
Some grounds are made the richer for the rest;
And I will bring a crop, if not the best. (11-19)

In Jonson's "Epistle," breaking one's word is worse than failing to pay a legal debt. The person who collects the legal debt is only interested in payment and is not subject to the prerogatives of friendship. Jonson exploits the idea of friendship to extend his repayment time. His claim that "now such a friend as you would trust in me" serves to entrap his unnamed friend into an extended loan by attributing to him a generosity that the recipient must now practice. Jonson then employs the metaphor of a piece of land that when left unused to rest, may be restored to a useable soil again. He promises that as a result of the extended loan, a "rest" from debt, he will produce a "crop", indicating that his friend's investment of generosity will yield a return that is not simply what is expected but what is "the best," in true Jonsonian form. In the "Epistle," Jonson realizes that he has breached the expected time of reciprocity, but now expects his friend to elongate this period for him as he places the creditor further in debt through praise.

The epigrams and poems to Robert Cecil, one of Ben Jonson's most important patrons early in his career and throughout Jacobean period, exemplify how Jonson places his patron in his debt and fends off rivals. In Epigram 43, "To Robert, Earl of Salisbury," Jonson praises Salisbury's fame and hopes for fame in return while at the same time distancing himself from rival poets:

What need hast thou of me, or of my muse,

Whose actions so themselves do celebrate?
Which should thy Country's love to speak refuse,
Her foes enough would fame thee in their hate.
'Tofore, great men were glad of poets; now,
I, not the worst, am covetous of thee.
Yet dare not to my thought least hope allow
Of adding to thy fame; thine may to me,
When in my book men read but Cecil's name
And what I write therefo find far and free
From servile flattery (common poet's shame)
As thou stand'st clear of the necessity. (1-12)

In the first line, Jonson asks what need there is for him or his "muse." In the next the line, however, he explains there is no need because Salisbury's "actions" bring him enough fame. Here, Jonson feigns humility in his suggestion that the Earl does not need him, claiming that his poetry will do little to add to Salisbury's already established fame. Later in the epigraph, though, Jonson makes a strong case that the Earl does, in fact, need him, to represent his virtues "far and free / From servile flattery." In lines two through four, Jonson specifies which of his particular skills would be most advantageous to the Earl in securing their mutual legacy when he claims that Salisbury's compatriots harbor animosity towards him and might "refuse" to speak their "love" for him. Jonson explains that even their hate adds to his fame. Salisbury repeatedly defended himself against disparagement, which created insecurities in his position ("Frozen Maneuvers" 122). By addressing these fears and mitigating these potential weaknesses while avoiding "servile flattery," Jonson is in a position to provide a valuable image-building service to

Salisbury. Thus, Jonson is able to place Salisbury in his debt by providing a form of protection against rivals' "hate" and slander. Jonson writes that "great men" have always been "glad of poets," evoking a longstanding and successful tradition of poets defending the honor of "great men." Jonson, "not the worst" of these protective poets, "is covetous of [Salisbury]", meaning that he wishes to provide this same service for the Earl. He cleverly presents himself as a humble poet looking for a worthy patron to praise, but is really indicating that Salisbury needs someone of Jonson's caliber to render him worthy of his position. He dares not hope that he will be the one to add to Salisbury's fame, though he anticipates that "when in [his] book men read but Cecil's name," Jonson's fame will increase by association. One of the poet's most valuable gifts to his or her patrons is bestowing "grace and immortality" through art, which Jonson does when he alludes to great men and their poet-supporters earlier in the epigram (Ostovich 297). With this gesture, Jonson proposes that poetry's longevity will preserve Salisbury's greatness for posterity. At the same time, he expects his own literary prestige to elevate Salisbury's reputation. To ward off accusations of insincere fawning, he singles out other poets whose praise he calls "servile flattery." He assures the Earl that he is "clear of the necessity" of the "common poet's" attempts to win his favor through false praise. Ever the uncommon poet, Jonson represents his own work as sincere, and positions himself as a superior alternative to his peers. Whether the Earl recognized this as "servile flattery" in and of itself is immaterial, as Jonson's attempts to secure his support were largely successful. To reciprocate Jonson's gifts of praise and promise of immortality through poetic representation, the Earl commissioned Jonson on four separate (and well-paid) occasions to write "speeches or entertainments" for the King ("Frozen Maneuvers" 120).

Jonson places patrons in his debt socially by forcing them to reciprocate poetic praise to maintain their reputations at court and in society more generally. In Jonson's *Works* (1616), the long list of patrons testifies to his proficiency in gaining the support of wealthy and influential people and institutions. The list includes William Camden; the Inns of Court; Richard Martin; Esme Stuart, Lord Aubigny; the two universities of Oxford and Cambridge; Sir Francis Stuart; Lady Mary Wroth; and William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, to name a few (Donaldson, cvi). In naming his rich and well-connected patrons, Jonson is not only paying them homage but using their reputations as a kind of currency, adding value to his poetry. The list of patrons, then, acts as a series of aristocratic and academic endorsements, likely to inspire curiosity in the general reading public and increase the text's value as an object of exchange among divergent socioeconomic groups.

Pembroke helped sustain Jonson by giving him twenty pounds a year and (most likely) helping him procure an honorary degree from Oxford. In turn, Jonson dedicated his *Epigrams* to Pembroke, praising him most explicitly in an individual epigram. Despite Pembroke's continued support, Jonson paradoxically places his patron in his debt in the preface to the *Epigrams*, setting up a series of expectations that only someone of Pembroke's allegedly exemplary character could fulfill:

...I must expect, at Your Lordship's hand, the protection of truth and liberty, while you are constant to your own goodness. In thanks whereof, I return you the honor of leading forth so many good and great names as my verses mention on the better part, to their remembrance with posterity. Amongst whom if I have praised, unfortunately, anyone that doth not deserve, or if all answer not in all numbers the pictures I have made of them, I

hope it will be forgiven me, that they are no ill pieces, though they be not like the persons. (111)

Here, we see the projection of virtue onto Pembroke, who is “constant to his own goodness.” Jonson charges Pembroke with the protection of his works, should someone accuse them of attacking specific individuals. In praising Pembroke, Jonson is also making demands upon him. Pembroke must live up to Jonson’s praise or he will fall short of the virtue attributed to him. Therefore, the praise places the patron in debt to the poet.

With time, the paradoxical relationship whereby Jonson places his patrons in his debt begins to shift back to the more traditional formulation whereby he owes them. Addressing Esme Stuart, Lord Aubigny in Epigram 127, Jonson recognizes that he is in debt to his patron for providing protection against accusations of recusancy, or refusal to attend Anglican services:

Into the debt, and reckon on her head
How full of want, how swallowed up, how dead
I and this muse had been, if thou hadst not
Lent timely succors, and new life begot.
So all reward or name that grows to me
By her attempt shall still be owing thee.
And than this same I know no abler way
To thank thy benefits: which is, to pay. (5-12)

Jonson acknowledges in line six how he might have died without Aubigny’s support. He must repay this debt in the only way he knows how: through his poems and praise. He states that any “reward” he gains through his writing will be owed to Aubigny. In the last line, he offers payment by humbling himself before his patron – a gesture that is likely very difficult for a poet

who has been accustomed to placing others skillfully in his debt. Jonson's adept navigation of the complex system of early modern patronage has disintegrated into desperate and one-sided pleas for help.

Perhaps the most striking examples of this collapse of early modern patronage and gift-exchange occur when the pretenses of gift-gifting and reciprocity are stripped away, as when Jonson writes William Cavendish, Earl of Newcastle during the impoverished final stages of his life (Donaldson cxii). In two of the five letters to Newcastle, Jonson refers to him as his "best patron", acknowledging that the Earl supported him the most during the hardest time of Jonson's career – the Caroline period. While Jonson retains some of his poetical prowess during this time, his poems may be viewed as "hackneyed echoes" of a "declining poet's hunger for social security" ("Making Just Approaches" 63). Indeed Cavendish provided much needed income at a time when Jonson fell out of favor at court, lost his job as City Chronologer, and experienced difficulty collecting his hundred-pound pension from Charles I (Ostovich 301). Rather than offering a "gift" of poetry in exchange for patronage, Jonson simply begs for money. He writes, "but I make a most humble petition to Your Lordship's bounty to succor my present necessities this good time of Easter, and it shall conclude all begging requests hereafter" (Letter 16). Jonson's request is short and pointed; he asks for money and offers nothing in return. Once the great poet of patronage, operating expertly within a complex network of reciprocal debt, Jonson has been reduced to begging for alms at Easter, and because of his status as an emblem of aristocratic and artistic gift-exchange, his fall from grace heralds the demise of the larger system of early modern patronage.

It is perhaps appropriate that the "poet of patronage" who exemplified the greatest potential of the Jacobean poetic gift-exchange also helped lead to the demise of the system

altogether. With the publication of his *Works*, Jonson helped to create a new marketplace where the name of the author became more important to buyers than the name of the patron. Prior to the emergence of the print marketplace, the poet had depended on a long-lasting relationship built on reciprocal debt. After this shift from elite manuscripts to popular print took place, the poet could now reap the rewards (i.e.: profits) of his work independently. He no longer required the gift of patronage to survive (“Marketing” 141). The traditional patron-client relationship could not last in a “money market that in itself pledges no allegiance to reciprocal service bound by intellectual or artistic ties” (Ostovich 301). The epigram of this chapter, “If thou be such, I make thee my patron; if not so / Much, would I had been at the charge of they better literature” comes from “The Dedication, To the Reader” that prefaces Ben Jonson’s 1631 play *The New Inn*. Unlike previous works, *The New Inn* is dedicated to a nameless general “reader,” rather than a prestigious, well-connected patron. Though his audience is different, Jonson does not abandon his strategy of placing the recipient of his works in his debt through his writing – be it panegyric poems, plays, or collected works. In the new marketplace, Jonson “looks beyond the aristocratic patronage and embraces the full measure of textual patronage, which includes book-buyers and readers” (Bergeron 136). In addressing this new general reader, Jonson fundamentally changes both the idea and practice of patronage in the early modern period, ushering in a new culture of authorship, readership, and the exchange therein.

CHAPTER 2

LOVE DEBTS IN LADY MARY WROTH'S *PAMPHILIA TO AMPHILANTHUS* AND *LOVE'S VICTORY*

"I have seen my daughter Wroth's letter; if you have let her have any money...I will repay it at my return, and indeed I should be very loath that she did want."

---Robert Sidney (Sidney 124).

"So fall in love and fall in debt"

---Billy Joe Armstrong

Lady Mary Wroth is the most well-known female writer of the Jacobean period. She was the first woman in English history to write a sonnet sequence, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, a collection of 103 sonnets and songs. Wroth appended the sequence to the 558-page *Urania*, the first prose romance published by an Englishwoman. In addition, she composed *Love's Victory* (circa 1620), the first pastoral tragicomedy written by a woman in the early modern period. Her other unpublished works include a long, unfinished sequel to *Urania*, numerous letters, and a few poems (*Writing Women* 243).

Though her work takes many forms, sometimes transgressing generic boundaries and dabbling in innovative structures, it is united in its central concern with love, which, for Wroth, was a complicated, often unhappy thing. This chapter argues that Lady Mary Wroth's experiences with debt and love throughout her childhood, arranged marriage, and widowhood

affected the production and imaginative workings of her prose, poems, and drama, prompting her to examine how debt affects relationships, livelihood, love, and service. First, this chapter will give accounts of love and debt in Wroth's life, examining how her father's actions signaled to her that taking on debts is necessary to ensure the happiness of loved ones. Then the chapter looks at her marriage to Sir Robert Wroth, a prominent yet debt-ridden noble, whose premature death left her a widow who fought creditors for the rest of her life. During her widowhood, she wrote many letters for protection from debt collectors, which will be examined. Finally, this chapter examines the role of love, debt, and obligation in her sonnet collection *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* and in her play *Love's Victory*.

Debt and Love in Wroth's Life

Many of Wroth's works deal in thinly veiled biographical allusions. S.P. Cerasano and Marion-Wynne Davies note in *Renaissance Drama by Women: Text and Documents* that "of all the authors in this anthology it is Wroth whose life is most intimately bound to her literary productivity" and that learning the biography of Lady Mary Wroth is "essential to the understanding of her work, for the characters in her romances, poems, and play represent the people she knew, those she loved and those she despised" (91). Margaret P. Hannay comments in the preface to her substantial biography of Wroth that her works "invite, and have received biographical readings" because the family in *Urania* closely resembles the Earl and Countess of Pembroke and their three children (xi). Thus, Wroth's biography "provides an important context" since her works "allude to the circumstances of her life and family relationships" (*Writing Women* 244). However, certain critics advise caution when reading Wroth's works through a biographical perspective. While reading Wroth's works with particular attention to

autobiographical allusions, one must entertain the possibility that many of the characters, settings, or places represent a nexus and convergence of her life and experiences, and that “no single character in her play, romance or sonnet sequence can be assigned to a single member of the Sidney family” (Wynne-Davies 86). Critics struggle to differentiate the elements of *roman à clef* from Wroth’s “purely imaginary adventures and miraculous incidents” (Roberts 28). Despite these disagreements on the extent to which we may read Wroth’s life in her writing, the critical consensus is that understanding her biography is essential to interpreting her work. While it is certainly useful that understanding her biography is necessary to reading Wroth’s works, one must remain cautious about assigning any literary character or event to an actual individual or place. Rather, I look at how debt affected Wroth’s life, but it also lifts her imaginative writing out of those particulars in a broader cultural field.

Debt shaped Wroth’s life from an early age. Though she often experienced and enjoyed the lifestyles of richer relatives such as the Earl and Countess of Pembroke, she was much more familiar with financial strife than success. Her immediate family struggled to pay for their multiple estates and her father, Robert Sidney, spent himself into debt trying to obtain favor in both Elizabeth’s and James’s courts (Hay 55). To pay his debts, he sold his lands and family possessions, a solution that left an impression on Wroth, who emulated his example of living beyond one’s means and selling lands to compensate (Hannay 277). Financial problems were so serious that Sidney instructed his wife in a letter to sell their plate to pay the rent “if the worst fall out” (99). Despite substantial financial hardship, his family’s happiness remained his priority. In a letter dated March 20, 1596, he tells Barbara “I do not love my plate so well as I love my wife” (Sidney 99).

Later, when her parents negotiated Mary's marriage to Sir Robert Wroth, Sidney faced problems acquiring the money for her dowry. He was so worried about attaining loans that he suggested to his wife that they delay Mary's wedding until he could figure out how to raise the money (Sidney 115-116). They finally settled on the large dowry of £3000, an amount enabled by a £1000 loan from the Earl of Pembroke, continuing the pattern of living in the debt and shadow of wealthier relatives. Robert continued to make payments on the dowry until four years after their wedding, though he never ended up paying the full amount (Hannay 120). Fortunately for Sidney and his daughter, Robert Wroth annulled the remaining balance in his will (Waller 50).

