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SHICKMAN: SHAKESPEARE'S "FIGURE OF AN ANGEL": AN ICONOGRAPHIC STUDY

by ALLAN SHICKMAN

Those who discover a substructure of religious symbolism in some of Shakespeare's very secular plays have overlooked a detail which, if carefully analyzed, tends to support symbolic interpretations. This detail is the reference to a gold piece familiar in Shakespeare's time, the English "angel" coin. Morocco mentions it briefly and rather unexpectedly in The Merchant of Venice, and significantly it is also alluded to in Measure for Measure, a play with which The Merchant of Venice may be compared for thematic similarities, and which, like the earlier comedy, particularly lends itself to symbolic explanation. Nevill Coghill saw in The Merchant of Venice an "allegory" of "Justice and Mercy, of the Old Law and the New," while M. C. Bradbrook declared that "the debate between Justice and Mercy . . . is the main theme" of Measure for Measure; and if similar meaning underlies these very different comedies, we may expect, and in fact find, comparable iconography clarifying and enriching them. In both plays the "angel" image serves exactly these functions, but how is its evocation related to the comparable content of the plays? The importance of this symbol has not been recognized, and consequently it has escaped analysis.

When tawny Morocco is about to elect the golden casket within which he expects to discover fair Portia's picture, he recalls the English gold piece with its angel sculptured in low relief. Portia's miniature within the casket, he declares, will likewise be "an angel in a golden bed":


4. Danson, p. 16: "In The Merchant of Venice the relationship of justice to mercy, and the theological vocabulary the theme entails, is strikingly prominent. And so it is too in Measure for Measure."
They have in England
A coin that bears the figure of an angel
Stamp'd in gold, but that's insculp'd upon;
But here an angel in a golden bed
Lies all within. (II.vii.55-59)

The Moor's comparison is not entirely apt, for he is likening a sculptured disc to a painted image, but he adduces what evidence he can that angels, and therefore Portia, belong in golden settings—false theology, as the death's head manifests.

In Measure for Measure the angel coin is not actually named, although coin imagery and the minting metaphor are frequently employed, but in one instance it is unmistakably referred to. Shakespeare surely intended his audience to think of it when Angelo, whose name suggests "angel," compares himself to a coin with a figure being impressed upon it. To Duke Vincentio, who extols Angelo's virtue and desert, the deputy protests:

Let there be some more test made of my mettle
Before so noble and so great a figure
Be stamp'd upon it. (I.i.47-49)

The metaphor has a double purpose. We are to understand that the Duke of Vienna is about to stamp his own image on Angelo, since the substitute will occupy the Duke's office in his absence; but also, because of the deputy's name, a vision of the angel coin must have been forcibly impressed upon the imaginations of the Renaissance audience to whom it was familiar.

The angel coin shines in other of Shakespeare's works, for, as George Unwin has observed, the name of the gold piece provided opportunities a poet could not afford to neglect. Dromio, for example, brings angels to deliver his master (Com. of E., IV.iii.40-41). Other instances appear in M. Wives, I.iii.53, John, II.i.590 and III.iii.8, 2 Henry IV, I.ii.165, and Much Ado, II.iii.33. The important difference between these and the allusions noted above hinges upon the appearance of the coin itself, which, in the case of The Merchant of Venice and Measure for Measure, seems directly relevant to a larger meaning of the plays, to what Nevill Coghill calls "the governing idea."

The token (Figure 1) depicts the winged and armored archangel St. Michael treading down the dragon devil, a motif long popular in

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European art, especially after the dissemination of the theme by the late 15th century graphic works of Schongauer and Dürer (Figure 2). The subject derives from the Book of Revelation:

> And there was a battle in heaven. Michael & his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon fought & his angels.

> But they prevailed not, neither was their place found any more in heaven.

> And the great dragon, that old serpent, called the devil and Satan, was cast out, which deceiveth all the world: he was cast into the earth, & his angels were cast out with him. (12:7–9)

Since Shakespeare and his time were thoroughly familiar both with the image of conflict sculpted on the coin and the biblical passage it represented, it seems strangely incongruous that he caused the Prince of Morocco to conjure up a memory of the angel and compare it to Portia's portrait. Even though Morocco had not glimpsed the picture, it would have seemed most inappropriate for him to compare a gentlewoman, then present, to a heavenly warrior, Michael, in the throes of battle with the great dragon. What, after all, does the war in heaven have to do with the lady of Belmont?

