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‘Troubled with the stone’ or *Deus pecuniaque ex machina*:

The economics of castration in Massinger’s *The Renegado*,

Heywood’s *The Fair Maid of the West*, and Rembrandt’s *The Baptism of the Eunuch*

In Philip Massinger’s *The Renegado* (1624), the newly-unemployed Venetian Gazet approaches Carazie, the eunuch of the Tunisian palace, with the hope of securing a lucrative position there. Gazet brusquely turns down every offer—that is, until Carazie suggest his dream career, the job that will secure his every ambition to wealth, splendor, and sexual opportunity: that of palace eunuch. This exchange is treated as a business endeavor by Gazet and understood to be an effective surrender of Gazet’s masculinity by Carazie, a double entendre between currency and testes by no means rare in the period. In fact, in many other texts of the period, the language of commodification was frequently applied to the testes, as though a man’s economic standing was a matter not of circumstance, but of his masculinity.

Because the Ottoman Empire was both trading rival and eunuch maker to the English, associations between castration and economic loss appear frequently in early modern European texts dealing with encounters between the two cultures. *The Renegado* and Thomas Heywood’s *The Fair Maid of the West* (*Part I* 1600; *Part II* 1630), as well as Dutch artist Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn’s *The Baptism of the Eunuch* (1626), reveal two conflicting predictions of European exchange with the Ottomans. On the one hand, the peril in which trade itself is halted (as in the plays by Massinger and Heywood); and

on the other, the redemption that affords free circulation for all parties involved (as in the Biblical painting by Rembrandt). Massinger's and Heywood's plays represent castration as an allegory for the dangers for Europeans of otherly exchanges, while Rembrandt envisions an Ethiopian eunuch who receives redemption by his castration and acceptance from his European encounter.¹ Though ambivalent, both fantasies in early modern European texts anticipated one common element: interactions with other peoples would end in *loss of self* for one or the other party, for better or worse.

Concerning the less fortunate of these two fates, England's apprehension about cross-cultural exchange was inspired by recent events out of the Mediterranean. International commerce in the Jacobean period was undependable, and frustrated by constant interruption. Valerie Forman, *Tragicomic Redemptions: Global Economics and the Early Modern English Stage*, describes how Barbary pirates tended to halt English trade with the Ottoman Empire, seizing men and ships on their way to selling wares. This made trade in the region extremely difficult, and increased fears about the Ottomans. Drawing from Forman and other scholars of early modern economic theory, Jane Hwang Degenhardt identifies this as a source for dramatic treatments of "cross cultural contact and conversion":

The Ottoman empire's control over the majority of southeastern Mediterranean ports and trade routes meant that the English were completely at its mercy for obtaining the luxury goods that they increasingly depended upon. [...] English seamen [during King James's reign] operating in the Mediterranean were

¹ Though Philip the Apostle was historically Judean, Rembrandt's depiction is unquestionably European.

constantly vulnerable to piracy, enslavement, and religious conversion, especially along the Barbary Coast, where privateers of many different nationalities competed for commodities—both nonhuman and human. (66)

In spite of the harrowing conditions Degenhardt describes, commercial possibilities were great: while the East India Company struggled to yield profit, trade with the Ottomans, when successful, was rich in return. Valerie Forman observes a paradox in this dynamic: “what we see are two very different pictures: in one, the trade is ‘balanced’ (and thus profitable); in the other, it is nearly impossible to conduct. It is perhaps not so much that trade in this region is filled with contradictions, but that conditions presented equally likely but opposing results” (160). Passages such as early modern merchant Thomas Mun’s “industry to increase and frugality to maintain are the true watchmen of a kingdom’s treasury” may *sound* like simple solutions; the idea that simply increasing national exports can solve the problems of poverty and debt (which rarely manifest as a clear, national enemy) is inviting. But the reality was that unpredictable factors could potentially negate trade altogether, complicating the idea that trade will either be successful or unsuccessful by presenting the very real possibility that there will be *no* trade, at all.