As a result of the £3000 dowry, Mary received a life interest in several Wroth properties; these properties became another problem of debt for her much later on. After her marriage, her father continued to take on debts to help her achieve social, political, and financial advancement. When Mary participated in Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* with Queen Anne, her father borrowed around £10,000 worth of jewels from goldsmiths for her to wear (Hannay 125). Sidney incurred several debts to secure Mary a prosperous marriage and to ensure her participation in court activities. The actions of Wroth's father illustrate the burden one might take on for a loved one's happiness. It also indicated to Wroth how much she would have to pay to live the life she wanted, and the life her father wanted for her. Through the debts that her father collected and the debts resulting from her arranged marriage, Wroth learned how debt, tradition, and love merge and become inseparable.

At the beginning of both *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* and *Love's Victory*, Cupid and Venus appear and orchestrate the characters' love lives, a pattern that closely mirrors Wroth's own experience with her marriage to Sir Robert Wroth. Negotiations for the Wroths' wedding

began when she was at least 13, which meant she was too young to protest the marriage (Hannay 99). Though it seemed like a fortuitous match considering Robert and Mary's similar social standings, the marriage was an unhappy one. Mary's parents made preparations most likely before the two had met and definitely without considering the concept of love. As Barbara Lewalski notes, "the marriage was entirely a marriage of patriarchal arrangement [with] no hint of affection between the young people" and they "had almost nothing in common" (*Writing Women* 245). For a young maiden to enter into an arranged marriage for wealth and social status was common in the period. Early modern English Protestant culture distrusted marriages for love and expected them to end poorly. Instead, parents chose partners for their children based on the prospect of prosperity (Hannay 102).

Unhappiness came quickly after the wedding. Despite its financial advantages, the marriage "seems not to have been either an immediate or long-term success" (Waller 45). In a letter to his wife, Robert Sidney writes about a brief meeting in London with Sir Robert Wroth: "I find by him that there was somewhat that doth discontent him: but the particulars I could not get out from him: only that he protests that he cannot take any exceptions with his wife nor her carriage to him. It were very soon for any unkindnesses to begin" (Sidney 123). Robert Wroth kept the details of their discontent secret, and Robert Sidney wished to keep the matter quiet because his "enemies would be very glad for such an occasion to make themselves merry at [him]" (123). Robert Wroth's unwillingness to divulge the problems plaguing his marriage and Sidney's wish to keep their discontent a secret has led many scholars to speculate as to the precise nature of the Wroths' unhappiness. One theory is that the marriage had not been consummated, perhaps because Lady Mary believed she was in a *de praesenti* marriage with her cousin, William Herbert, which might have resulted in the loss of Lady Mary's virginity (Hannay

108). Even if she had not lost her virginity to Pembroke, there may have been some jealousy if Mary loved someone else (*Writing Women* 245). In his conversations with William Drummond, Ben Jonson says that, “my Lady Wroth, is unworthily married on [sic] a jealous husband” (275). Another theory is that financial woes already plagued the young couple. Robert Wroth was heavily in debt when they married, and Lady Mary’s father had trouble paying the dowry. In a revealing example of their financial hardship, Robert Sidney’s troops sent 200 pounds for Mary to buy a string of pearls – a traditional gift for a new bride. Mary thought the money belonged to her; however, her father “spent it on the dowry and the wedding” (“My Daughter” 57). Mary apparently needed the money because Robert told his wife “I send therefore now fifty pound which is as much as I can get, and I doubt not will serve her turn till she come to London, at which time she shall not fail of the rest, and so I do write unto her” (Sidney 121). As the epigraph at the beginning of this paper points out, Robert Sidney was “loath” to let Mary go without money, and he created complex networks of debt to ensure her happiness. Despite his efforts, however, Mary endured many periods of unhappiness due to her marriage and debt.

Most criticism points out that the couple simply did not have much in common. While Lady Wroth devoted her time to literary interests, Robert occupied himself with outdoor sporting activities. The Sidney family had provided Mary with a courtly upbringing, instructing her in the ways of fashion and conversation – customs that went against her father-in-law’s puritanical leanings (Hannay 120). Because of her background, Mary spent most of her time at court, particularly in Queen Anne’s close group of friends, and participated in masques and entertainments. Robert, on the other hand, spent most of time tending to his duties as the Royal Forester, which included caring for the king’s deer and mitigating the damage they caused to tenants’ property. Notably, Robert shared his father’s “distrust of the court and preference for

hunting and country life” (Waller 42-43). He inherited most of his debt from his father, who had in turn inherited it from his father, which was common as nearly every aristocratic family, and the Crown, suffered from inflation and the cost of running estates (*Selfish Gifts* 127). The Wroth family owned a large amount of land in a culture that valued land as a primary indicator of wealth (Hannay 110). When his father died, Robert and Lady Mary inherited both a sizable amount of property and an insurmountable debt in the form of annuities. The new properties included manors, homes and water mills, which elevated the social status of the young couple enough to entertain on a much grander scale. They entertained King James on many of his hunting trips, each of which proved a lavish expenditure for them. Often, the Crown did not reimburse the costly entertainments put on in the monarch’s honor (Hannay 140-141). Thus, the inheritance of Wroth’s father’s land drew the couple deeper into social and financial debt, obliging them to increase their entertaining and fund costly royal visits.

On 14 March 1614, Robert Wroth died of gangrene, leaving behind substantial debt for Lady Mary Wroth and their new son. At the time of his death, he was £30,000 in debt; this included his family’s debt and his investments – neither of which had been incurred by Lady Mary. Wroth did everything he could to provide for his wife and son posthumously, despite the dismal state of his finances. He left land and property to Mary in his will, along with one thousand pounds towards the payment of her own debts (Hannay 171). Sir Robert Wroth’s “family debt and obligations” prevented him from providing for her as he had hoped (172). Following her husband’s death, Mary’s life changed dramatically. Sir Robert’s income disappeared and she found herself battling against his brothers for the wardships of baby James and his inheritance. Most of these problems ended when baby James died two years later.

With the death of her son, her claims to the inherited properties were null, and she found herself relieved of many of her responsibilities, though she also lost many sources of income. Most of the lands and properties went to her brother-in-law. However, she retained Loughton, the manor that she had worked so hard to rebuild. In addition, the life of a widow seems to have suited her more. As Waller notes, “It does not sound a promising situation and yet arguably the next decade of her life was to prove the most eventful and, probably, the most exciting” (Waller 47). Being a widow and facing debts allowed her “a degree of involvement in public affairs and autonomy that she clearly had in part to suppress as a married woman” and engage in “legal disputes over her land...to preserve her financial independence” (47). While being a widow did allow her a certain degree of freedom and personal growth, the dark side of debt still pervaded her life, causing constant struggles over where and how she lived. With Robert’s death, her income greatly diminished causing her to sell the land she inherited in the will to survive. However, by selling these lands, her income diminished even more, and she resorted to pleading for debt protection from the Crown.

These debts put Wroth in a “financial abyss” that she worked the rest of her life to manage, trying to free herself from debt while at the same time acquiring more debt to help her children (“My Daughter” 61). Wroth wrote the king’s secretary, Sir Edward Conway, many times to plead for debt protection, which would prevent her from being sued or arrested for her debt. Wroth’s tone in the letters is painful, vulnerable, and humble, revealing the suffering and humiliation her financial debt caused her. She writes:

This business which I heere present unto you doth make mee ashamed for the
poorness of my estate to aske itt...but nessesity urgeth mee, and that must beg

my pardon, or plead my excuse, I dare nott <of> my self being soe unprofitable a creature. (Wroth, qtd. Roberts 242)

She confirms that her estate is in poor condition and that she cannot make enough profits to pay what she owes. The debt reduces her to begging and dehumanizing herself by calling herself a creature as if being in debt diminishes one's humanity. A year later, she writes Conway again stating, "I was soe much bound unto you for your favor when I prove to you ungratefull I will leave living" (243). Her life is contingent upon the constant expression of gratitude to her savior; however, she realizes that she cannot possess a life without debt. She continues:

...butt such is the continuance of my ill fortune, as I must befor I can deserve the first beg againe, and trouble you...the Lords I have petitioned, and given theyr Lordships an note of such debts as I have this yeere payd under my hand, which amounte to the haulf I did owe...I humbly bessech his Majesties protection the saflier to accomplish itt, which I will doe with my best ability, and truly satisfy every man... (243)

She has managed to pay half of her debts, but she still needs the protection of the Crown to safely finish paying off the rest. She earnestly pleads for an extension, offering evidence of how she is willing to pay but needs time. Her plea for continued protection rather than debt forgiveness demonstrates her understanding of debt as a social rather than simply a financial obligation. Paying her debts to "truly satisfy every man" is a way to reinstate her humanity, rising from a "creature" to an upstanding member of society.

Wroth concludes the letter by saying she needs one more year of protection so that she may "free" herself of "all debts yet owing" (244). Her formulation of being "free" of her debt provides insight into her perception of her plight because it indicates that she what she owes

enslaves her. David Graeber, an anthropologist who writes extensively on debt, notes that the first use of the word *freedom* in a political document occurs when the Sumerian King Enmetena absolved all the debts within his kingdom (Graeber 216). The connection between debt and slavery is, then, an ancient one, which finds multiple iterations in early modern debtors' prisons and systems of indentured servitude.

Wroth's petitions to the Crown proved largely successful; the Privy Council granted her debt protection nine times. This bought her much needed time to repay the crippling debt that dictated so many of her decisions and compromised the quality of life her father had worked so hard to provide for her. Many scholars posit that the Crown's continued protection was in no small part due to the efforts of council member William Herbert, her cousin and lover. Margret Hannay claims that he helped to "promote Wroth's protection from her debts" (*Mary Sidney* 253). If so, then Wroth encountered yet another example of love and debt merging. Just as her father had entered into both social and financial contracts to fund her dowry and participation in court life, so did Herbert lobby to secure her social status and financial freedom.

Debt and Love in Wroth's Works

This biographical connection between debt and love pervade Wroth's written work, as well, particularly in her sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*. The sequence tells the story of Pamphilia's tortured love for Amphilanthus and exhibits the traditional Petrarchan conventions of unrequited love and internal suffering (Roberts 46). Wroth's sonnets employ the imagery of Venus and Cupid, and contain many "apostrophes to night, sleep, hope, absence, and despair" (Roberts 48). Structurally, Wroth emulates Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, using his sequence as a model in her employment of the compound epithet and the corona, a

technique in which the last line of the sonnet is the first line of the next sonnet in the sequence. Wroth departs from Sidney, however, in both her tone and the relationship she posits between lover and beloved, imbuing her sequence with her understanding of the connection between love and debt (Roberts 46). One of the primary differences in Wroth's representation of the relationship between the lover and the beloved is evidenced in the fact that Pamphilia does not aggrandize Amphilanthus the way Sidney's Astrophil aggrandizes Stella. Instead of placing her lover on a pedestal, Pamphilia recognizes his shortcomings and reflects on the feelings of betrayal and depression caused by his behavior. Furthermore, Wroth subverts sonnet tradition by inverting the sexes of the subjects. This change allows her to focus on the speaker's "internal struggles" rather than the idea of feminine beauty that is the traditional preoccupation of sonnet speakers (Roberts 48).

In addition to Sir Philip Sidney, Wroth's father served as a significant influence on her sonnet sequence. However, his influence affected the tone of her sonnets more than their structure. Robert Wroth's poetry focuses primarily on the horror of wartime experiences; even poems that deal with love are marked by despair. As Roberts notes, the greatest similarity between Wroth and her father might lie in their shared "attitude of somber introspection" (48). Throughout the sonnet sequence, Pamphilia, the speaker, explores notions of debt in terms of obligation, bondage, offerings, and rewards. Her consistently melancholic tone evokes Sidney's lugubrious reflections on war, which, like debt, disrupts social bonds and strains relationships.

In the opening sonnet of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, the speaker witnesses the goddess Venus riding on her chariot with Cupid at her feet. Venus and Cupid also appear in the beginning of Wroth's play *Love's Victory*. In both the sonnets and the play, the pair manipulates the other characters' desires, governing their attractions, attachments, and alliances. Similarly, Wroth, who

was in a loveless prearranged marriage and in love with her unattainable cousin, had to contend with forces beyond her control that governed her relationships. In this sense, Venus and Cupid serve as an allegory for her parents. Wroth did not choose her husband; instead, she found herself subjected to her parents' will. In the first sonnet, Cupid visits Pamphilia in a dream and encloses a burning heart in her chest, saying, "thus must wee winn" (1:11). Waking from the dream, Pamphilia acknowledges her altered state, crying "O me: a lover I have been" (1:14). Cupid has implanted something into the speaker that causes her to transform into a lover, a status that comes with new expectations and obligations. Venus wishes to win something through this transaction; however, the desired prize is not apparent. A relationship of debt is beginning to take shape. Venus has given Pamphilia's heart a longing, and the former expects the latter to serve her through love. Though the lover did not wish for the heart, she is now obligated to follow the edicts of the goddess of love.

Throughout the sequence, Pamphilia stays constant and serves both Amphilanthus and Venus, but the forced mandate of service causes her to question her relationship with and obligation to both characters. She begins to wonder whether she has paid her debt to Venus and should be compensated. She asks:

Say Venus how long have I lov'd, and serv'd you heere?

Yett all my passions scorn'd or doubted allthough cleere

Alas thinke love deserveth love, and you have lov'd

Look on my paines, and see if you the like have prov'd. [P 58]

Pamphilia questions Venus about the length of her service. She wonders why Venus has not rewarded her devotion *to* love *with* love. Thus far, her love is unrequited; what's more, Venus actively scorns and doubts her love despite the authenticity that is "cleere" to Pamphilia.

The speaker expresses her disappointment at the love she feels she deserves but does not receive when she cries “Alas” in the third line of the song. Her interjection demonstrates her disillusionment with the exchange. She has ascertained Venus’s goals in endowing her with the blazing heart, and proceeds to turn the debt back on the goddess in an appeal that is desperate in tone but cunning in nature. She tells Venus that she, too, has loved and urges the goddess to empathize by commanding her to look at her pains and see if she has proven that love deserves love. The next stanza begins with Pamphilia telling the Goddess to “Remember then you ar the Goddess of desire / and that your sacred power hath touch’d, and felt this fire” (P 58:6). In this line, Pamphilia urges the goddess to remember her duties and obligations by reminding her that she is responsible for placing the fire in the speaker’s heart. This suggests that Pamphilia understands the exchange to begin with Venus’s insertion of the heart, meaning that the debt begins with a deposit rather than a withdrawal as in the traditional financial formulation of debt. This collapses the conventional understanding of debt by making both parties simultaneously debtors and creditors.