The story is of the merchant Antonio, legally snared by the wily and murderous Shylock until Portia, disguised as a "wise young judge" (IV.i.224), turns the tables on the Jew and sends him defeated to his house. To be sure, the comedy contains much more, both in plot and meaning. As Professor Coghill and others have pointed out, it can be interpreted to represent the contention of principles—law and justice against grace and mercy—with important characters standing for the ideas they defend. Shylock articulates his symbolic role when he declares before the Ducal court "I stand here for law" (IV.i.142), and Portia identifies herself with Christian principles when she counters the usurer's cry for justice and his bond with her crucial "quality of mercy" speech. In this context, the indebted merchant's role also takes on symbolic overtones. Although "Antonio is a good man" (I.iii.12) by this world's standards, his debt corresponds to that of fallen humanity "bound" by its sinful state and justly condemned but for grace and


Fig. 2. Martin Schongauer, *St. Michael and the Dragon*. Art Institute of Chicago.
heavenly intercession. The Duke, as ruler and judge, assumes a position resembling Divinity, characteristically refusing, despite his power, to "wrest once the law to [his] authority" and "to do a great right, do a little wrong" (IV.i.215-16), since neither the Duke nor Almighty God can be expected to violate his own edicts and traduce his state. Thus explained, we have in The Merchant of Venice symbol as well as character, analogy as well as plot.

Wonderful it is to see how Shakespeare's characters have in their humanity the traits proper to their analogic roles. This is especially notable in Shylock's obdurate and unrelenting stance, which indicates the rigidity of unmitigated law. But Shylock's legalistic posture can carry a further, religious, meaning. His legitimate hold on Antonio resembles the Devil's just claim to unredeemed man—the very claim of the Devil of the Processus Belial—for "in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation" (IV.i.199-200); and thus the Jew, who hypocritically urges law, but is solely bent upon destroying his victim, seems to become "a kind of devil" (II.ii.24). Indeed, he is frequently so denominated, as Elmer Stoll has observed. He is "the devil [who] can cite Scripture for his purpose" (I.iii.98), "the very devil incarnation" (II.ii.27), his "house is hell" (II.iii.2), etc. And to some he bears an appropriate character:

A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch,
Uncappable of pity, void and empty
From any dram of mercy. (IV.i.4-6)

Gratiano describes him as "wolvish, bloody, starv'd and ravenous" (IV.i.138), fit epithets for the Fiend. At times Shakespeare needs to remind us sharply, through Shylock's most famous speeches, that the Jew is as human as we are, whatever his connotations.

If Shylock is the "devil" in The Merchant of Venice, he is not the only one, although no other character is as insistently marked as one. There is another infidel, Morocco, with "the complexion of a devil" (I.ii.130). Not without reason did Shakespeare provide Portia with a black suitor, whose color was then generally regarded as a demonic attribute. His humiliating failure and "expulsion" resemble Shylock's later defeat, with Portia in both cases cast in the position of an adversary.

Just as the Moor and the Jew connote blackness and wickedness, Portia assumes the role of an angel of virtue and mercy, with image and metaphor strongly implying this second level of meaning. Bassanio has

11. The view that Antonio plays the part of humanum genus was supported by Rea, p. 311-12, and more recently by Monica J. Hamill, "Poetry, Law, and the Pursuit of Perfection: Portia's Role in The Merchant of Venice," SEL, XVIII (1978), p. 239.

12. Elmer E. Stoll, Shakespeare Studies (New York: Unger, 1960), p. 271; also see Danson, pp. 89-91, on Shylock's "diabolical literalism"; for Shylock as devil see Rea, p. 311 ff.

