

A Note on the Theme of "Money" in Jonson and Shakespeare

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None of Shakespeare's works has a character called Money or a character whose only epithet is a person of wealth. However, this does not mean that Shakespeare was foreign to the literary context which gave birth to such Elizabethan moral interludes as *All for Money* or *Liberality* or *Prodigality*; or Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, *The Alchemist* and *The Staple of News*; or citizen comedies whose main characters fall into three type-figures of "the citizen-hero, the usurer, the prodigal"¹ and whose plot is the competition of characters "with each other, with money and property as the prizes."² By comparing these three plays by Jonson with Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Timon of Athens*, we can conclude that money is one of the most important themes for both of them. However, at the same time, we are struck by the difference in the meanings this theme is given in these five plays. In all of them money and wealth function to build up human ties but the effect is different. In *Volpone*, *The Alchemist* and *Timon of Athens* money functions as a touchstone to reveal protagonists' vulnerability and their carnal desires. It is regarded as synonymous to a man himself or a piece of his flesh. However, in *The Staple of News* money functions as one of the means to actualize natural feelings among men that exist outside of financial systems. In *The Merchant of Venice* it plays both of these two functions.

In *Timon of Athens* friendship, marriage and a man's life are regarded as something exchangeable with money. In the first scene of the play, we see three examples of Timon's way of building up human relations. He gives Ventidius five talents to prove his friendship:

Timon : Noble Ventidius! Well,
I am not of that feather to shake off
My friend when he must need me. I do know him
A gentleman that well deserves a help,
Which he shall have. (I. 1. 103-07)³

The five talents that he gives Ventidius is a token of his friendship. It is also a financial representation of Ventidius's value of him.

The second example is the arrangement Timon makes for Lucilius. Just as the Old Athenian does, so Timon uses financial terms to describe the bringing up of children.

Old Athenian: The maid is fair, o'th'youngest for a bride,
And I have bred her *at my dearest cost*
In qualities of the best. (I. 1. 127-29)

Timon : This gentleman of mine hath served me long.
To build his fortune I will strain a little,
For 'tis a bond in men. Give him thy daughter.
What you bestow, in him I'll counterpose,
And make him *weigh* with her. (I. 1. 146-50)

As G.R. Hibbard writes that "This idea, that society is held together by men's readiness to be generous to one another, is basic to Timon's behaviour at this stage in the play,"⁴ Timon thinks that it is money that is the cause of the associations of himself with others and that relates each member of the society to one another.

This idea is the basis of Timon's feast. As the present writer discussed this in "*Timon of Athens in Its Elizabethan Audience*,"⁵ Timon's feast

appears to re-present the Last Supper but its meaning is the opposite of that of the Last Supper. Timon offers his money to satisfy the secular need of his guests. What lies between him and his guests is not the relation of a redeemer and the redeemed but the relation of a giver and a receiver of money. Timon thinks he can buy friends by using money for a feast with his friends and thus equalizes friendship and feast to material possession.

When he is baited by the servants of his friends, he is about to lose his breath (II, 2, 38; III, 4, 104) Emrys Jones writes that "Since breath is life, robbing him of his breath is a token killing." ⁶ This means that Timon is thinking that his life lies in his money and that its loss is equal to death for him.

In this way in *Timon of Athens* money is the only standard to tell the value of friendship, bringing-up of children, and a person's existence. Money in *Volpone* has the same function. Unlike Timon, Volpone never uses money. He simply collects it. To own as much money as possible is his only concern. Therefore, he measures a person's value by how much money he can bring to him. He calls Mosca a "good rescal" (I, 5, 138).⁷ He is good because he can fleece much money of gulls and give it to Volpone. There is no difference between Volpone and Corbaccio and Corvino in this respect. Corbaccio is ready to sacrifice the tie with his son, and Corvino the tie with his wife, in order to get money from Volpone. Family ties and all the human feelings attached to them are exchangeable with money for these four rascals.