In the third stanza, Pamphilia quantifies her love by offering proof of the suffering she has undergone for its sake. She endures “restles nights” and “sighs,” and her “saddest looks” show the “greife” her soul experiences (P 58: 9-12). Pamphilia numbers these instances of suffering and berates Venus: “Yett, all thes torments from your hand noe help procures.” She treats her pain as a kind of currency whereby each act is meant to pay a portion of her debt, placing tokens of her love into Venus’s “hand.” Venus, however, has failed in her reciprocity. Pamphilia feels she has paid her dues to Venus and now Venus is obligated to give her what she desires. Pamphilia tells Venus to rein in her “wayward child” Cupid and make him realize that his bow and arrow are at her command. Once Venus does this then “new hopes may spring that

[she] may pittie move” (P 58: 16). Pamphilia tells Venus of Cupid, “Rule him, or what shall I expect of good to see / Since hee that hurt you, hee alas may murder mee” (20). Pamphilia surmises that if Cupid could wound a goddess, he may very well kill a human⁴; further, if the goddess of love is hurt by love’s obligations, debts, and rewards, then what hope does a mere mortal have?

Constancy is the main form of currency to pay love’s debts in the sonnet sequence. In P 90, Pamphilia states, “The tribute which my hart doth truly pay / Is faith untouch’d, pure thoughts discharge the score / Of debts for me, when constancy bears sway, / And rules as Lord, unharm’d by envyes sore” (5-9). The bondage and debt of love imprisons Pamphilia, much as it imprisons Wroth in her letter to Sir Edward Conway. Once again, we see a remarkable parallel between Wroth’s experience of debt and that of her characters. Just as Pamphilia can only “discharge the score / of debts” through constancy, so can Wroth only hope to free herself if she can “truly satisfy every man” in her commitment to consistent and continued payment. Whereas Pamphilia is constant in her fidelity to her patron Venus and her beloved Amphilanthus, Wroth must be faithful to her promise of repayment and her loyalty to the Crown.

That Wroth’s concern with the connections between love and debt continues into the 1620s is unsurprising; the Privy Council extended her debt protection nine times between 1623 and 1631 (Hannay 251). The drama she composed in the early 1620’s (exact date unknown), *Love’s Victory*, demonstrates a preoccupation with love and debt in much the same way that her sonnet sequence does. The play exists in two manuscripts, one of which is incomplete. The Penhurst manuscript is the complete version and is owned by Viscount De L’Isle, meaning the

⁴ The wound to which Pamphilia refers was inflicted when Cupid shot Venus with an arrow, which increased her love for the god Mars. Venus’s love was unrequited, like Pamphilia’s for Amphilanthus. Wroth also refers to this in the opening of *Love’s Victory*.

manuscript has most likely stayed with the Sidney family since composition. The other manuscript is at the Huntington Library and is incomplete. Paul Salzman, editor of *Early Modern Women's Writing*, which includes an edited version of the Huntington manuscript, suggests that Wroth "consciously" left the play unfinished, following the example set by her uncle Sidney's *Arcadia* and her own *Urania* (84). By doing this, Wroth renders the play much more radical, subverting the conventions of tragicomedy: a tragedy ends in death, a comedy ends in marriage, and the Huntington *Love's Victory* ends in neither, meaning that it is indebted to both but enslaved to neither. The play is pastoral in mode and tragicomic in genre, making it inherently controversial in the period. Wroth's uncle Philip Sidney, felt that adding "comic scenes in tragedy" created a "mongrel" (Lewalski 92). However, by the 1620's it had become the most popular stage genre, and the mode appealed Wroth. The exact nature of the pastoral was also imbued with controversy, as there was a dispute about the appropriate tone and subject matter. Samuel Daniel, for instance, thought that pastoral should deal with the soft and tender, whereas Ben Jonson thought that the mode required comedy (Huntington Manuscript 170). Wroth's engagement with the pastoral in *Love's Victory* is more in line with Jonson's approach, incorporating riddles, jokes, and a generally lighthearted tone.

Love's Victory follows Venus and Cupid planning to strike a group of shepherds with love to make them remember the love goddess.⁵ Revolving around the romantic exploits of four couples, the play explores various kinds of love, and the problems that come with them. The play's main characters are Philisses and Musella who are constant, virtuous, and dedicated to each other. Their difficulties stem from miscommunication and from external threats, mostly

⁵ The trope of Venus and Cupid presiding over the hearts of mortals evokes Petrarch's *Triumph of Love*, which is one of Wroth's most influential literary sources (Cerasano and Wynne-Davies 93).

from the play's villain, Arcas, who delights in seeing true love fail. Lissius and Simeana, the play's second couple, represent a more volatile, distrustful iteration of love. Lissius scorns love and believes that he is immune to its effects but soon finds himself in love with Simeana; Simeana, in turn, must contend with intense feelings of jealousy. The third couple, the Forester and Silvesta, face complications from Silvesta's choice to follow the chaste goddess Diana after Philisses rejects her. The play's fourth and final couple, Rustic and Dalina, represent lust and earthly pleasures, and provide the comic counterpoint to the play's other couples. The four pairs illustrate four different types of love and how each type of lover responds to his/her respective dilemma.

The play opens with Venus and Cupid in the goddess's temple discussing the group of shepherds who have forgotten her. Just as she does in the first sonnet in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, Venus sends Cupid down to manipulate the mortals' desires. Much like the sonnet sequence, *Love's Victory* invokes a language of obligation and debt in connection with love. Venus tells Cupid, "Thou shall discern their hearts, and make them know / That humble homage unto thee they owe" (Wroth 11-12). Cupid will make the group of shepherds and shepherdesses fall in love, and when they do, they will realize that they are indebted to Cupid for his services. To pay this debt, they must honor his mother Venus by enduring a period of suffering for love. If, however, the investment of suffering does not yield the appropriate return of love, the mortals turn to the goddess and demand compensation, positioning her as a debtor. In the last act of the play, most of which is absent from the Huntington manuscript, Musella's mother tells her that she must marry Rustic instead of Philisses because it is in her father's will. The Huntington *Love's Victory* ends here, with an ambiguous reversal of debtor and creditor that is nevertheless challenging in its lack of resolution.

The Pembroke text proceeds, however, with a much more definitive conclusion in which the characters pay their debt to Venus and the debtor-creditor balance is restored. Unknown to Musella, Arcas tells her mother that she pursued Philisses instead of him, which causes her mother to force Musella's marriage to Rustic. Musella, distraught, tells Simeana:

Neglected for base gain, and all worth lost
For riches? Then 'tis time for good to die,
When wealth must wed us all to misery. (5.1.1-6)

These lines suggest that wealth weds everyone to misery, which in this case refers to her impending marriage, but also refers to the debt of love. The line says that marrying for wealth leads to misery, and further to debt, which evokes Lady Mary's own arranged marriage to Sir Robert Wroth.⁶ When Musella and Philisses discuss the forced marriage and consider their options, they raise questions about debt, obligation, and loyalty:

Philisses: But will you marry? Or show love to me?
Or her obey, and make me wretched be?

Musella: Alas, Philisses, will you this doubt make?
I would my life, to pleasure you, forsake;
Hath not my firmness hitherto made known
My faith and love? Which yet should more be
shown

If I might govern but my mother's will.

⁶ Much of the criticism of *Love's Victory* treats Rustic as an allusion to Robert Wroth, citing the nature of the arranged marriage and the pun on Wroth and worth. Margret Hannay, a heavily influential biographer and critic of Mary Wroth, disagrees, saying that "she had nothing to gain from mocking her dead husband" in a public fashion and doing so would ridicule not only him but her "own social position as widow" (214).

Yet this last question even my heart doth kill. (5.1.47-54)

Here, the two lovers demonstrate how debt governs the reality of love. Philisses places pressure on Musella to decide between marrying Rustic or loving him. He then asks her if she will obey her mother and make him “wretched”, which, in his case, means suicidal. Using her love as currency, Musella must decide whom she wants to pay, and to whom she is willing to be in debt. She must weigh how much her mother has done for her against what Philisses has done and will do for her, deciding whether she will honor the customs and traditions that brought about her creation by submitting to her father’s will or reimburse the love offered by her dedicated partner. She must decide if she is obligated to her parents, to her lover, to her feelings, or to some combination of these. Later in the conversation, Musella admits that she consented to the arranged marriage to Rustic out of despair. This prompts Philisses to tally the services he has performed for Musella and provide an estimate of what she owes him in return:

I hear and see my end. O, Love unjust
And careless of my heart put in your trust,
Ungrateful and forgetful of the good
From me received, by whom thy fame had
stood,
Thy honor been maintained, thy name adored
Which by all others with disgrace was stored
Is this the great reward I shall receive?
For all my service? Will you thus deceive
My hopes and joys? (5.1.75-83)

Philisses believes he did what was required to secure Musella's love; she now owes him for his "service." He accuses her of being both ungrateful for and forgetful of the acts he has performed, including praising her name and defending her honor when others scorned her. Philisses, through these quantifiable demonstrations of love, has placed Musella in his debt, whether or not she consented to his acts. For Philisses, love is a service for which payment is due, similar to the homage Venus demands from the shepherds.

In his final demonstration of love for Musella, Philisses pledges his life to her, telling her, "Ask my poor life, all else long since I gave" (Wroth 5.1.85). The couple decides that the only way to satisfy their love-debt is to end their lives. Here, the play draws from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in which the lovers decide to commit suicide to avoid being separated by an unwanted marriage. Musella and Philisses go to Venus's temple to sacrifice themselves to the goddess of love. They stand before the altar and declare:

Venus and great Cupid, hear,
Take our sacrifices, clear!
Where not rites we only give,
But our hearts wherein you live;
Those true relics of firm love
On your altar still to move;
Where none such, none so sincere,
To your triumph light did bear. (5.4.1-10)

Here, the two lovers offer themselves and their hearts as payment to Venus for the love she instilled in them. Before they stab each other with a dagger, their friend Silvesta arrives and offers them a "sweet potion" that will kill them so that they may embrace each other and die

peacefully (Wroth 5.4.61-62). They accept Silvesta's potion and die together on Venus's altar.

When the other shepherds hear of their deaths, they gather around and reflect upon what has happened, much like the families in *Romeo and Juliet*. Simeana blames Musella's mother for placing her daughter under an obligation she could not meet, explaining, "Musella, finding that her given consent / Proved thus her hell, her soul did then lament. Yet could not gain release, but that she must / Look as her mother liked" (5.5.68-70). Lissius confronts Musella's mother, asking, "Can you endure this change, and hear us say / Your forced marriage brought her to her funeral day?" (5.5.118-120). While this echoes Mary Wroth's own arranged marriage, it should be noted that Jacobeans were generally fascinated with "tales of forced marriage, whether true or feigned" (Hannay 215). Forced marriage places children under an obligation that holds the potential for great misery, and this obligation might lead not to prosperity as intended but to greater obligations, such as insurmountable debt in Mary Wroth's case.

For providing the lovers with the fatal poison, Silvesta is sentenced to death, which she willingly faces because she "...came in and hindered that sharp blow, / though, not their wills, more honor I did owe / To that in love alone, unhappy pair, / And brought their ends more quiet and more fair" (Wroth 5.4.86-90). For Silvesta, the love between Philisses and Musella obliges her to intervene, drawing her into the cycle of debt created by the forced marriage. Her awareness of the love shared by the "unhappy pair" prompts her to pay the debt of "honor [she] did owe" to love and friendship. When Silvesta hands the young couple the potion, Philisses tells her, "Friendship, what greater blessing, than thou art, / Can once descend into a mortal heart" (5.3.63-64). Just as Philisses and Musella must pay their debt to love with their deaths, so must Silvesta pay her debt to friendship by risking her life.

Later, as Silvesta is about to be burnt at the stake for supplying the potion, Venus and Cupid descend and wake the two lovers. Venus's priest reveal that she orchestrated the event: "Venus hath caused this wonder for her glory, / And the triumph of Love's Victory" (5.7.65-66). Although the lovers have consumed a deadly potion, their death is not final. Venus accepts their offering and rewards them with resurrection. Seeing that Philisses and Musella were prepared to give their lives for her and for love, Venus says that she "could not suffer your dear hearts to blood" and that she used Silvesta as an "instrument" to "kill, and save her friends" (5.7.71-72). Everyone is relieved at the turn of events, and Musella and Philisses acknowledge their new debt to Silvesta for her role Venus's plan. Musella says, "Silvesta, next, to you our lives are bound, / For in you only was true friendship found," while Philisses proclaims, "And chaste Silvesta, take my life when I / Ungrateful prove to your worth binding tie" (5.7.86-92). This new bond is a life debt that the couple now owes Silvesta for her sacrifices. With the couple's offering, Venus is satisfied and leaves the mortals to their own devices. Thus, the relationship ends when both parties have paid their debts. Once again, Wroth's language recalls her own experiences with debt. Philisses's command to Silvesta to "take my life when I / Ungrateful prove to your worth binding tie" evokes Wroth's very similar promise to Sir Edward Conway that "I was soe much bound unto you for your favor when I prove to you ungratefull I will leave living" (Wroth, qtd. Roberts 243). For both Wroth and Philisses, debt serves as a "binding tie" that not only joins debtor and creditor, but has the power to sustain personal relationships, social structures, and even life itself.

Lady Mary Wroth's treatment of the interconnectedness of love and debt in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* and *Love's Victory* illuminate not only the influence of her life on her writing but the socioeconomic realities of early modern relationships, community structures, and culture,

more generally. Plagued by debt in various forms throughout her childhood, marriage, and widowhood, Wroth negotiated her place in her family, her marriage, the court, and society through both her experiences with reflections on social and financial obligation. In both her life and her literature, love and debt are inextricably linked. They produce and are produced by each other in a cycle that both challenges and reinforces interpersonal relationships, creating the complex and heavily stratified communities that characterize early modern culture.

CHAPTER 3

‘I OWE THE MOST IN MONEY AND IN LOVE’: DEBT, FRIENDSHIP, AND THE IMPERATIVE OF THE OUTSIDER IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

“That he hath a neighborly charity in him, for borrowed he
a box of the ear of the Englishman, and swore he would
pay him again when he was able. I think the Frenchman
became his surety, and sealed under for another.”

1.2.79-83⁷

"Forgive our debts, as we forgive our debtors"

Matthew 6:12

“It was responsible and honorable to pay back one’s debts,
whether one dealt in pounds sterling or pounds of flesh.”