13. Aragon fits into the same mold as Morocco and Shylock. His is the folly of sinners who 'assume desert,' like that of the Jew who fears no judgment because he supposes that he does no wrong.
sworn a "pilgrimage" to his lady (I.i.120) as if she were the object of holy veneration, and her tawny suitor calls her an "angel," a "shrine" and a "mortal breathing saint" (II.vii.40). Her picture is "heavenly" (I.i.48). Jessica says that Bassanio finds with Portia "the joys of heaven here on earth" (III.v.76), and indeed her Belmont house seems heaven as much as Shylock's is hell. Moreover, her stance is to be that of intercessor and defender against the devilish Shylock, whose knife and scale will be prepared to weigh out, measure for measure, human flesh for justice. Reduced for the moment to simple terms—though we know the matter is far more complex and rich than our simplification can reveal—the conflict of Shylock, who would destroy Antonio, and the disguised Portia, who will save him, thus resembles an encounter of devil and angel for the soul of man. Can it be accidental that Shakespeare had earlier evoked a vision of angelic combat by referring to the golden coin?

That the playwright had specifically in mind the archangel Michael, traditionally a protector of souls, is suggested not only by the allusion to the gold piece but is also indicated by a literary precedent. Michael is pictured in *Piers the Plowman* as a patron of merchants, to be sent by Truth, along with an injunction against usury and greed, to defend their souls from devils at the time of death.

> "And I shal sende yow my self Seynt Michel, myn aungel, That no devil shal yow dere, dighe whan ye dighe, That I ne shal sende youre soules sauf in-to hevene, And before the face of my fadir fourme youre setis. Usure and avarice and othes I defende [i.e., forbid], That no gile go with yow, but the graith treuthe." Thanne were marchauntis merye and wepe for joye. . . ." (viii.36-42)

Portia's defense of the merchant of Venice curiously corresponds to Michael's protective function described in this passage, which reflects the disesteem in which the merchant's way of life was held in Langland's time, and beyond that into Shakespeare's. Even today Michael is invoked in the prayer following Catholic Low Mass: "Saint Michael Archangel, defend us in battle, be our safeguard against the wickedness and snares of the Devil. . . ." Portia's intercession, enabling Antonio to escape Shylock's snare, invites a Christian reading.

It is only with respect to these hints of symbolism, only when regarded in terms of the play's hidden meanings and analogies, that the reference by Morocco to the angel coin makes sense. In comparing Portia's

14. See Chew, p. 48, who points out the scales and sword are attributes of Justice, and that Shylock holding scales and a knife suggests a travesty of Justice. It should be recalled that sword and scales are also frequent attributes of St. Michael, put to perverted use in Shylock's hands. "The sword of heaven," "weighing" and "angel" appear in conjunction in the Duke's soliloquy of M. for M. (III.ii.261-72). The sword is as misplaced in Angelo's hands as in Shylock's.

miniature to the heavenly combatant of Revelation, he is implying, how­ever unconsciously, the action to follow: his own expulsion and, more significant, the ultimate defeat of Shylock—or rather, what each begins to symbolize. Thus what at first seemed to be Morocco’s inappropriate and puzzling comment is, upon closer examination, discovered to be Shakespeare’s deliberate and inspired use of an image to foretell some of the principal action of the comedy, and to clarify its analogical meaning. If the symbolic interpretation can be credited, it becomes one of the key pictures in the play.

And the picture is mirrored in the final act, but gloriously transformed, for when the courtroom climax has passed, along with the metaphysical battle it has so strongly suggested, Lorenzo’s subsequent talk of harmony visualizes the overhanging stars of heaven as “patens of bright gold.” But now the golden discs bring forth a mental view not of angels in battle but hymning celestial song:

Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.
There’s not the smallest orb which thou behold’st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-ey’d cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it. (V.i.58-65)