In these two plays discussed briefly above, cannibalism is the common imagery. This means that in these plays the spiritual aspect of men's existence has less value than its materialistic aspect. In a word, men are taken to be interchangeable with money and with all that money can be changed into. Women are expected to play only one role and that is to satisfy men's lust.

In *The Alchemist* women are also the objects of men's lust. Money in this play functions as a touchstone to reveal financial and sexual greed of protagonists. Coining of money, that is alchemy, functions as a

metaphor of the gulling plot; the steps where each gull is fleeced are parallel to the process of alchemy. It functions also as a metaphor of protagonists' metamorphoses. Subtle, Face, Dol, Dapper, Drugger, Mammon, Kastril and Surly change themselves into an alchemist, a captain, the Fairy Queen, a lord's sister, a gambler, a philanthropist, a gallant and a Spanish count. While the first three protagonists try to actualize their metamorphoses using their wits, the rest depend upon their money to do it. This means that they debase their metamorphoses into something which can be bought by money.

In *Timon of Athens*, *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* human feelings and wishes are transformed into something interchangeable with money, and money is the code that ties people together. Jonson's *The Staple of News* tells us another story about money. It is highly moralistic. It teaches that "safe frugality" (V. 2.) is the best.

Pecunia : And so Pecunia herself doth wish,
That she may still be aid unto their uses,
Not slave unto their pleasures, or a tyrant
Over their fair desires; but teach them all
The golden mean; the prodigal how to live;
The sordid and the covetous how to die;
That, with sound mind; this, safe frugality.
(V.2.)⁸

Money, *pecunia*, is not something to be collected or stored up (as Pennyboy senior or Volpone does) or something to be wasted (as Pennyboy junior or Timon does). It is something to be used moderately and to be transformed into life and human feelings. Pennyboy senior says that misers are persons who "smother money in chests and strangle her in bags" (V. 2.). The personification used in this line emphasizes

the close association between money and life. The Prodigal-son plot of Pennyboy junior shows the folly of men and the barrenness of the social ties bought by money; in other words, natural feelings between persons cannot be bought by or exchanged into money. As a whole this play tells us that money is essential to human life and relations and yet it must be used moderately to help natural feelings (that exist outside of financial systems) be actualized.

In *The Merchant of Venice* money is used to measure people's value and to help human feelings be actualized. It is not only Shylock who measures people's value using money. Antonio, Bassanio and Lorenzo do the same.

When Shylock says, "Antonio is a good man," (I. 3. 12)⁹ he does not mean Antonio is morally good. What he means instead is that "Antonio is sufficient," so that he can pay back the money he borrows from Shylock. He also says that he will "buy his [Antonio's] favour" by lending him money. When he demands one pound of carnal flesh for three thousand ducats, he reduces the whole meaning of Antonio's existence into a pile of cold gold pieces. Or his confusion of Jessica with ducats ("Would she were hears'd at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin!" III. 1. 89-90) also transforms the meaning of Jessica's existence into something exchangeable with money. For him his own existence is not an exception:

Shylock : Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that, —
 You take my house, when you do take the prop
 That doth sustain my house: you take my life
 When you do take the means whereby I live.
 (IV. 1. 370-73)

Both Bassanio and Lorenzo also use money to measure a person's value.

They choose rich women as their wives. When Bassanio asks Antonio to lend him money, he explains that his marriage to Portia will bring him money: ¹⁰

Bassanio: In my school-days, when I had lost one shaft,
I shot his fellow of the self-same flight
The self-same way, with more advised watch
To find the other forth, and by adventuring both,
I oft found both: I urge this childhood proof
Because what follows is pure innocence.
I owe you much, and like a wilful 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 your latter hazard back again,
And thankfully rest debtor for the first.