-Linda Woodbridge

In the first epigraph above, Portia describes a hapless Scottish Lord seeking to win the casket challenge to gain her hand in marriage. Her description exemplifies the overarching themes of debt, friendship, and otherness in *The Merchant of Venice* in a humorous, even satirical tone. Portia attributes a “neighborly charity,” or sense of friendship, to the Scotsman,

⁷ All References to *Merchant* come from William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* in *The Riverside Shakespeare* 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996).

citing his comical exchange with the English and French suitors. The Scottish Lord borrows “a box of ear,” or slap in the face, from the Englishman and swears to re-pay it “when he [is] able.” The French suitor, in turn, offers to serve as his “surety,” or guarantor, seizing the opportunity to slap the Englishman for himself should the Scotsman find himself unable to repay the debt. This violent but comical transaction of slaps is anything but cursory; it anticipates the shocking flesh debt Bassanio’s guarantor Antonio will owe Shylock later in the play, setting the stage for a gruesome system of social, political, and physical exchange.

This chapter argues that Bassanio’s request for a large loan from Antonio strains their friendship to the point that they need the bond of an outsider, Shylock, to preserve their relationship because the debt becomes so great that it creates a sustained inequality between them. This chapter will first explore the economy of credit that existed in the early modern period whereby citizens relied on informal loans and community assistance. It will then examine how the Jewish merchant community integrated itself into this economic structure, but not into Venetian society more generally, by practicing a form of proto-capitalism that strengthened the Venetian economy. Despite being ostracized and mistrusted as outsiders, the Jewish population played a vital role in providing credit and debt bonds that allowed businesses to flourish in Venice. After illustrating the importance of the part played by the Jewish community, this chapter will examine how these principles are at work in *The Merchant of Venice*, showing how Shylock enables the friendship between Antonio and Bassanio to survive social and financial strife, much like the larger Jewish population allowed the Venetian economy to flourish. However, Shylock’s longstanding hatred of Antonio causes him to seek retaliation through the debt and transforms Antonio and Bassanio’s friendship-based loan into a cruel commercial transaction that endangers Antonio’s life. In the end, the chapter will prove that the friendship

can only be saved through the intervention of a disinterested third party: Portia disguised as Balthazar.

Economies of Credit and Debt

The Merchant of Venice stages the complex network of debt that arises from financially bereft Bassanio's desire to court the rich heiress Portia despite his limited means. In order to undertake the journey, he turns to his friend Antonio, to whom he already owes many debts, to borrow the three thousand ducats he needs to make the trip and represent himself as a member of the aristocracy to the Portia. Antonio is unable to provide the loan, but out of friendship, he agrees to guarantee a bond if Bassanio can locate a lender. Bassanio finds such a lender in Antonio's sworn enemy, Shylock, a Jewish moneylender. Shylock, in turn, borrows the money from Tubal, another Jewish merchant, to lend it to Bassanio with Antonio as a guarantor, thus inaugurating the complex network of debt and exchange among both friends and outsiders that pervades the play.

This system of "early modern credit relations" entraps Antonio insofar as he plays the role of creditor, guarantor, and friend to Bassanio not merely for this transaction, but for a host of previous loans as well (Leinwand 16). Beyond his charitable loans to Bassanio, Antonio is ensnared by his own debt to several other creditors who worry about his ability to repay them when his investments overseas collapse. Thus, Bassanio is in debt to Antonio, who is, in turn, in debt to his creditors. At the same time, Bassanio borrows from Shylock, who has borrowed from Tubal. The consequences of each transaction, then, extend beyond how each debtor and creditor is affected individually, reverberating throughout a complex network of social and financial

indebtedness and creating a space for exploring commercial and interpersonal relationships in the early modern period.

The early modern economy relied on a large, complex system of credit that involved everyone in a given community (*Economy* 95). Since coinage had yet to become the standard means of exchange, almost everyone relied on honor and trust. Once one entered into an agreement, usually sealed with a handshake, one's honor depended on the ability to pay back the lenders. Thus, a link formed between credit and honor, and the terms became synonymous. In the Renaissance, credit referred to "a reputation for honesty and integrity", and most "money was literally trust" (Graeber 328). In this network of credit, one's reputation and honor were the main considerations for a creditor considering providing a loan (328). Cash, at this time, was largely non-existent, and most communities relied on tabs and on a series of reciprocal actions based primarily on promises, which, in turn, rendered everyone both a creditor and debtor (327). During this time, neighbors assumed "they ought to be constantly slightly in debt to each other" (328). Above all, the "love and amity" of friends constituted the credit economy (329). Antonio represents this system in *The Merchant of Venice* because for him "credit relations signify not solvency but friendship" (Leinwand 17). Thus, friendship, credit, and honor constituted a substantial portion of the early modern economy, but as the debts grew larger and more outsiders entered the system, defaulters were increasingly punished by the legal system.

This implies that the credit economy, which had been an informal reliance on friendship and community, was shifting towards a codified legal system of suits and bonds (Engle 20). The interconnected and at times confusing web of debt in *The Merchant of Venice* reflects the transforming state of the economy in early modern Europe. Craig Muldrew explains:

With limited amounts of gold and silver in circulation, this economic expansion was based on the increasing use of credit, much of which was informal...because most credit relations were interpersonal and emotive, this led to their becoming problematic. As chains of credit grew much longer and more complex in a relatively short time, defaults became more common...The complexity of these chains of literally hundreds of thousands of intertwined and interconnected credit relationships also led to an explosion of disputes...(3)

In this early modern economic system, relationships among friends and neighbors took precedence over credit and bookkeeping. Outsiders represented the only exception to this rule because they had not established the requisite mutual investment of trust with the rest of the community.

While the Christian and Jewish communities in *The Merchant of Venice* distrust each other, the early modern Venetian economy relies on their commercial transactions; however, most of the Christian community fails to admit its dependence on the Jewish population. This refusal to acknowledge the contributions of the Jewish outsiders to the larger Venetian economy manifests itself in expressions of anger toward and suspicion of Jews and other marginal groups (Novy 65). This is evident in Antonio's intense and largely inexplicable resentment towards Shylock who becomes "symbolic of absolute otherness – alien, mysterious, uncivilized, [and] unredeemed" (Novy 66). Shylock is a merchant who extends credit with interest – a practice upon which the early modern Venetian economy depends for the growth of its proto-capitalist marketplace, however much resentment this incurs from Venetian Christians in *The Merchant of Venice* (Lim 355). Throughout the play, Shylock is described as less than human, not simply because of his marginalized Jewish faith, but because of his undesirable, yet economically

necessary, mercantile practices. Further, he extracts the full debt with interest from the defaulter's guarantor in the spirit of revenge, which was condemned in the early modern period as un-Christian (Woodbridge 39). The Christian community believed that "no true brother" or "true believer" (Harris 54) could practice usury. This belief is illustrated in Deuteronomy 23:20, which states, "Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury; but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury" (*King James Bible*, Deut. 23.20). According to Deuteronomy, Shylock's ability to participate in usury is predicated upon exclusive dealings with strangers. Thus, he is continually marked as an outsider in his dealings with Christians and despite his extensive interactions with the Christian community, he is never fully integrated into mainstream Venetian society.

However, the rising demand in Venice for credit to secure investments necessitated a loophole so that the Jewish population could offer these loans where Christians could not. To do this, early modern Venetian scholars found an "ingenious, if xenophobic loophole" in the same passage in Deuteronomy: Jews viewed gentiles as "others" and "outsiders" rather than as "brothers"; therefore, they were able to charge interest on loans (Harris 54). While many Christians did practice usury, most people turned a blind eye to these transactions and instead maintained "the moral high ground by scapegoating the fictive Jew" (Langis 18). When England expelled the Jews in 1290, the Jewish communities found new homes across Europe. They landed in various "European trading capitals" such as Venice that granted them "denizenship rights of limited residency and restricted trade privileges" in exchange for their "mercantile services" (Kitch 132). These capitals hoped that the Jewish communities would boost their economies by increasing their importing and exporting connections. These "merchant-usurers" helped create "new forms of banking" and consolidated "an emergent form of capitalism" (Lim

356). In the same way that the early modern economy depended on the mercantile practices of the Jewish outsiders, Antonio and Bassanio's friendship relies on Shylock's usury.

The uncertainty and confusion in the increasingly complex world of credit led to the creation of the debt bond, which becomes instrumental for Shylock in his agreement with Antonio. The word "bond" appears multiple times throughout the play and signifies several things at once. The bond represents both the "the friendship between Antonio and Bassanio" and the "legal contractual agreement entered into between Shylock and Antonio" (Lim 374). With the onset of proto-capitalism, the bond became the most secure way to ensure payment from a debtor. The bond was only valid, however, when applied to loans taken out without interest – a clause that Shylock later agrees to in exchange for a chance at revenge (Bailey 53). The bond, which was written by a scrivener and sealed by two witnesses, signified that a great amount of money was being lent and that there was often a severe punishment involved if the payment was not returned (*Economy* 109). In *The Merchant of Venice*, defaulting on such a bond has not only financial, but social, political, and even physical consequences.

Due to an increasing amount of defaulters, lenders began to use bonds as an illicit money-making strategy. Moneylenders only profited when borrowers failed to pay back their loans (Bailey 6). The bond differed from loans of usury because the bond lender did not "charge for the use of his money" (i.e.: interest); instead, the lender built a clause into the contract that compensated for the loss, should the borrower default (6). In these contracts, two sums were included: the principal and the penal. If the borrower paid the loan back on time, he or she only owed the principal. If he or she failed to pay the principal or the penal sum of the bond, however, the lender "could lay claim to the debtor's body" (6). This claim to the debtor's body struck terror into the imaginations of seventeenth-century citizens (34). Craig Muldrew describes the debt

bond as the “most important form of indebtedness after sales and service credit – certainly much more important than moneylending” with interest (109). If the borrower failed to pay, the lender could take action against his or her goods and property. Most often, however, the creditor made claims on the debtor's body (Bailey 53). Shakespeare stages debt bonds in their most macabre form, representing the fear surrounding the emerging economic trend wherein one's body acts as a form of currency or surety.

Friendship and Debt

The Merchant of Venice explores the ramifications of running up substantial debts between friends and borrowing from enemies. The play stages the transference of debt from Bassanio to Antonio, which enables their friendship to continue and creates a new relationship between Bassanio and Portia. Bassanio, already deeply in debt to Antonio, asks for a large loan that will free him from his debts to others and secure his future, but this request comes at a time when Antonio's investments, fortunes, and ships are at sea. Since he does not possess the funds Bassanio needs immediately, he tells Bassanio that he will guarantee a loan if Bassanio can find a lender. This is more than a friendly gesture, however; Antonio's offer means that he would have to face the consequences if Bassanio defaults on the loan. Bassanio finds Shylock, who is marginalized by his dual status as Antonio's enemy and a Jewish moneylender. Further, Shylock exists outside of Antonio and Bassanio's friendship, in the same way the Jewish community exists outside of Venetian society. Nevertheless, both Shylock's loan and the mercantile practices of the Jewish moneylending community are integral to the survival of Venetian society and the relationships sustained therein. If Antonio directly loans the money to Bassanio, and Antonio's fortunes are destroyed, this would cause irreparable damage to their friendship

because Bassanio would be personally responsible for compromising Antonio's livelihood. Therefore, the debt relationship must be transferred to an outsider (i.e.: Shylock) so that the friendship can remain intact.

In the first scene of the play, Antonio inquires about Bassanio's secret pilgrimage to see a "lady" that Bassanio "promis'd" to tell him about (1.1.119-121). When Bassanio answers, he begins with a description, not of his journey, but of his financial ruin. He laments the poverty he has brought upon himself through excessive spending, saying, "How much I have disabled mine estate, / By something showing a more swelling port / Than my faint means would grant continuance" (1.1.123-125). Rather than addressing Antonio's question, he draws attention to his own concerns, namely his lack of funds. He goes on to say:

Nor do I now make moan to be abridged
From such a noble rate, but my chief care
Is to come fairly off from the great debts
Wherein my time something too prodigal
Hath left me gaged. (1.1.126-130)

Bassanio is not interested in regaining his former elite financial status; he is not protesting being "abridged" from his "noble" lifestyle (1.1.127-127). Rather, his primary goal is "to come fairly off from the great debts" in which he is currently entangled (1.1.128). The "prodigal" time to which Bassanio refers represents his continued debt to Antonio and others, accrued through excess borrowing and spending over a long period. His speech indicates that this present request is not the first time Bassanio has asked his friend for a loan without any realistic hope of repaying it. For Bassanio, money takes precedence over social obligation and reciprocation. If Antonio were to grant him the large loan for which he is about to ask, he would enable Bassanio

to continue his pattern of borrowing and spending but not repaying, allowing Bassanio to fall deeper into debt. Additionally, if Antonio were to supply the loan directly, and Bassanio paid it back either too slowly or not at all, the prolonged unevenness of the exchange would bankrupt Antonio and destroy his friendship with Bassanio.

Bassanio goes on to admit that Antonio is his greatest creditor:

...To you Antonio

I owe the most in money and in love,

And from your love I have a warranty

To unburthen all my plots and purposes,

How to get clear of all the debts I owe. (1.1.130-134)

Keeping with the priorities he established in answering first with his financial troubles rather than addressing Antonio's question about love, Bassanio states that he owes Antonio "the most in money" first and "in love" second. Bassanio obligates Antonio by appealing to the nature of their friendship. When he says "from your love I have a warranty," he means that he has the "permission of a superior which frees the doer from the act of blame or legal responsibility" (OED 7a). Here, the roles of friend and creditor intermingle, which was typical during the early modern period since most transactions used credit instead of money ("Debt, Credit" 10). Bassanio's debt to Antonio is "not merely financial, but emotional as well" (Engle 24). He plans to use his friendship to Antonio as a means to escape the debt he has incurred, transferring the benefits of an interpersonal exchange to the commercial realm.

Antonio agrees to help Bassanio, which is unusual considering that Bassanio's large debts represent a substantial liability. Thus, Antonio's offer of assistance is made solely for the sake of their relationship rather than for any hope of economic gain. Antonio responds to Bassanio's

request with an assurance of continued friendship, extending both his social and his financial support as long as Bassanio remains "...as you still do, / Within the eye of honor" (1.1.136-137). Here, Antonio is bestowing upon his friend a social credit with the mention of honor. This condition of honor underlies most debt exchanges in the early modern period. David Graeber notes that "Honor is the same as credit; it's one's ability to keep one's promises, but also, in the case of a wrong to 'get even'" (Graeber 193). In the aforementioned scene, Antonio agrees to help Bassanio with his debt if he remains a man of honor who will keep his promises – a strange stipulation considering that Bassanio has already defaulted on Antonio's prior loans in favor of extravagant spending. However, as Graeber notes, honor can also refer to the opportunity to exact revenge when one is wronged. This shadow side of honor becomes critical during the trial scene later in the play when Antonio fails to repay Shylock. As Lim writes, "by extending kindness and generosity in the name of friendship, Antonio comes uncomfortably close to losing his life" (Lim 374). Antonio states that on this condition of honor, "My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions" (1.1.138-139). Thus, Antonio fulfills the obligations of friendship by playing "the role of one who endures and gives all for love of his friend" (Novy 68), even if that friend has repeatedly proven himself unworthy in the past.