Clearly implied here is the harmony of the spheres often expressed symbolically as music-making angels. Just as the image of the angel coin evokes a vision of angel conflict, this passage beautifully suggests the celestial concord that emerged from Michael’s victory. Lorenzo’s standard comparison of stars to angels recalls that the Dragon drew after him “the third parte of the stars of heaven” according to the Apocalypse chapter to which we have already referred (12:4), and that the fallen Lucifer of Isaiah (14:12-13), always identified with the morning star, sought to ascend “beside the stars of God.” We need not search far to discover such commonplaces of medieval and Renaissance iconography as musical angels, but a revealing representation appears in a panel of Jan van Eyck’s renowned Ghent Altarpiece—famous in Shakespeare’s time as it is now—where a richly robed heavenly choir harmonizes before a lectern on which is carved the prominent image of St. Michael expelling the Beast (Figure 3). Lorenzo’s lines, themselves a breathtaking example of “divine” harmony in Shakespeare’s lyric poetry—for poetry too can “lead and draw vs to as high a perfection of our degenerate soules, made worse by theyr clayey lodgings, can be ca-

16. The word “paten” resonates with poetic and religious nuances. It means a thin metal disc, but it is also the word for the flat golden plate that is used to hold the sacred host. Hence it could suggest the sacramental wafer itself, which sometimes was impressed like a coin.

17. See the Geneva Bible gloss: “[the] morning starre, that goeth before the sunne, is called luci­fer.”
Fig. 3. Jan van Eyck, *Musical Angels*, Altarpiece of St. Bavon, Ghent. Copyright A.C.L. Bruxelles.
pable of"—occur at the moment in the play when the symbolic encounter between Portia and Shylock has concluded with heaven’s triumph, and concord is restored just as it had been when Michael first overcame the Dragon. Thus, led by art to an awareness of higher things, we find in Lorenzo’s speech a golden counterpart to Morocco’s.

*Measure for Measure* treats similar religious undercurrents with greater gravity than does *The Merchant of Venice*. Claudio’s sin, like Antonio’s debt, is “of the flesh” and difficult of redemption. The lives of both are forfeit by law and justice, and Isabella, like Portia, intercedes before “a stony adversary.” As in *The Merchant of Venice*, an all-powerful Duke (to whose omniscience Shakespeare adds a curious omnipresence) holds his potency strangely in abeyance.¹⁹ The atmosphere of a lofty spiritual encounter beyond the merely mortal level permeates the text, far more than in *The Merchant of Venice*. The seriousness and profundity of the principal speeches, the complexity of the moral problems, and the pervasiveness of the symbolism and imagery all contribute to this exalted mood.

Equally important is the telling contrast between the higher and lower social spheres, which begins to suggest a division between heavenly and earthly planes. The elevated drama of Duke Vincentio, Isabella and Angelo seems almost to hover between the realms of flesh and spirit. The activities of “bawd born” Pompey and Mistress Overdone, of Abhorson, Barnardine and Lucio, on the other hand, are immeasurably lower, smacking of drunkenness, fornication, blasphemy and all the vices that render whoreson man unfit either to live or die. The human baseness that so cries out for grace and redemption is in these lewd wretches grotesquely parodied, and the Duke’s occasional presence among them is like that of Christ in a region of lost souls. To this depth from the high sphere of virtue and justice Angelo falls, and of course his descent may be seen as the keystone of a symbolic drama; he “falls like Lucifer,” like “that olde serpent, called the deuil and Satan . . . which deceiueth all the worlde.”²⁰

Angelo actually experiences two falls—from grace in Act One and from power in the final act—both precipitated by encounters with the immaculate and lofty-minded Isabella. He resembles sin set loose in the world prior to its millennial expurgation, bringing to mind the fallen angel whose former eminence, brightness, underscore the depth and suddenness of his plunge. Once the deputy has forgotten his grace, his likeness to the Devil swiftly grows, and we observe “the progressive


¹⁹. Duke Vincentio’s resemblance to “power divine” has frequently been noted, e.g., Knight, pp. 80-106; Bradbrook, p. 326; Chambers, p. 280. It is worth comparing Bullingbrook’s godlike role in *R.II* (V.iii) as he chooses between justice and mercy in his judgment of Aumerle, whose parents, like bad and good angel, alternately plead for his punishment or pardon. “A god on earth thou art” (V.iii.136) exclaims the relieved duchess when Bullingbrook pardons her son.