(I. 1. 140-52)

Bassanio knows that if he invests money in Portia, he will earn some profit and will be able to pay his debt to Antonio. When he talks about Portia to Antonio for the first time, the first thing he says is, "In Belmont is a lady richly left" (I. 1. 161) and her beauty and moral virtue come after it. This means that his understanding of marriage is more materialistic than spiritual and that the first reason he chooses Portia is her money.¹¹

Antonio, like Timon and Shylock, thinks his life lies in money. Learning the news that three of his ships came back safely, he says he has got "life and living" (V. 1. 286).

In *The Merchant of Venice*, therefore, money is what decides the value

of a person and of a person's life and what ties people together. However, money used by Antonio and Bassanio functions to tell us that men have the things that cannot be exchanged into money. Antonio lends Bassanio his money without a bond. Here Shylock's lending his money to Antonio functions as a foil. Antonio lends his friend money out of his friendship. He lends him money but he does not give it to him. That is what differentiates Antonio from Timon. Lending money without a bond can take place only between the two persons who regard the other as an independent person who is equal to him in abilities and value. Giving money, by contrast, takes place when one regards himself as superior to the other. Therefore, Antonio's lending money to Bassanio is different from Timon's giving it. The motive of his action is his friendship which exists outside of financial systems.

Bassanio's readiness to "hazard all he hath" (II. 8. 16) in order to get married with Portia proves that he is regarding love, another natural feeling between persons, exists outside of financial systems. It is a feeling which cannot be replaced by material possessions.

The theme of money in these five plays functions to reveal the protagonists' understanding of social ties, natural feelings among persons, and the meaning of life. Its complexity invites further study.

Notes

This note is based on the paper prepared by the present writer and read at Jonson Seminar held in Kyoto on the fifteenth of October in 1986. The seminar was organized by Japan Shakespeare Society, with Professor Anne Barton as the leader. Some corrections are made and some lines are added. She is well aware of the fact that the theme of money in Jonson and Shakespeare needs more thorough discussion. Shakespeare's use of money (or gold) as the vehicle of a metaphor should not be ignored. The meaning of money in Elizabethan marriage needs careful study. This short note may become a germ for further consideration.

1. Alexander Leggatt, *Citizen Comedy in the Age of Shakespeare* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973) p. 54.

2. Leggatt, p. 54.
3. William Shakespeare, *The Life of Timon of Athens*, ed. G.R. Hibbard (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970) All the quotations of *Timon of Athens* are from this edition. Italization is the present writer's.
4. Hibbard, a note for I, 1, 148.
5. *Osaka Jogakuin Tanki Daigaku Kiyō*, No.13 (1982), 55-67.
6. Emrys Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford; the Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 68.
7. *Ben Jonson, Volpone; or the Fox*, in *Elizabethan Plays*, ed. Hazelton Spencer (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1933)
8. Ben Jonson, *The Staple of News*, in *Ben Jonson's Plays*, ed. Falix E. Schelling (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1910). All the quotations of *The Staple of News* are from this edition.
9. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972). All the quotations of *The Merchant of Venice* are from this edition. Anne Barton's introductory article in reference to the theme of money is significant when reading the play.
10. This was pointed out by Anne Barton at Jonson Seminar.
11. The importance of money in marriage is discussed in Renaissance letters: "If a man falls in love and is not rich, he is headed for every kind of calamity." — A letter from Pietro Aretino to Ambrogio degli Eusebii; a letter from Michelangelo Buonarroti to his Nephew Lionardo Buonarroti advises him not to think about money in choosing his wife:

Wherefore I tell you, if you wish to take a wife, not to rely on me, for I cannot give you the best counsel; but I can at least tell you not to go after money, but only after goodness and a good reputation.

This indicates that people often went after money rather than goodness or a good reputation. Both quotations are from *Renaissance Letters: Revelations of a World Reborn*, ed. Robert J. Clements and Lorna Levant (New York: New York University Press, 1976) p. 399 and p. 407.

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