Antonio's blessing prompts Bassanio to give an example of a youth who recklessly shoots an arrow, loses it, shoots another arrow the same way and follows the trajectory to find both, thus recovering all of his losses (1.1.140-144). He employs this example to provide Antonio with some idea of his plan to repay him:

I owe you much, and like a willful youth
That which I owe is lost, but if you please
To shoot another arrow that self way

Which you did shoot the first, I do not doubt
As I will watch the aim, or to find both,
Or bring you the latter hazard back again,
And thankfully rest debtor for the first. (1.1.145-151)

Bassanio requires another loan to help repay the first loan and employs the metaphor of a child thoughtlessly losing what he owes Antonio, who has already promised to help in any way he can. Here, Bassanio, whether knowingly or unknowingly, admits a profound inequality in their relationship beyond the normal creditor/debtor binary. In the aforementioned metaphor, Bassanio compares himself to a child, which puts Antonio in the superior position of the adult or father figure. A child is not legally responsible for his or her debts, and is, therefore, an unequal party in the exchange. A debtor who cannot pay back a loan or “cannot do what it takes to restore” himself to “equality” often feels that there is “something obviously wrong” with him (Graber 121). The debt between them creates inequality, and Bassanio must rectify this difference to feel noble again. As it stands, he sees himself as an errant child who begs his father’s indulgence while he slouches toward maturity.

Antonio sees through the metaphor and urges Bassanio to get to the point: “You know me well, and herein spend but time / To wind about my love with circumstance” (1.1.153-154). Once again, Bassanio demonstrates his lack of time management skills and social ineptitude. Antonio is insulted by Bassanio’s childish metaphor and circumlocution; he urges Bassanio to “speak plainly” (1.1.160), abandoning pretense and adopting the behaviors expected of a friend. Bassanio then shares his plan to win Portia, a wealthy heiress who is besieged with suitors. Bassanio is confident that if he possesses the “means / to hold a rival place with one of them”, he will “questionless be fortunate” (1.1.173-176) in his pursuit. Antonio responds that Bassanio

knows that all his “fortunes are at sea” and that he does not have “money, nor commodity” to raise the sum Bassanio requires (1.1.177-178). Although Bassanio is aware of Antonio’s precarious financial situation, he presses him for support, demonstrating both his selfishness in their friendship and his desire to recover his status as Antonio’s socioeconomic equal. Because Antonio cannot offer concrete financial support, he donates his reputation instead, telling Bassanio to go see “what [his] credit can in Venice do” (1.1.179). Antonio concludes their discussion by expressing his concern about the impending financial strain whereby his credit will be “racked even to the uttermost” (1.1.181). Despite his anxiety about his finances, Antonio does not question his ability or willingness to support Bassanio, reassuring him, “I no question make / To have [money] of my trust, or for my sake” (1.1.184-185). Antonio’s selfless endeavors to help Bassanio not only demonstrate his commitment to the friendship but create another imbalance in the relationship, whereby Bassanio is cast into insurmountable social debt. Because Antonio’s sacrifices supersede anything Bassanio has done or will be able to do for him, they represent yet another debt Bassanio will not be able to repay. Thus, the opening scene of *Merchant* reveals the crippling size of Bassanio’s debt and demonstrates that he “can raise no money except from loving and forbearing friends” (Engle 26). In order for their friendship to sustain this tremendous risk of Antonio’s honor and credit, the pair must turn to an outsider who will lend the money needed to fund Bassanio’s quest. This outsider is Shylock.

At the start of Act 1, Scene 3, Bassanio asks Shylock to provide the required loan of three thousand ducats, and Antonio offers to be his guarantor should he default. It is in this scene that the nature of debt and relationships shifts. Because Antonio has agreed to guarantee Bassanio’s debt to Shylock, the financial burden shifts from Bassanio to Antonio; if the loan cannot be repaid, it will be Antonio, not Bassanio, who will be penalized. This is an important transition

because the relationship of debt now exists primarily between Antonio and Shylock, rather than Antonio and Bassanio. Shylock's mediation alleviates the financial tension between the two friends, restoring a sense of equality to their relationship by turning them both into debtors. Bassanio is quick to point out that "Antonio shall be bound", or contractually obligated, to repay the loan (1.3.4). Shylock considers Antonio's credit and judges him to be a "good man", meaning that he possesses the wealth to repay the loan in the three-month period established in their contract (1.3.12). However, he notes that all of Antonio's investments are currently spread across different oceans on a variety of ships – a situation that renders his financial status tenuous. Shylock recognizes this as an opportunity to exact revenge on Antonio for his violent condemnation in Act 1, Scene 3. Once Shylock agrees, he wishes to speak to Antonio, and Bassanio invites him to supper. Shylock replies:

Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which our prophet the Nazarite
conjured the devil into. I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, and so
following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you,
nor pray with you. (1.3.33-38)

In his refusal to join Bassanio and Antonio for dinner, Shylock confirms himself as an outsider; by extension, he establishes that his relationship with Bassanio and Antonio is not interpersonal but commercial. Dining, drinking, and praying together are activities in which members of a close-knit community engage. These activities strengthen communal ties and encourage trust among participants. Shylock is neither willing nor able to participate in these rituals and is, therefore, excluded from the community with which he is doing business. His lack of personal ties to the Venetian Christian community does not, however, prevent him from loaning Bassanio the three thousand ducats. Thus, his loan subverts the traditional notion of credit and friendship

that existed in the early modern period, and represents the more impersonal characteristics of the burgeoning proto-capitalist marketplace.

Once Antonio arrives, Shylock mentions in an aside his true intentions in providing the loan. It is his hope that Antonio will be unable to repay the three thousand ducats. This default would allow Shylock to exact revenge upon Antonio for the merchant's cruel treatment of him and the Jewish community. This evokes Graeber's formulation of honor and debt, wherein one can "get even" to avenge himself of a debtor's wrongdoing. In this sense, Shylock feels that Antonio owes him, both financially and socially. In addition to the three thousand ducats, Antonio owes Shylock a debt of honor. Shylock's statement that he hates Antonio because "he is a Christian" (1.3.42) amounts to little more than early modern anti-Semitic caricature, but his objection to Antonio's specific mercantile practices establishes him as a complex and multifaceted if somewhat opaque character. Shylock says of Antonio that "he lends out money gratis, and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice" (1.3.44-45). Shylock's complaint is that Antonio's interest-free loans steal customers from and reflect poorly on the economically disenfranchised Jewish community, which depends on usury, or interest-based loans, as one of the few commercial enterprises available to it. Shylock states that Antonio "hates our sacred nation" and "rails" against his business, meaning that Antonio is actively sabotaging Shylock's commercial ventures (1.3.48-51). Shylock refers to his feelings towards Antonio as an "ancient grudge", indicating that he has harbored his resentment for a significant amount of time. Now, Shylock is in a position of power within the hierarchy because Antonio has become the debtor. In this superior position, Shylock stands to gain by exacting revenge if Antonio defaults, which is likely considering the precarious nature of his sea-bound investments. Further unlinking friendship and credit, Shylock introduces the idea of economic retribution through debt. He

transforms Antonio and Bassanio's friendship-based debt into a ruthless commercial exchange that exploits rather than enhances interpersonal relationships. This demonstrates the danger of borrowing from outside a trusted community of socially and emotionally linked participants. However, when the debt between friends becomes so great that it creates a sustained inequality and threatens the integrity of the friendship, this outside intervention becomes absolutely necessary. Thus, Shylock's loan paradoxically enables Antonio and Bassanio's friendship to survive the financial tension it has undergone.

Later in the conversation, after discussing issues of usury and scripture, Shylock takes note of the risks Antonio's ventures pose and debates whether he should give him the loan. Antonio responds by explaining the difference between loans and debts between friends and strangers. Shylock, in turn, enumerates all the offences Antonio committed against him:

In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneies and my usances
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug
(For suff'rance is the badge of all our tribe).
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spet upon my Jewish gabardine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.

Well then, it now appears you need my help. (1.3.107-114)

In cataloguing the myriad wrongs committed against him, Shylock is taking stock of the social debts Antonio owes him, in order to decide whether or not he should provide the loan. He is also evaluating the advantages he will gain by placing Antonio in his debt. He continues by asking Antonio a pointed question:

Fair sir, you spet on me Wednesday last,
You spurn'd me such a day, another time
You call'd me a dog; and for these courtesies
I'll lend you thus much moneys? (1.3.126-129)

Shylock's question highlights the hypocrisy of Antonio's request. He formulates Antonio's insults as a kind of currency of wrongdoing whereby Antonio has placed himself in significant social debt. If Shylock grants his request, then Antonio should expect the stakes to be high; he should also be grateful to Shylock for overlooking his misdeeds and crediting him with a good character where he so clearly falls short. In providing the loan, Shylock seeks compensation for the "mental anguish" Antonio's treatment has caused him (Woodbridge 37). Antonio responds by explaining how debt differs between friends and between enemies:

I am as like to call thee so again
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.
If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends, for when did friendship take
A breed for barren metal of his friend?
But lend it rather to thine enemy,
Who if he break thou mayst with better face

\ Exact the penalty. (1.3.130-137)

Antonio makes it clear that he has no desire to establish a friendship with Shylock. For Antonio, the terms of Shylock's loan (i.e.: usury) prevent the exchange from entering the realm of friendship. A friend, Antonio remarks, would never "take a breed for barren metal," meaning that he or she would never charge interest when lending money to a friend. An enemy, conversely,

would not only charge interest but “exact the penalty” if the debtor defaulted. A friend allows extensions and helps his friend achieve the equality of position again with as little harm as possible. An enemy punishes the defaulter to the full extent and has no interest in restoring balance.

Antonio “violently rejects” the notion of “kinship” with Shylock, even to the point of rejecting him as a “fellow human being” (Engle 31). Despite Antonio’s vigorous campaign against Shylock and usury, the growing marketplace of Renaissance Europe necessitated the practice of interest-based loans. Antonio’s objections represent the dogmatic xenophobia of a dramatic character rather than the reality of the early modern Venetian economy. Just as Bassanio and Antonio need the assistance of Shylock to preserve their friendship, so does the proto-capitalist European marketplace require the intervention of marginalized communities to ensure the survival of mainstream society.

In a surprising response to Antonio’s continued insults, Shylock says, “I would be friends with you, and have your love / Forget the shames that you have stained me with” – quite literally Antonio’s spit upon Shylock’s religious garments – and “supply your present wants” with no usury (1.3.138-141). This seems like a desire to enter into the kind of friendly debt shared between Antonio and Bassanio, indicating that Shylock seeks to forfeit his status as an outsider and integrate into the larger Venetian community where he can conduct business based on trust and honor. However, it becomes clear that Shylock has other intentions when he proposes a gruesome and extreme punishment for defaulting on the debt bond:

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 nominated for an equal pound

Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken

In which part of your body pleasesth me. (1.3.146-151)

If the loan and the penalty for defaulting on it seem disproportionate, one must take into account that Antonio's offenses exceed mere slander. Antonio has actively tried to ruin Shylock's business by destroying his honor, or credit in the marketplace, which would deprive him of his livelihood – and perhaps even personhood – in an economy that relied on credit and reputation (Woodbridge 37-38). Bassanio recognizes this as a debt too large to take on for friendship's sake: "You shall not seal such a bond for me, / I'll rather dwell in my necessity" (1.3.154-155). While Antonio is confident about his investments across the oceans, Bassanio remains concerned his friend is taking on a debt that cannot realistically be repaid. A debt, by definition, exists because it "*can* be paid, [and] equality *can* be restored", but if Antonio were to lose a pound of flesh, Bassanio would remain in debt to his friend for his sacrifice with no hope of repayment (Graeber 121).

For Shylock, the pound of flesh represents payment for Antonio's social debts of sabotage and slander, and while he knows that the pound of flesh serves no practical purpose, he feels that the payment is sufficient to equalize the relationship between the two men. When pressed by Salarino on the value of such a payment, Shylock says that "If it will feed nothing else, it will / feed my revenge" (3.1.53-54). Shylock then begins his famous commentary on the inequality between him and Antonio, which examines the debt between the two parties. Graeber notes that all debts are forms of inequality between two people who are "...potential equals, who *are* equals in those ways that are really important, and who are not currently in a state of equality – but for whom there is some way to set matters straight" (Graeber 120, his italics). Shylock

asserts that Antonio hates him because he is a Jew and goes on to explain that they are indeed potential equals in all the ways that are important:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs,
dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with
the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject
to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means,
warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer,
as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?
If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you
poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall
we not revenge? (3.1.59-67)

Shylock sees Jews and Gentiles as equal in all the “ways that are really important” (Graeber 120). He also considers revenge a way to restore the equality that has been lost through Antonio’s misdeeds. By demanding the merchant’s flesh as payment, Shylock is attempting to complete the debt exchange and recover the equality he believes he shares with Antonio, not by elevating himself but by debasing Antonio. In removing a pound of Antonio’s flesh, Shylock extracts a piece of his humanity, in the same way that Antonio had diminished Shylock’s humanity through his insults and cruel treatment. Thus, Shylock feels that his proposed revenge would make them equals. If honor is the same as credit, as Graeber claims, and to “get even” repays the debt of being dishonored, then this does indeed restore their state of equality.

Later in the play, news of Antonio’s wrecked vessels reaches Portia and Bassanio, who are celebrating their new engagement. Upon realizing that Antonio must forfeit a pound of flesh to Shylock, Bassanio confesses to Portia that without Antonio’s loan, his estate “was worse than

nothing” (3.2.260). He goes on to explain the nature of the debt into which Antonio has entered on his behalf, emphasizing the strength of their friendship:

I have engag’d myself to a dear friend,

Engag’d my friend to his dear enemy,

To feed my means. (3.2.261-263)

Bassanio began by placing himself in debt to Antonio, which in turn forced Antonio to place himself in debt to Shylock. This transfer of debt was necessary to ensure the survival of the friendship. When Bassanio inquires about his friend, he is informed that Shylock is doing everything in his power to persecute Antonio, and that “the Duke himself, and the magnificoes / Of greatest port have all persuaded with him / But none can drive him from the envious plea / Of forfeiture, of justice, and his bond” (3.2.280-283). Shylock’s daughter Jessica, who has escaped from his household, hears this and admits that she heard him say “that he would rather have Antonio’s flesh / Than twenty times the value of the sum / That he did owe him (3.2.286-288). Jessica’s statement confirms that, for Shylock, the debt is not financial but social. Money cannot repay the offenses Antonio has committed.