²⁰. See Battenhouse, p. 1035.
deterioration of evil" which Lewalski notes in Shylock.21 Giving his sensuality scope, he poses for Isabella a perplexing dilemma which, like a temptation by the Fiend, confounds virtue and vice.22 Hellishly he threatens Claudio with "ling'ring sufferance" (II.iv.167), and almost becomes the very Prince of Lies when, contrary to his own sinful bargain, he orders the death of Claudio. By degrees, as Iago does, Angelo increasingly resembles a devil; more than once is he so named. Thus, as character evolves into symbol, physical beings begin to assume a metaphysical identity. Things of spirit are lodged in the actions of Shakespeare's mortals "grossly closed in," becoming perceptible only by stages.

Paul Siegel has observed that "Iago overcomes the influence of Desdemona, as the bad angel overcomes the influence of the good in the moralities."23 A similar analogy operates in Measure for Measure. As Angelo, like Iago (and Shylock), resembles the bad angel, so Isabella, like Desdemona and Portia, corresponds on occasion to the good angel. All three women plead for mercy over justice in the careers of their respective plays. Isabella's elevated, spiritualized role is indicated by the phrases that describe her; for as Othello's wife is "divine" and Portia a "breathing moral saint," Isabella is "enskied, and sainted" (I.iv.34), "dedicate to nothing temporal" (II.ii.154-55), and by her renunciation "an immortal spirit" (I.iv.35). Such key descriptions, not mere hyperbole, define the analogic functions of these characters, whereby the conflict between Angelo and Isabella, like that of Portia and Shylock, can take on an added dimension of meaning to which the stamped device of the angel coin is again directly relevant. In the first scene of a play fraught with the atmosphere of an apocalyptic struggle, Shakespeare saw fit to introduce in a premonitory flash of imagery the theme of heavenly war.

To be sure, the analogical interpretation rendered here gives a simplified reading of two plays full of complexities, a view which cannot pretend to "explain" their meaning entirely though pointing to currents of thought common to both. The symbol of the angel coin leads us along only one strand, though surely an important one, of a dense and elaborate fabric which interweaves the secular and religious, the real and fantastic, and one meaning or idea with another. And this fabric is richly embossed with "ironic suggestions calculated to daunt the most zealous allegorist,"24 so that it is not always clear what meanings the audience is to infer. If Angelo seems demonic, or Isabella or Portia angelic, they are also memorable as creatures of human feelings and motivations. We are always aware that the "devil" is not without good and suspect that the

22. Battenhouse, p. 1044: "Only a devil's logic would confound Christian charity with mortal sin."
23. Siegel, p. 1070.
"angel" may be less than perfect. If we detect in Antonio a symbol for the dilemma of the ordinary mortal, we must also note with Barbara Lewalski his likeness to the divine Christ.25 He is on one hand the merchant who must sin to live,26 like every man of flesh, and on the other hand a submissive and gentle Man of Sorrows. It may in fact be that Shakespeare intended an iconographic vignette ironically referring to the widespread pictorial tradition of the Man of Sorrows flanked by two angels representing Justice and Mercy, the first angel holding the attribute of a sword and the second a lily (Figure 4).27 Lawrence Danson cannot deny Antonio's partial resemblance to the sorrowful Christ,28 even if the merchant's unchristian treatment of Shylock precludes an absolute identification.

Nor can we ignore the diverse facets of Shylock, or glibly identify him solely as the devil of an allegory. Danson reminds us that "our response to Shylock must accommodate what is good in him," indicating that his defeat is not merely a case of good overcoming evil, or grace destroying law, but a fulfillment too.29 It seems at times that Shakespeare would lead us symbolically in more than one direction, hesitating to allow his characters to consistently maintain any single allegorical role, and teasing us with contradictory hints of meaning. The great poet "plays the spider"—the artist, not the theologian—as he weaves with more than a touch of virtuosity a tapestry of vignettes and allusions to familiar Christian iconography and thought.