From these mixed feelings toward trade between Europeans and the Ottomans emerges the eunuch as a figure for the worst possible result: the “other” removes from the European man the source of his profit. This is nearly the case for Gazet in Philip Massinger’s *The Renegado*, whose dialogue dealing with potential castration began this essay. Indeed, the play depicts Gazet as a social climber whose economic *ambitions* threaten to leave him permanently impotent. Economic exchange, or rather the general

absence of it, figures prominently in the play as a whole, but in the negotiations between the social climbing Gazet and the palace eunuch Carazie, contemporary anxieties towards emerging trade practices are most vividly reflected. (3.4.48). To the thought of serving as his mistress' "bedfellow," Gazet replies: "Oh, rare! / I'll be an eunuch, though I sell my shop for't / And all my wares" (3.4.48-51). Certainly the economic terms by which Gazet expresses his elation point toward the likely final estimation of his dealings; but they also doubtless resonated with its audience's ambivalence toward early modern trade theory, which argued strongly for an equitable balance in the national bullion achieved by exporting as much as, if not more than, what is imported in a constant back-and-forth exchange.

When Carazie dismisses the loss: "It is but parting with / A precious stone or two. I know the price on't," Gazet, in elated anticipation, exclaims, "I'll part with all my stones; and when I am / An eunuch, I'll so toss and touse the ladies!" (3.4.51-4). Gazet's response shows that this situation is a form of economic exchange whereby what is exported can never be brought back. In other words, that the ability to trade is removed and circulation permanently interrupted. Reversing the idea that money invested is deferred for profit later, this scene depicts loss as just what it is on the surface: *loss*, irredeemable. Gazet's situation, according to Forman, demonstrates

expenditure as loss that not only produces no return but also prevents the very possibility of it. Thus, in the figure of the eunuch the play connects the impossibility of trade (as the absence of circulation) to the impossibility of making a profit, of not seeing a return for one's expenditure. (173)

The threat of castration is, more than mere gender politics, a threat against national commerce. As writes Jonathan Gil Harris in *Sick Economies: Drama, Mercantilism, and Disease in Shakespeare's England*, the immobility resulting from castration corresponds to that resulting from economic misfortunes:

Clem's and Carazie's castration not only metaphorically deprives England of its precious stones but also arbitrarily removes wealth in the form of human capital from circulation: immuring otherwise mobile Englishmen within the confines of the Muslim despot's seraglio, Clem's and Carazie's cuttings foster the *jouissance* of Mullisheg or Donusa without increasing the wealth of Morocco or Turkey.

(158)

Another key reason why economic interruption is resembled as castration is that both were received from the same donor: the Ottoman Empire.

The association between castration and economic loss that Massinger makes appears also in Thomas Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the West, Part II* (1630). Having been castrated in *Part I*, the Christian-Englishman Clem, curses his "receipt" and the exchange with the "other" (the "barbers of Barbary") that separated him from his troubles: "A / murrain of these barbers of Barbary! They have given me a / receipt, that, 'scape the colic as well as I can, I shall be sure / never to be troubled with the stone" (1.1.49-52). Whereas Gazet and Carazie are distinct examples of the before and after of being a eunuch, in Clem early seventeenth-century London audiences would have witnessed the frightening process of economic ambition leading to effective inertia. There is a bitter irony in the utterance of "troubled with the stone"—like gold, reproduction can

lead human beings to countless troubles, but it is nonetheless *necessary* for sustaining life. Without income, one can't survive: without conception, *no one* can.

It is also notable that Clem juxtaposes survival of abdominal-intestinal illness with loss of reproductive potential. In fact, this correlation between national economy and the testes (along with the liver) was ready-made, as Massinger and Heywood derived these representations from economic and medical literature of the period. Jonathan Gil Harris explores the link between the liver/testes and national bullion in contemporary thought: In a sort of Galenic economics, early modern economists such as Edward Misselden and Edward Malynes treated the nation, or a composite nation of European nations—called by Misselden the ‘Circle of Christendome’—in corporeal allegory, with the body as the European economy and liver performing important functions (138-50).² Thus the liver—with the testes, which was then considered the final stop on the cardiovascular process after blood had been produced by the liver and then partly purified by the heart—was often given a special, even (in Malynes) a central position in corporeal analogies. At its heart (or rather its liver), this concept of a European composite nation as a body inherently excludes other peoples from the system, inviting inevitable primal considerations about whether the other is an enemy or a friend, as well as trade anxieties about whether exchange will leave the body bettered or dispossessed. Returning to the plays, he writes that, “Heywood’s and Massinger’s fantasies of Christians’ castration in North Africa suggest how the eunuch could serve as a figure not only for Oriental despotic *jouissance* but also for Christian fantasies of transnational economic

² According to Galen, the liver produced blood and not the heart. Galenic physiological assumptions dominated early modern thought until William Harvey published *De Motu Cordis* in 1628, confirming Aristotle’s cardio-centric theory.

competition” (Harris 158). The eunuch, forever deprived of virility, held captive against his will, among none but strangers: this was one of the two outcomes of European interaction with the “other”.