Not realizing the motivation for Shylock’s loan, Portia offers to overpay Shylock to cancel the debt “before a friend of [Antonio’s] description / Shall lose a hair through Bassanio’s fault” (3.2.301-302). She makes available her riches to help Antonio out of debt: “...You shall have gold / To pay the petty debt twenty times over” (3.2.306-307). To Portia, the debt is of “little importance”, indicating both her wealth and lack of understanding about what the debt signifies for all the involved parties. Though the debt may be of little financial “importance” to her, it is of great symbolic significance to Shylock, for whom it represents much-desired revenge, and to Antonio and Bassanio, for whom it constitutes a substantial challenge to

friendship. Portia's description of the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio evokes Montaigne's essay "On Friendship" which defines friendship as the condition in which "... souls do bear and equal yoke of love" (3.4.13). She asks Bassanio to read a letter from Antonio which states:

Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all miscarried
My creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low, my bond to
the Jew is forfeit, and since in paying it, it is impossible I
should live, all debts are cleared between you and I, if I might
but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your
pleasure. If your love do not persuade you to come, let not
my letter. (3.2.315-322)

The fortunes of Bassanio and Antonio are now reversed; Bassanio is engaged to a wealthy heiress whose fortune has secured his financial future, whereas Antonio has fallen from a "noble rate" in defaulting on his loan from Shylock. Instead of being in debt to a friend as Bassanio had been, however, Antonio is at the mercy of his greatest enemy.

Shylock becomes obsessed with retribution and intends to extract Antonio's debt literally from his body despite Antonio trying to reason with him. Antonio who spat on him and called him a dog now wishes to talk to him as an equal, but mere words will not repay the offenses inflicted upon Shylock. When Antonio tries to speak with him, Shylock responds: "I'll have my bond, speak not against my bond, / I have sworn an oath that I will have my bond" (3.3.4-5). Here, Shylock adheres dogmatically to the code of honor upon which credit systems are based. He has kept his word, whereas Antonio has failed to. Antonio surmises that the reason Shylock hates him is because he "delivered from his forfeitures / Many that have at times made moan to

[him]” (3.3.22-23). When pressed about the possibility that the Duke may release Antonio regardless of Shylock’s charges, Antonio explains the rules governing debt bonds in early modern Venice:

The Duke cannot deny the course of the law.

For the community that strangers have

With us in Venice, if it be denied,

Will much impeach the justice of each state,

Since that the trade and profit of the city

Consisteth of all nations. (3.3.26-31)

The Venetian economy relies upon the Jewish community and their commercial connections, and the state must maintain the stability of the market by honoring Shylock’s suit. If the Duke is selective about which credit laws he enforces, then he compromises the integrity of the entire Venetian economy. The economic situation staged in *The Merchant of Venice* once again demonstrates a shift from the credit economy between friends to the credit economy between strangers in the emerging capitalist marketplace. As Kitch states, “Shakespeare’s Venice...depends in many ways on Jewish commerce” and “Shylock cannot be extracted without risking the lifeblood of the Venetian republic” (149). Here, the Venetian state is confronted with the “prospect of the letting Antonio die or of disregarding its own laws, laws that enable alien merchants to trade with confidence on the Venetian Rialto” (Howard 41). Antonio continues:

These griefs and losses have so bated me

That I shall hardly spare a pound of flesh

Tomorrow, to my bloody creditor.

Well Jailer, on. Pray God Bassanio come

To see me pay his debt, and then I care not! (3.4.32-36)

The debt has obviously taken a physical toll on Antonio, who is worried that there will be little left of him with which to pay Shylock. He calls Shylock a “bloody creditor”, punning on Shylock’s desire for a piece of his flesh. The epithet also reflects typical Venetian attitudes toward outside lenders during the early modern period. He prays that Bassanio comes to see him “pay his debt” which is odd, considering Antonio’s aforementioned letter, which freed Bassanio from his obligations. Even though Antonio has absolved Bassanio’s monetary debt, he still expects his friend to honor his interpersonal obligations.

Despite the pleas of everyone in the climactic courtroom scene to forgive Antonio’s debt, Shylock eagerly awaits the promised pound of the defaulter’s flesh. Bassanio, who has fulfilled his personal obligation to stand by Antonio in his hour of need, offers six-thousand ducats in place of the original three, but Shylock refuses, saying, “If every ducat in six thousand ducats / Were in six parts, and every part a ducat, / I would not draw them, I would have my bond” (4.1.85-86). His refusal to accept Bassanio’s money confirms that he considers Antonio’s debt to be social rather than financial. Bassanio, realizing too late that the debt extends beyond money, quickly offers his own blood: “The Jew shall have my flesh, blood, bones, and all, / Ere thou shalt lose for me one drop of blood” (4.1.112-113). In this moment, Bassanio realizes that Antonio’s loans had never been based on commercial exchange but on a profound sense of commitment to their friendship, which he now shares. Everything Bassanio has gained through these loans – his wife, his new riches, his freedom from debt – comes from Antonio’s sacrifice, which creates an insurmountable social debt for Bassanio.

Indeed, Bassanio is never able to repay his social debt to Antonio, as it is Portia (disguised as Balthazar) who successfully confronts Shylock and prevents Antonio’s death. Most

scholarship on *The Merchant of Venice* focuses heavily on Portia's stunning argument that the flesh debt cannot be paid without spilling blood, which would act as a kind of interest, thereby violating the terms of the interest-free bond and voiding the contract. Her ability to outwit Shylock (as well as the Venetian court) is, indeed noteworthy. The present reading, however, considers the fluctuating nature of debt and the personal and commercial relationships within which it exists. Although Shylock's loan has alleviated the tension between Antonio and Bassanio, it has created a new inequality that cannot be reasonably reconciled, even within the terms of the debt contract. If Shylock did achieve this sense of equality with Antonio, it would result in Bassanio's insurmountable debt to his friend for his ultimate sacrifice, perpetuating the inequality that inaugurated the debt in the first place. Thus, Bassanio and Antonio must transfer their debt onto a third party who, unlike Shylock, is not invested in revenge at any cost. This third party takes the form of Portia. By saving Antonio from death, she prevents him from having to pay Bassanio's debt. This, in turn, alleviates Bassanio's irreconcilable debt to Antonio, allowing their friendship to recover its balance. Portia is only able to achieve this because of her status as an outsider. Because the Venetian legal body is comprised exclusively of men, Portia's gender ensures that she is not subject to its restrictions and expectations, allowing her to achieve a creative solution that is beyond the purview of her male peers. In order to put forth her argument, she disguises herself as Balthazar. Thus, Balthazar, who does not exist, has taken on the debt shared among Antonio, Bassanio, and Shylock. Because Shylock's bond has been proven void, the only debt that remains, theoretically, is that between the two friends. This, too, is cancelled, however, as it has been transferred to Portia via Balthazar. When Portia removes her disguise, she is also removing her identity as Balthazar and the friends' debt disappears with her alias. Thus, the debt between Antonio and Bassanio is transferred to a disinterested third party

who disintegrates into the fiction from which he came, and the balance of their friendship is
restore

CHAPTER 4:

‘RELEASE YOU HER OF HER WORDS, AND I WILL / RELEASE YOU OF YOUR DEBTS’: EXCHANGING SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL CURRENCY IN *A TRICK TO CATCH THE OLD ONE*

“I perceive there’s nothing conjures up wit sooner than poverty,
and nothing lays it down sooner than wealth and lechery!”

-Theodorus Witgood (3.1.72-74)⁸

“The world is so deceitful!”

-Jane (3.1.193)

I’m yet like those whose riches lie in dreams.
If I be waked, they’re false. Such is my fate,
Who ventures deeper than the desperate state,
Though I have sinned, yet could I become new,
For where I once vow, I am ever true.

-Jane (4.4.148-152)

Thomas Middleton’s *A Trick to Catch the Old One* opens in a way that is strikingly similar to Shakespeare’s *A Merchant of Venice*. Both plays feature an impoverished noble who

⁸ All references to *A Trick to Catch the Old One* are from *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 2007. Print.

hopes to marry a wealthy heiress through an intricate plot. Like *Merchant*, *A Trick* examines the consequences of both financial and social forfeiture. However, instead of focusing on interpersonal debt as Shakespeare does, Middleton explores the legal consequences of debt in the new city marketplace, specifically debtor's prison and the infamous Hole. This chapter will demonstrate how the economically disenfranchised nobleman Witgood concocts an elaborate, outlandish plot to avoid being taken advantage of by the new economy full of creditors and usurers who exploit others' financial misfortune to increase their own wealth. It will argue that while executing this plan, the protagonist becomes part of the exploitive system and unwittingly adopts its practices, using them against Jane, his mistress, and incurred a substantial social debt in the process.

A Trick to Catch the Old One's stages the exploits of Theodorus Witgood, a poor nobleman who has mortgaged all his land to his greedy, usurious uncle Lucre. Witgood and Lucre's relationship lacks the element of trust that was the foundation of the older honor-based credit economy. Instead, Lucre's treatment of Witgood is characterized by deceit and self-interest. In debt to many creditors, both poor and destitute, Witgood spends all of his remaining fortune on his courtesan Jane. Fed up with living in poverty despite his cleverness, he and Jane devise a scheme to reclaim his land. Jane agrees to present herself as a rich country heiress with the intention of marrying Witgood. Witgood anticipates that his uncle will do everything he can to secure the marriage, excited about the prospect of having a rich nephew whose wealth he could share. Once Lucre's usurious rival Hoard hears of the news, however, he immediately devises a plan of his own to marry Jane, believing that she is a rich country widow, as well. In the end, Jane marries Hoard, which enrages Lucre and prompts him to confront the supposed heiress about her abandonment of his nephew. She claims that Witgood had lied to her about his

estates and promises that if Lucre restores them, then she will marry Witgood. Lucre happily agrees, but he is too late as Witgood's creditors arrest him. Out of desperation for the two to marry, Lucre gives Witgood his lands back. However, the creditors are not satisfied; they demand immediate repayment. In a final act of wit and friendship, Witgood writes a letter to Jane to convince her to admit she took a precontract, or vowed to marry him first. Her admission of the precontract would effectively nullify her marriage to Hoard. Because Hoard wishes to remain married to Jane, he agrees to do everything in his power to free her of the bond, which includes paying off Witgood's debts so he will release her from the precontract. She agrees, and both Jane and Witgood are set free from their poverty.

To examine the plot and elucidate the conflict between the new and old ways of conducting business in the emerging proto-capitalist marketplace of early modern England, I will first address the genre of city comedy. City comedy provided a way for Londoners to explore and reflect on the rapid changes occurring in their urban surroundings, particularly regarding the issues of debt and punishment. After exploring that, I will analyze Witgood's relationship with his creditors and consider the very real danger that existed for debtors in the early modern period. Finally, I will provide a close reading of Jane and Witgood's relationship to examine the implications of the traditional system of honor and trust that collides with newer, more dangerous forms of credit and self-interest.

City Comedy

City comedies refer to a group of plays written between 1598 and 1615 that use London as their setting, exploring the city's geography, and focusing less on nobility and more on commoners. The two greatest writers of city comedies are Ben Jonson and Thomas Middleton,

who explored the “city vices and follies such as greed, lechery, and undeserved pretensions to wit” (Howard 19). The typical city comedy plot pitted gentry against merchants for social standing within the city, and focused on the current trends, fashions, and scandals of the time. City comedies differed from other theatrical genres, such as tragedy and the national history play, by featuring average citizens instead of monarchs or aristocrats. What distinguishes city comedies is that they pitch their “social register” lower and “mark a moment in early modern culture when urban commoners” became the protagonists in popular dramas (Howard 19).

The city comedy is also important because of the role it plays in addressing a new and confusing economy wherein the legal system punished debtors harshly, prisons overflowed with defaulters, and many debtors simply died in the Hole. The growing consumer market promoted an explosion of “debt and credit relations,” prompting a trend in London comedies to portray “prodigals, debtors, or long-distance merchants whose ventures failed” (Howard 82). By focusing on these characters, the plays demonstrate the power debt had to destroy one’s “social standing or identity” (Howard 71). While one’s reputation in the early modern period always relied on credit, new forms of punishment for defaulting arose during the Jacobean period.

The shifting nature of the early modern economy was manifest in the innovative ways in which Jacobean dramas were brought to a close. City comedies in particular often presented audiences with unresolved or unconvincing endings. While the resolutions of many city comedies could seem confusing and at times abrupt, they represent “an implicit and unfinished struggle within urban culture to make sense of a complex market economy in which debt and the acquiring of credit were an increasingly central aspect of daily life and how to deal with them in a cultural negotiation not yet concluded” (Howard 72). Thus, the playwrights themselves did not know how to resolve the social and legal issues that were larger than the stage on which they

were performed. Instead, they portrayed the problems that the new economy presented and provided a space to explore the “social tensions” arising in London in ways that made the new city more “socially legible” (Howard 3). City comedies play a crucial role in allowing the public to confront their changing world without facing the immediate consequences of the problems presented. Thus, the city comedy provided an opportunity to achieve catharsis within a new economic system with devastating penalties.

Peter Smith describes another view of city comedies saying that they are “fundamentally didactic” in that they expose the “faults of human desire for financial and sexual fulfilment at the expense of other people” (Smith 522). While Smith is referring to Jonson’s *Volpone* here, it should be noted that the majority of Jonson’s works were didactic in nature and often imparted moral advice. Jonson and Middleton may have operated within the same genre, but their goals were fundamentally different (Twynning 362). Instead of proposing the actions a moral character should make as Jonson does, Middleton presents citizens caught in a new and dizzying economy, who must do everything, even through immoral and unethical means, to survive the changing London social experience. As *A Trick to Catch the Old One* demonstrates, the fluctuating social landscape of London can at one time damn and another time save. The ending demonstrates Witgood’s return to “the very qualities of city life that had earlier threatened his existence” (Ayers 11). When Witgood abandons the city, he risks his identity and wallows in the loss of his noble title; however, the “social flux” of the city that “nearly swallow[s] him up also prove[s] his salvation” (Ayers 11). What Witgood realizes in the evolving socioeconomic landscape of London is that “he can define himself and the Courtesan as he wishes, the only limit being his ability to persuade others to accept the definition” (Ayers 11). Instead of the city posing a moral

threat by corrupting its citizens with its many vices, London proves itself, in its fluid state, to be both an enemy and a savior at different times for different characters.