No better example of the ramifications of Shakespeare's allusions can be cited than those attending the character Portia. John Rea saw figured in her confrontation with Shylock the intercession of the Virgin Mary on humanity's behalf as told in the Processus Belial. Rea's brief but important note30 convincingly connects the courtroom episode with the medieval drama, but Israel Gollancz and Nevill Coghill urged another equally persuasive source for the same scene.31 Tracing the courtroom conflict to the recurrent medieval allegory of the "Parliament of Heaven," they found (with some divergence in their interpretations) that Portia occupies a position in the play which reflects that of the "daughters of God"—and not the Virgin Mary. God's four daughters, a fre-

25. Lewalski, p. 344: "Antonio, who assumes the debts of others (rescuing Bassanio, the self-confessed 'Prodigal,' from a debt due under the law) reflects on occasion the role of Christ satisfying the claim of Divine Justice by assuming the sins of mankind." On page 339 she speaks of Antonio, like Christ, "baring his breast to shed his blood for the debt of another.

26. The spiritual state of merchants was traditionally held to be precarious, profit-taking implying a sinful preoccupation with worldly increase. For a summary of Elizabethan attitudes to merchants, see Danson, pp. 25-27. Additional valuable comments appear in T. P. Dunning, Piers Plowman: An Interpretation of the A-Text (London: Longmans, 1937), p. 72 ff.


28. Danson, p. 31.


Fig. 4. Master of St. Erasmus, *Man of Sorrows Flanked by Mercy and Justice*. Kupferstichkabinett, Dresden.
quent subject of medieval and Renaissance art and allegory, may be seen in a sixteenth-century book of hours in the Huntington Library (Figure 5). They are Justice, Truth, Peace and Mercy. Coghill saw mirrored in the courtroom encounter of Shylock and Portia the allegorical debate of two of the daughters, Justice and Mercy, over fallen man. A different although related view was cogently put forth by J. A. Bryant, who saw in Portia the representation of Christ's divine nature, complementing Antonio's figuration of Christ's physical nature. Yet another dimension was introduced by Barbara Lewalski, who noted the significant comparison within the play of the disguised Portia to the biblical prophet Daniel—"a second Daniel" (IV.i.333)—whose adopted name of Belteshazzar closely resembles Portia's chosen alias, Balthazar. This link too seems undeniable. Finally the analogue of good angel suggests itself, supported by the angel coin image, and the disarray of Christian exegetes seems complete. Can Portia enact all of these roles? Does she in fact play any of them? It is possible, indeed likely, that Portia is meant to recall every one of these sources; they are spiritually akin and not mutually exclusive. But the ironic point is that she, like Shylock, becomes none other than her mortal self whatever the religious correspondences, suggestions and resemblances. That is why her "heavenly" picture can only be placed in the casket of gross lead, the material body for all that is spiritual within. And the quasi-allegorical roles of the other principal figures, including those of Measure for Measure, are likewise subsumed by their dominant humanity and mortality.

The enhancement of the secular subject with the glow of Christian overtones is so typical of the age that follows the authorship of these comedies that we may venture to compare Shakespeare's analogues in the plays to a remarkably similar one in a painting by a Dutch artist, Jan Vermeer. Vermeer's "Woman Holding a Balance," itself a work of transcendent beauty and poetry (Figure 6), coincidentally includes some of the same symbols as are discussed above. A young Portia or Desdemona of almost divine loveliness and radiance, apparently attending to ordinary household affairs, weighs gold in a scale, while on the wall

32. See Chew for a thorough iconographic study of this subject.
33. Bryant, chapter 3. The Geneva Bible gloss identifies the archangel Michael as Christ in Genesis 31, Daniel 10 and 12, and Revelation 12.
34. Lewalski, p. 340, notes that the prophet Daniel was held to "foreshadow the Christian tradition by his explicit denial of any claim upon God by righteousness, and his humble appeal for mercy." Shakespeare's reference to the Book of Daniel illustrates the complexity of some of his allusions, as well as the shifting nature of his analogies. He could have connected Daniel with the Michael of Revelation since, in the apocryphal text, Daniel, like St. Michael, combats a dragon. According to Louis F. Hartman in The Jerome Biblical Commentary, ed., Raymond E. Brown (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 1, 450, the name Belteshazzar means "guard his life," which corresponds with Portia's defense of Antonio as well as Michael's protective function. The relationship of Daniel to Michael, though cryptic, is undeniable. The archangel is mentioned three times in Daniel (10:13, 21 and 12:1), and rarely elsewhere in either Testament. Both overcome dragons. Jews as well as Christians regarded Michael as their advocate and identified him with mercy. In Enoch (71:2) he teaches the mysteries of clemency and justice. A Jewish tradition also holds that the angel who prevented Laban from harming Jacob was Michael. (Cf., M. of V. Liii 66f.). See Max Seligsohn, "Michael," The Jewish Encyclopedia (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1925).
behind her a panel of the Last Judgment magically lifts her out of the commonplace by making us suddenly aware of her resemblance to the archangel Michael, who is usually shown in paintings of the Judgment with scale in hand. Like Shakespeare, and like so many artists of the seventeenth century, Vermeer transforms everyday life to finer stuff by hinting at meanings beyond the merely secular, thereby investing genre material with spiritual significance and splendor. Just as the Dutch painter uses the background painting to clarify and enrich his meaning, so does Shakespeare employ the image of the angel coin, albeit with greater ambiguity and complexity, as an “amplifier”—so Danson puts it—“of conceivable meanings.”

But was Shakespeare really thinking of good and bad angels when he created such characters as Isabella or Angelo, Portia or Shylock? And does the angel coin image really appertain? Apparently Shakespeare had such symbolic currents in mind in the second Henry IV, where Falstaff, compared to Prince Hal’s evil angel, puns on the angel coin (I.ii.164–65), but they stem from his earliest days as a playwright; for the angels of the moralities are recalled in A Comedy of Errors when S. Dromio compares the jailer of E. Antipholus to an “evil angel” (IV.iii.20), and then refers to the “redemption” money (IV.ii.46) as delivering angels (IV.iii.40–41). In that first of Shakespeare’s comedies a goldsmith named Angelo sends E. Antipholus to prison for failing to discharge a debt, declaring “I shall have law in Ephesus” (IV.i.83). The entire situation strikingly prefigures circumstances in The Merchant of Venice and Measure for Measure. We have the deputy Angelo’s name, the merchant Antonio’s debt, Claudio’s imprisonment, Shylock’s insistence on law (cf., “I stand here for law”), the reference to the angel coin, and the suggested conflict of good and bad angels all occurring together in the same passage. We can hardly doubt that these elements, appearing separately in the later comedies though conjoined in A Comedy of Errors, were meaningfully linked in Shakespeare’s mind.

Another link between the plays worth mentioning here which identifies Angelo, like Shylock, with the Era under Law, and which shows how currents of thought and iconography connect the two plays under discussion, is a passage in The Merchant of Venice that sheds light on the symbolic role of Vincentio’s deputy in Measure for Measure:

Portia. That light we see is burning in my hall.
How far that little candle throws his beams!
So shines a good deed in a naughty world.
Nerissa. When the moon shone, we did not see the candle.
Portia. So doth the greater glory dim the less:
A substitute shines brightly as a king
Until a king be by. . . . (V.i.89–95)

Of course the substitute dimmed by his lord immediately brings Angelo

35. Danson, p. 15.
to mind, and the candle to which he is made to correspond is a commonly used symbol of the Old Dispensation, though usually it is the sun, not the moon, which obscures it. The idea, which stems from the Revelations of St. Bridget, may be observed in many a Christian altarpiece, an example appearing in the Dijon "Nativity" by the so-called Master of Flemalle (Figure 7). There Joseph is seen carefully and reverently holding a candle although the prominently depicted sun has already risen, rendering the candle superfluous. With Christ's nativity, the "greater glory" of the New Dispensation dims the lesser light. This is the symbol Shakespeare employs in the dialogue between Portia and Nerissa, and since he equates the substitute with the emblematic candle, we have a clear indication of what Duke Vincentio's deputy meant to the poet. Thus commonality of themes in the two comedies finds expression in iconographic relationships, as with the shared device of the angel coin.