Many of Middleton's plays, namely *The Roaring Girl*, *Michaelmas Term*, *A Mad World*, *My Masters*, and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* explore debt, debtor's prison, and the notorious Hole. Middleton also considers the practice of usury, which was looked down upon by many of his contemporaries (Hawkes 281). One of the things Middleton accomplished by working within the genre of city comedy was to imagine a society in which "relations of credit and debt mediate every kind of human interaction...despoiling innocence, violating love, debasing character and unbalancing the mind" (Hawkes 281). Since coinage remained in short supply, almost every economic transaction revolved around credit, which created confusion since the "exchange-based, market economy" expanded very rapidly (Hawkes 282). Middleton's plays contemplate social and financial survival despite the greedy new creditors to which this increasingly proto-capitalist world has given rise.

The Hole and the Creditors

In early modern England, people conducted most of their exchanges on a system of credit. Money, in the form of coin, only accounted for one-fifteenth of all transactions ("Debt, Credit" 10). Because of the instability of coins, due to inconsistent metallic composition and rampant counterfeiting, merchants and consumers chose to enter into a complex network of debt and credit. Arrangements and agreements of credit relied on the legal system, rather than the Crown or private banks, to ensure payments of debt. For this reason, the market became increasingly litigious; it focused on various debt-based legal suits and the various punishments doled out for defaulting. The most reliable kind of loan came in the form of sealed bonds. Parties

wishing to make a transaction using the bond as currency composed a legal contract, which was signed and sealed by two witnesses. Should the debtor fail to repay the bond, she was required to surrender her person to imprisonment as punishment.

The system of credit and debt in 17th century London stipulated that if a debtor did not pay back the creditor on a loan given without interest, then he forfeited his exemption from the penal conditions of the debt bond. The law also allowed creditors to capture their debtors without trial. Creditors had the option of either imprisoning the debtors or taking their goods. Most creditors chose the former because it often produced a greater profit. While in prison, debtors paid for their housing and accommodations since the city officials leased the prisons of London to wardens who charged the prisoners extraordinary fees to stay there (Bailey 119). Most prisons were in disrepair, and their unsanitary conditions allowed diseases to spread quickly. Many inmates died of typhoid fever and the plague. If the debtors could not pay for their housing, then the wardens cast them into the Hole, an open dirt pit where the prisoners would most likely die of starvation and disease (Bailey 54). In early modern England, the prison system did not rely on “confinement and surveillance” as prisons do now; instead, the prison consisted of “pay wards” where prisoners were grouped together based on their means (Bailey 119). The richest prisoners could buy their way out of jail into the surrounding communities, entertain guests, and walk abroad. The poorest debtors, already at a disadvantage because of their poverty, could not afford such privileges, and lived in a state of uncertainty with the looming possibility of being cast into the Hole.

Debt-based imprisonment was initially intended as an honorable means of securing repayment when social pressure failed (Byrne 110-112). As the system of debt collection became increasingly corrupt, more people were imprisoned for debt than for capital crimes like murder

or treason. Creditors paid a fee to the officers, usually prison sergeants or marshals, to execute a warrant and arrest the defaulters. At the same time, many debtors paid the officers a fee to avoid arrest. Thus, the officers were able to profit from both sides. Recognizing additional opportunities to exploit this system, the officers courted creditors and persuaded them to take out warrants on their defaulters so that the officers might collect fees from the arrest. The number of tallymen increased among the lower social classes. The tallymen persuaded customers to buy on credit, and then charged high interest on their loans. While extending credit to customers, the tallymen also offered officers a share of the prison fees. The scheme encouraged the poor to take out a loan they had no hope of repaying, and then allowed the officers to arrest them so that the officers and tallymen could make a profit from the defaulters' imprisonment.

Debtors could always pay a fee to avoid jail. Options included staying inside in the officer's quarters or in any rental rooms he might have. The fees were expensive, but the debtor also faced fees at any of the prisons where he might be incarcerated. The creditors considered the job done well if the debtors managed to raise the money to free himself from prison. More often than not, the defaulter could not raise the money, and would continue to pay for his imprisonment. The worst parts of the prisons were occupied by those inmates stuck in perpetual debt with no hope of escape. In addition to these hopeless inmates were wealthy debtors who had collected a large amount of debt knowing that they would not be able to repay the sum. Recognizing that their debt would die with them and they could use their money to stay comfortably incarcerated for their rest of their lives, they decided to "live well in prison rather than in poverty outside" (Byrne 111). In one of the nicer prisons, a survey showed that the average debt was twenty-five hundred shillings (111). Unlike the tallymen who exploited the lower classes with high interest, the creditors to the upper classes did not gain anything from

executing a warrant against them. In most cases, the lender settled for much less of the original loan.

Thus, Theodorus Witgood faces real danger at the hands of his creditors, and he fears them, debtor's prison, and the Hole. While their brief appearances and initial comic relief distract from the threat they pose, Witgood's creditors are potentially quite dangerous. Witgood reflects in a soliloquy, "I dare / not visit the city. There I should be too soon visited by / that horrible plague, my debt" (1.1.19-22). For Witgood, the debts are a potentially deadly affliction, like the plague. While the threat of a literal death is very real, Witgood is also referring to a kind of "social death" whereby he would lose "a secure place in the commercial and political worlds in the city" (Howard 111). He tells his uncle about his hesitancy to visit to him city: "You that know my danger i'th' city, sir, so well, / how great my debts are, and how extreme my creditors, / could not out for your pure judgment, sir have wish us hither" (2.1.235-238). Later in the play, when Witgood's plan is near completion, a member of Hoard's entourage describes Witgood's situation:

That Witgood is a riotous, undone man

Imperfect both in fame and in estate,

His debts wealthier than he, and executions

In wait for his due body, we'll maintain

With our best credit and our dearest blood. (3.1.163-168)

Witgood knows that if his creditors were to find him, he would be "undone." They would not hesitate to imprison him, and exact revenge for his debts upon his body. He describes his debt as "great" and his "creditors" as extreme. He owes a significant amount of money, and he fears the lenders are ruthless to collect back what they are owed. Hoard's description illustrates that

Witgood's predicament is well-known and that just as his body is at risk for physical harm, his reputation is in danger of "social death."

When Witgood first encounters his creditors in the play, he accuses them of endeavoring to undo his intricate plan, rather than simply pursuing the "justness of the debt" (3.1.3). When the first creditor responds that he has "forborne [his] money long" (3.1.4), meaning that Witgood has failed to repay his loans in a timely manner, it reveals that the creditors, to some degree, are inconvenienced by debtors who fail to pay back their loans. This suggests that the creditors might not be the greedy monsters they are often depicted to be. Witgood wonders why they choose this moment to appear, when he is about to execute his plan to get him out of debt, asking, "If ever you have hope to be / satisfied, why do you seek to confound the means that / should work it?" (3.1.12-14). This particular statement speaks to the general treatment of jailed debtors who found themselves entrapped within a system of inescapable debt, since they could not work and, therefore, could not take steps toward repayment while funding their imprisonment without income. When the first creditor agrees with him, Witgood states, "Remove me now, and I consume forever" (3.1.17-18). By removing him (i.e.: arresting him), Witgood's creditors would be sending him to debtor's prison. "Consume," here, refers to both the consumption of Witgood's body and finances during his incarceration, and the consumption in which he has partaken which has led to his potential imprisonment. Witgood will be consumed insofar as he will physically waste away in debtor's prison. His finances, too, will be consumed or eaten away while he funds his incarceration. Finally, it is his practice of excessive material consumption that has brought him to this point. His loans have enabled his consumption and now his debt will, in turn, consume him.

Witgood reveals his plans to the creditors to keep them at bay for a while longer, duping them into believing he will have lands to satisfy them with, which reveals how their greed and hunger for even more money makes them gullible. The creditors have heard that Witgood is about to be “married suddenly to a rich country widow” (3.1.8). Witgood confirms the rumors about his wealthy bride-to-be, and persuades them that if she finds out that he is deeply in debt, then she will not marry him, which would ruin their chances of collecting their loans. When he states that “I am but newly sure yet to the widow / and what a rend might this discredit make”, he is referring to his honorable reputation (3.1.25-26). Because honor and credit are intricately entwined in the early modern economic landscape, any word of his debt would destroy his chances as a suitor and ruin the creditors’ chances at recovering their money. Witgood confirms this: “...for mine own credit and your / comfort. Now, if my former debts should be divulged, / all hope of my proceeding were quite extinguished” (3.1.31-33).

The creditors depicted in the play attack each other, displaying their lack of honor, which represented the general cultural prejudice against commercial lenders. The prospect of Witgood’s marriage to a rich widow tricks the creditors into lending him more money with the hope that he will become a wealthy patron to them. This aspiration pits them against one another and causes them to behave dishonorably within their community. The first creditor tells Witgood in an aside that he will supply him with forty pounds and will “deserve [his] custom hereafter” (3.1.34-36). After that, the second creditor, also in an aside, offers money to help enhance Witgood’s financial appearance. The third creditor attacks the other two maliciously while offering aid. He gives Witgood a ruby to present to his future bride and says, “Beside, if I might so much work with you, I would not have you beholden to those bloodsuckers for any money” (3.1.56-58). The third creditor calls his colleagues “bloodsuckers” in an attempt to separate himself from them

and appear as though he has Witgood's best interests in mind. He divulges the backstabbing nature of the moneylending business, even going so far as to call the others "a brace of cutthroats" (3.1.61). However, the creditors' willingness to betray each other and help Witgood disappears later in the play when Witgood's plan to marry the rich widow seems to fall apart.

The three creditors quickly change their attitudes when they learn of Witgood's failure to secure a wealthy bride, ironically substantiating the third creditor's claim that moneylenders are "cutthroats." The third creditor cries out for revenge: "Hang him, prodigal" (4.3.4-5). This creditor, who had referred to the other two as "bloodthirsty," is the first to want to murder Witgood. When it is revealed that Witgood is caught, the first creditor states that it "warms him" to see "dogs upon men" (4.3.14-15). When he refers to "dogs," he is referring to the sergeants who collected defaulters for money, which places Witgood in real danger because most "sergeants' summons ushered [debtors] into a world of deprivation from which they could not escape" (Howard 76). Confronting Witgood, the second creditor says:

He, a rich widow? Who? A prodigal,

A daily rioter and a nightly vomiter.

He, a widow of account? He a hole i'th' counter! (4.3.22-24)

Besides insulting his costly habits and limited marriage prospects, the second creditor condemns Witgood to the Hole, which as mentioned earlier is the worst punishment exacted upon a debtor. Seeing that he is untrustworthy, all three creditors call in their debts, which happened when a "debtor was exposed as untrustworthy before all his other creditors, who would then worsen the debtor's plights by calling in their loans as well" (Howard 82). Witgood pleads for more time because he knows his plan is not fully realized, but the creditors are impatient. The second creditor states they "must either have money or a carcass" (4.3.51). When Witgood asks what

good his body will do, the third creditor responds, “We that are used to keep birds in cages have the / heart to keep men in prison, I warrant you” (4.3.54-55). To the creditors, a debtor is inhuman, and as such, they can justify subjecting him to the inhumane punishment of imprisonment in the Hole.

Witgood’s Social Debt to Jane

The main plotters in the play are Witgood and Jane, who form a complex relationship of debt, friendship, and honor. Witgood also shares a frustrating relationship with his uncle, Lucre, whom Witgood and Jane plan to trick into restoring Witgood’s fortune. Witgood describes himself as a broke gentleman who has “all sunk into that little pit, lechery” (1.1.4). The “little pit” into which he has “all sunk” is a figurative reference to his mistress Jane and a more literal reference to her genitalia. He has all but exhausted his wealth in the pursuit of both. He ponders the peculiarity of their sexual and financial dynamic when he asks himself why he spends “two shillings for his ordinary that nourishes him, and twenty times two for his brothel that consumes him” (1.1.5-7). He equates the nutritional nourishment he receives from food with the sexual nourishment he receives from Jane, casting himself as a victim who is consumed by his needs and desires. This formulation exonerates him from his role in precipitating his financial ruin. He goes on to blame his uncle for his meager finances because he mortgaged his lands to him. His uncle Lucre is a usurer and charges Witgood interest. Witgood ponders this relationship:

He that doth his youth expose

To brothel, drink, and danger,

Let him that is his nearest kin

Cheat him before a stranger. (1.1.15-18)

Witgood recognizes his uncle's strategy of capitalizing on his nephew's vices. He remarks that his uncle cheats him even before a "stranger", indicating that Lucre is the worst sort of usurer, who cares for nothing but money despite familial obligation. He summarizes the situation thus: "And that's [my] uncle, 'tis a principle in usury" (1.1.20). Witgood contemplates how he can escape his debt, which he greatly fears will compromise his marriage prospects, and decides that he can only rely on his wits. He wonders how men "make their wits their mercers", or use their intelligence to provide for themselves (1.1.25). He becomes determined to turn his wits into a way of reclaiming his wealth.

Witgood finds a loyal companion in his mistress Jane, who, despite her occupation as a courtesan, retains strong moral convictions. Her first line in the play is "my love" in an address to Witgood (1.1.29). Witgood, who was lost in his sorrows a few lines earlier, overreacts at her entrance:

My loathing! Has thou been the secret consump-
tion of my purse, and now com'st to undo my last
means, my wits! Wilt leave no virtue in me and yet
thou ne'er the better? (1.1.30-33)

Witgood's reaction reveals that he attributes his undoing to Jane and the desire she represents rather than his own poor choices. He blames her for consuming his fortunes and plunging him into debt, accusing her of coming to take his "last means" – his wit – which he earlier equated with a form of currency. Without hesitating, Jane proves herself his equal in wit, responding:

I have been true unto your pleasure, and all your
Land, thrice racked, was never worth the jewel which

I prodigally gave you: my virginity.

Lands mortgaged may return and more esteemed,

But honesty, once pawned, is ne'er redeemed. (1.1.36-40)

Jane's reference to Witgood's "thrice racked" lacks indicates his current economic disenfranchisement whereby he has mortgaged his property to his uncle, who is charging him interest. Still, she reminds him of her loyalty, claiming that she "prodigally" or recklessly gave him her virginity, which is worth more in society than all the wealth he ever possessed. Witgood can always regain his lost fortune, but Jane can never recover the "honesty" or social credit he took from her. With this statement, she charges Witgood with a social debt. He has taken something that she can never recover herself, and something that he can never give back to her. Witgood recognizes his error and says, "Forgive, I do thee wrong / To make thee sin and then to chide thee for't" (4.1.41-42). His apology is consistent with his perception of vice and responsibility therefore. Rather than encouraging Jane to take ownership of her actions, Witgood tells her that he has compelled her to sin, just as she had done to him. In this way, both parties share the blame, and yet neither needs to accept it.