As there was war in heaven, there is also war on earth. The theme of angelic conflict took on relevance to the events of European history which formed the backdrop of Shakespeare's creative conceptions. Between 1593 and 1606, during which interval The Merchant of Venice and Measure for Measure both were written, frontier wars between Austrians and Turks were renewed, awakening old anxieties throughout Europe. In 1453 the historic stronghold Constantinople had fallen to the Ottoman Turks, a catastrophe of earthshaking dimensions. Then, and for many decades thereafter, did "paganism" seem fearfully on the march. Suleiman the Magnificent took Belgrade in 1521, decisively defeated Christian armies at Mohács, and entered Buda in 1526. The reaction to this threat is well represented by Martin Luther's assertion of 1529 that the Turk was "the very devil incarnate" and his host an army of the devil. In the same year, 1529, Turkish legions ventured what proved to be their farthest penetration into Christian Europe when "their great Sultan" lay siege to Vienna. His boast, memorable and important here, was that he would breakfast inside the city's walls within three days—by the Feast of St. Michael. On that holy day deliverance came in the form of persistent torrential rains which inundated the Turkish enterprise despite its overwhelming advantage of numbers. Suleiman, his cannon bogged down and supply lines hampered, was soon forced to withdraw. But the danger of conquest lingered over Vienna even in Shakespeare's day.

36. Fortin, p. 270, writes: "But the lone candle which lights up this naughty world is nonetheless a true image of heavenly light, though it is not to be confused with that greater glory." See also Panofsky, p. 126, who identifies the candle as "the symbol of a light that is obscured rather than the source of a light that illumines," the splendor materia/is that is totally annihilated by the splendor divinus of the heavenly body which symbolizes Christ.


38. Lord Kinross, The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire (New York: Morrow, 1977), p. 191. Vienna's escape seemed miraculous considering the fact that it was besieged by a multitude, nearly a quarter of a million troops, and was defended by only 16,000. See Noel Barber, The Sultans (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), p. 49.
Fig. 7. Master of Flémalle, *Nativity of Christ*. Musée de Dijon.
Fig. 8. War in Heaven, from Tyndale’s 1534 New Testament. Private Library of William Scheide, Princeton, New Jersey.
A woodcut of the 1534 Tyndale Bible illustrating the heavenly war of Revelation as a battle between Christians and Turks (Figure 8)\(^\text{39}\) indicates how the Ottomite was viewed even in faraway England. The fearful encroachments upon Christendom of a people regarded as the very embodiment of anti-Christian agencies operating in the world made the battle of angelic and demonic forces for the souls of men seem real and current. Had not the salvation of Vienna been St. Michael’s defense of Christian souls against the Dragon? Shakespeare’s choice of that city as the setting of *Measure for Measure* conceals an unrecognized meaning, for just as the action of *The Merchant of Venice* is set in the *time* of the Islamic threat—this Morocco informs us when he boasts of a scimitar “That won three fields of Sultan Solymay . . .” (II.i.26)—so is *Measure for Measure* set in the *location* of Christianity’s great danger. Shakespeare very likely selected Vienna, which is not mentioned in any of his proposed sources, for its symbolic import, because it appeared to be situated on the earthly frontiers of the contending spiritual powers.\(^\text{40}\) The battle for Vienna against “the general enemy Ottoman” and that for Claudio or Antonio very probably were viewed by Shakespeare as manifestations of the same metaphysical encounter that is represented by the subject of the angel coin—which image of conflict, like *The Book of Revelation*, prophesied heaven’s ultimate victory.

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39. See Roland Mushat Frye, *Milton’s Imagery and the Visual Arts* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), p. 46. As Frye points out, the Tyndale woodcut copies one by Lucas Cranach, but differs in that “the faithful angels are unmistakably clothed in European fashions, whereas the satanic forces are shown in Turkish dress and armor. . . .”

40. As Battenhouse, p. 1036, points out, although the characters of *M. for M.* have Italian names, the setting of the play is Vienna. He calls Vienna, as the capital of the Holy Roman Empire, “a sort of type or miniature of the Christian commonwealth” (p. 1059), an explanation that is compatible with mine. None of the writings proposed as Shakespeare’s sources for *M. for M.* are set in Vienna, and some reason is required why he should have changed the play’s location from Innsbruck or Julio.