The extremity of their poverty forces Witgood and Jane to concoct a desperate plan in order to trick Witgood's usurer uncle into restoring his land. With their debts addressed but unresolved, they scheme together to recover Witgood's fortunes. Although Witgood had formerly accused Jane of consuming him, he now appeals to her as the only means he has left. She consents and promises, "What lies within the power of my performance / Shall be commanded of thee" (1.1.53-54). Witgood then divulges his plan to disguise her as a rich country widow that he will show off to his "covetous uncle" (1.1.66-67). Jane eagerly agrees to the plot, their "states being both / desperate" (1.1.68-69). Witgood endeavors to appeal to

Lucre's greed by bringing out "a kind of usurer's love in him to [his nephew] that he will not / only desire [Witgood's] presence" (1.1.91-92). Witgood is confident in his understanding of his uncle's disposition: "I know the state of an old man's affection so well. If his nephew be poor indeed, why, he lets God alone with him; but if he be once rich, then he'll be the first man that helps him" (1.1.94-99). Once Jane and Witgood's scheme to fool Lucre is established, the pair of plotters proceed into London to start spreading rumors of the upcoming marriage between Witgood and the rich country widow.

Upon hearing these rumors, Lucre, in turn, begins to scheme, hoping to share in his nephew's fortune. He reveals that he knowingly cheated his nephew in the past and hopes Witgood will not discover his new plot to benefit from the marriage. Lucre also tries to manipulate Witgood into thinking that he has been a great uncle to him all along so that "some of the widow's lands, too, may one day fall upon [him], if things be carried wisely" (2.1.182-183). Not only has Lucre acquired Witgood's former land, he now wishes to claim the land his nephew will gain via marriage.

Witgood's plan achieves considerable success. Not only does Lucre embrace him, he also does everything he can to facilitate his marriage to the rich widow. When Witgood arrives at Lucre's house, his uncle attempts to persuade him of his good intentions and inquires why his nephew does not come to visit him. He even references Witgood's debts, as if he had nothing to do with them. He tells Witgood:

Yes, faith, must I. Say your debts be many,
your creditors importunate, yet the kindness of a thing is
all, nephew. You might have sent me close word on't,
without the least danger or prejudice to your fortunes. (2.1.275-278)

Lucre tries to convince Witgood that he has his nephew's best interests at heart, acting as if his house is a safe haven from the troublesome creditors. He tells Witgood that he would have helped him build up his credit with Jane if he had had enough time:

Witgood: My Credit? Nay, my countenance. Push! Nay,

I know, my uncle, you would have wrought it so by your
wit. You would have made her believe in time the whole
house had been mine.

Lucre: Ay, and most of the goods, too. (2.1.243-247)

Lucre's deceitfulness is obvious to his nephew; his (transparent) intentions in offering to help Witgood indicate how far he would go to deceive anyone, even family, to increase his wealth. He would even temporarily compromise his own wealth, transferring it to Witgood to convince Jane that his nephew is a marriageable prospect, if he felt the return would outweigh the risk of both his financial and his social currency. He is willing to compromise his social wealth, including his ties to family and community, to increase his financial fortune – a practice that is reprehensible by the standards of the early modern trust-based credit economy.

Once Jane is introduced into the marriage marketplace as a rich country widow, she attracts the attention of men who had already invested their efforts in other women. These men, including the aptly named Moneylove and Lucre's nemesis Hoard abandon their initial investments and, by extension, their social obligations to their former beloveds, and decide to pursue Jane, the more attractive financial prospect. This raises the issue, again, of the conflict between social obligations and financial gain, particularly with respect to Hoard and Moneylove. Moneylove tells Hoard that he has "bestowed many / months in the suit of [Hoard's] niece" (2.2.1-2). Since Hoard's niece rejected him, Moneylove calls in a debt from Hoard for his wasted

time: "...yet in regard of / my great loss of time, and the zeal with which I sought / your niece, shall I desire one favour of your worship" (2.2.8-10). Moneylove then reveals that he has heard of a rich country widow who has come into the city, and he wants Hoard to vouch for his character so he can court the widow: "If I might but entreat your / worship to be a countenance for me, and speak a good / word – for your words will pass – I nothing but might set fair for the widow" (2.2.19-22). Hoard, upon hearing this, concocts his own plan to win Jane's hand in marriage, thwart his enemy Lucre, to "enrich his estate, augment [his] revenues, and build [his] own fortunes greater" (2.2.44-47). Thus, instead of honoring his social debt to Moneylove, Hoard intends to ruin him and gain Jane's hand in marriage – another example of the cutthroat practices of the shifting Jacobean credit economy.

In recognition of the success of their scheme, Witgood and Jane convene to celebrate her offers from multiple suitors. In their conversation, Witgood acknowledges his social debt to Jane and attempts to repay her by improving her financial situation, once more mixing social and financial debt. Jane says of her new marriage prospects, "I am so haunted / with suitors, Master Witgood, I know not which / to dispatch first" (3.1.82-84). She mentions that one of the suitors is Master Hoard who, she reports, disparages Witgood in hopes of gaining her hand: "I expect him every hour, with gentlemen / With whom he labours to make good his words, / To approve you riotous, your state consumed" (3.1.94-97). At this point, Witgood interrupts her and says:

Wench, make up thy own fortunes now; do
Thyself a good turn once in thy days. He's rich in
Money, movables, and lands – marry him. He's an old
doting fool, and that's worth all – marry him. 'Twould
be a great comfort to me to see thee do well, i'faith

marry him. 'Twould ease my conscience well to see thee
well bestowed. I have care of thee, i' faith. (3.1.98-104)

Recalling the very beginning of the play where Jane states that all the "land mortgaged may return and more esteemed, / But honesty, once pawned, is ne'er redeemed," Witgood now attempts to repay the very significant debt he incurred from her (1.1.39-40). In the Jacobean honor-based credit economy in which honor functions as a kind of currency, Witgood must do everything he can to restore Jane to a position of social respectability in order to secure her financial future. He tells her it would "be a great comfort to [him] to see [her] do well", which represents the guilt he feels for taking her virginity, her most valuable social commodity. His scheme has created an opportunity for Jane to live a comfortable life, which will restore the balance of their relationship, rendering them equals who no longer owe each other either a social or a financial debt.

Jane's decision to marry Hoard inaugurates the final stage of the plan whereby both she and Witgood are freed from their financial debt to their creditors and their social debt to each other. Witgood plans a celebratory dinner at a local tavern in honor of his (false) engagement to the rich country widow. During his preparations, the barkeep informs Witgood that Hoard has taken Jane away on a boat ride to a tavern Coal Harbor to elope. Witgood feigns surprise, exclaiming, "A plot, a plot! A boat! She's stole away! (3.3.93) for the benefit of his uncle. Lucre cannot believe that his rival has stolen his nephew's wealthy bride-to-be and commences a chase. By the time Lucre and Witgood catch up to Hoard and Jane, the pair has already married. Lucre knocks on the Coal Harbor tavern door and demands to be let in to talk to the Jane, unaware that she has already wed Hoard. Lucre scolds Jane about leaving Witgood: "O, you have done me infinite disgrace / and your own credit no small injury" (4.1.35-36). When he inquires why

she left his nephew for Hoard, Jane explains that Witgood is too deeply in debt to marry, mostly due to Lucre cheating him: “Was it not cause too much? / Send to enquire his state: most part of it / Lay two years mortgaged in his uncle’s land” (4.1.54-56). Lucre quickly promises that he will give back the land to his nephew if she abandons Hoard. She does not believe him at first; however, he declares before everyone in the tavern, “Widow, believe it. I vow by my best bliss, / Before these gentlemen I will give in / The mortgage to my nephew instantly / Before I sleep or eat” (4.1.66-72). Having secured a public declaration, Jane agrees to the deal.

As he promised, Lucre returns all of Witgood’s land, but Witgood’s creditors arrive to arrest him, prompting Jane to act on his behalf, despite the fact that her future is secure. This places Witgood in her debt once again. Although Lucre returns Witgood’s land, telling him, “You’re once more master of your own” (4.2.37), the creditors learn that the rich widow has married Hoard. They conclude that Witgood will not be able to share in her wealth and, therefore, will not be able to repay them. They arrest him immediately.

A letter arrives for Jane at Hoard’s house where the wedding party is celebrating. The letter claims that Witgood made a “precontract” with Jane, meaning that she had already agreed to marry Witgood before becoming involved with Hoard, meaning that her marriage is void. The letter presents Jane with a dilemma: she is no longer able to be completely loyal to Witgood because of her marriage to Hoard, who represents the guarantee of a comfortable financial future. Still, her sense of honor binds her to Witgood, to whom she feels a measure of social obligation. Thus, she must risk her financial security to uphold her social commitment to Witgood. She says in an aside, “Alas, his creditors so merciless, my state being / yet uncertain, I deem it not unconscionable to further him” (4.4.110-112). Because Hoard does not know about her past as Witgood’s mistress, Jane feels that her status as Hoard’s wife is “uncertain.” Should he discover

her prior employment in a brothel, he may abandon her, leaving her destitute. Certainly, ignoring Witgood's plight would be economically advantageous in this respect, so she faces the conundrum of saving Witgood or securing her future.

In keeping with her moral code, Jane elects to save Witgood, perpetuating the reciprocal relationship based on continuing favors, both financial and social. This action is consistent with the values of a pre-capitalist marketplace in which friends and neighbors owed each other social debts out of a sense of honor. Jane decides to admit to engaging Witgood in a precontract (even though she had not, in fact, done so), saying for Hoard's benefit, "Cursed be my rash and unadvised words [in agreeing to marry you]! / I'll set my foot upon my tongue / And tread my inconsiderate grant to dust" (4.4.115-117). Jane leads Hoard to believe that the alleged precontract would nullify their marriage and urges him to pay Witgood off in exchange for her release. She informs Hoard that Witgood has been "caught by his creditors" for "petty" debts, and that he will "bind himself to all inconveniences than rot in prison" (4.4.133-135). She advises Hoard to "send speedily for the creditors" because Witgood's "desperate" situation ensures that "he'll set his hand to anything" (4.4.137-139). Elated by the prospect of getting rid of Witgood once and for all, Hoard sends for Jane's alleged ex-fiancé and his creditors.

Everyone arrives at Hoard's house, and Hoard agrees to settle the debts if Witgood releases Jane from the precontract. Hoard tells Witgood, "Release you her of her words, and I will / Release you of your debts, sir" (4.4.198-199). Witgood consents, allowing for the final conflation of social and financial debt in the play. Hoard absolves Witgood of his financial debt in exchange for Witgood's forgiveness of Jane's social debt. Hoard's purchase of Jane's honor symbolizes the older economic paradigm of honor and credit being intertwined in a system of interconnected social and financial currency. Witgood's forfeiture of social currency in favor of

financial advancement represents the transition to a proto-capitalist system forgoes the link between honor and credit, replacing interpersonal debt with impersonal, commercial exchange.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown how social debt affected the creation of early modern English literature through networks of patronage, love, and friendship. In each chapter I looked at how social debt sustained and destroyed relationships, how creditors and debtors adapted to changing economic conditions, and how social debt simultaneously posed challenges and presented opportunities. Although each author experiences social debt differently, and each text treats the issue in a unique way, all share a common concern with the interconnectedness of social and financial obligations.

The first part of this study has demonstrated how social debt influenced both the lives and the literature of two early modern authors. Ben Jonson employed social debt to acquire patrons, exploiting the customs of the court and panegyric poetry to coerce the patron into reciprocating favors through gift-exchange. When James I ascended to the throne, the system of patronage expanded into a multi-tiered structure with a complicated hierarchy. Poets competed fiercely in this new structure and struggled to gain patrons by presenting praise instead of flattery. Jonson navigated this system expertly by placing patrons in his debt through his *Works*. By attributing generosity and good taste to the addressee of his poetry, he placed social pressure on patrons to provide financial support. Debt served as a catalyst for Lady Mary Wroth to explore the interconnectedness of love and debt. The debt she experienced in her life is manifested in her literature, which explores obligation-based exchanges in interpersonal relationships. Her father, Robert Sidney, instilled in her the idea of taking on substantial financial debts to secure the happiness and social advancement of loved ones. When her husband, Robert Wroth, died, he left her in crippling debt that she fought against for the duration of her widowhood. Her sonnet collection *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* and her pastoral tragicomedy *Love's Victory* demonstrate

how love and debt are inseparable, much like were in her life. Wroth's works consider the obligations that exist between lovers and what they owe each other when they endure pain and remain constant to each other.

The second part of this study has shown how early modern drama stages anxieties about the shift towards a proto-capitalist mercantile economy. Debt transforms the duties and obligations of the characters in *The Merchant of Venice* and *A Trick to Catch the Old One*. The concerns explored in the two plays are symptomatic of a shift from an interpersonal honor-based credit system to an impersonal economy of exchange. *The Merchant of Venice* stages these anxieties through the friendship of Antonio and Bassanio and the great debt between them. In order for their friendship to survive, they must rely on the intervention of outsiders. The new role of outsiders in sustaining relationships and the burgeoning mercantile economy created tension as transactions shifted from honor-based exchanges between friends and neighbors to exchanges with strangers whose reputations were questionable. *A Trick to Catch the Old One* treats these anxieties through the plight of Theodore Witgood who must survive a new cutthroat economy in which not even family can be trusted. In his efforts to survive, Witgood schemes with his mistress Jane to regain the fortunes he lost to his uncle. However, he employs several of the same strategies of the system that bankrupted on Jane, and incurs significant social debt in the process. It is only through this social debt between Jane and Goodwit that he is able to survive relentless creditors and treacherous family members.

This study has also demonstrated that while social debt and financial debt are closely linked, social debt takes precedence, forming the foundation of the majority of transactions during the early modern period. In positing social debt as a new category of obligation and exchange, this study has opened up new avenues of inquiry into both the socioeconomic realities

of the early modern period and the nature of debt more generally. It is predicated upon the simultaneous conflation of and distinction between social and financial obligations. With the addition of social debt to our critical vocabulary, Renaissance scholars are encouraged to reevaluate the harshly drawn binaries of the social and the financial, the personal and the commercial, and the public and the private. Going forward, other scholars might consider what other kinds of relationships break down when the definition of debt expands. What new formulations might arise in our consideration of early modern relationships, and what categories might be rendered obsolete by this consideration? What other aspects of Renaissance culture are touched by the category of social debt and the breakdown of binaries therein? Ultimately, this study, much like social debt itself, presents both challenges and opportunities, inviting others to participate in a complex yet rewarding network of exchange. Just as this study is indebted to the works of Amanda Bailey, Craig Muldrew, and Theodore B. Leinwand, so might it elicit reciprocation in the form of future scholarship.

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