Although I have used examples from tragicomedies to illustrate the desperate outcome of international trade, the redemptive outcome has a broader, more historical resonance, which I will now turn to. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* by Chris Baldick, a tragicomedy is, “a play that combines elements of tragedy and comedy, either by providing a happy ending to a potentially tragic story or by some more complex blending of serious and light moods” (Baldick 361). Though the blending of tones bears significance to the overall ambivalence to which commercial encounters with the “other” was approached, the tragicomic *turn* is more central to my argument.

Referencing two of Philip Massinger’s frequent collaborators, Baldick continues writes that, “the English playwrights Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher [adapted from Italian styles] a new fashion for dramatic ‘romances’ that turned threatening situations into improbably happy conclusions through surprising reversals of fortune” (361). If, to early modern European perception, one possibility of encounters with alterity was that the ego’s prosperity would be undermined, the second possibility begins worse—and ends best.

Whereas the eunuch’s loss represents tragedy, the eunuch’s salvation serves to illustrate the triumphant tragicomic turn. Representing a freely-shared spiritual economy, Rembrandt’s *The Baptism of the Eunuch* (1626) illustrates the conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch by Philip the Evangelical as chronicled in Acts 8. In the image, a central circuit of motion exists between (top-right of triangle) the open scriptures held by a member of the

Ethiopian's company, lending divine authority to Philip, (top-left) Philip, who lovingly imparts the gospel to the eunuch, and (bottom-center) the eunuch himself, who kneels, releasing his soul with head lifted in reverence to heaven. In this way, the eunuch gives glory to God, who is physically represented in the piece by the scriptures held at the beginning of the circuit. Conceptually, the process is self-renewing, a consistent giving whereby God shares himself with prophet, prophet shares God with eunuch, and eunuch freely shares his thanks and reverence with God in public sight of all in his company.

The exchange among God, Philip the Evangelist, and the Ethiopian eunuch is of the utmost sincerity: no conditions, no fine print, nothing to give in return except what God has given unto the recipient. Massinger's *The Renegado* presents an economy where one has the potential to lose, as the result of confusion and misunderstanding, one's place in the system, to be permanently barred from its wealth. Thus servants are castrated, while high-ranking men under the Sultan, as well as the gentleman Vitelli and the pirate Grimaldi, retain their reproductive privilege. In Rembrandt's piece the highest power is free in limitless charity; his messenger, Philip, humbly passes along his overseer's graces to his new brother; the eunuch pays the tax of thankfulness; and the example of an infinitely-renewing economy becomes available to all spectators. The system does not simply renew within its own bounds, but spreads externally to neighboring persons.

In two contemporary contexts, one economic-sexual and the other religious-scriptural, contrasted are finite trade with infinite, broken with balanced. The possibility of becoming a eunuch was a dread danger to London audiences, and the attainment of salvation was a strange ideal to first-century North-Eastern Africa. Both may seem too good to be true, but *Gazet* does not consider consequences, whereas the Ethiopian ignores

them. The redemption of the “other” is proof that interactions between one group and another can be beneficial for either party involved: and if it might serve to redeem either, it has just as much potential to redeem *both*, the European *as well as* the Ethiopian eunuch.

By understanding the historical background that inspired the ambivalence and theme of conversion so prevalent in early modern drama and visual art, modern readers come closer to understanding the origins of the tragicomedy, a genre founded on ambivalence. The contrary fantasies depicted in the European’s castration and the Ethiopian eunuch’s redemption likewise inform modern readers’ understanding of a world whose exploration and cross-cultural experiences were beginning to open into a sense of uncertainty, a necessary Pandora’s box of confusion. Meanwhile, the Oxford English Dictionary records that writers in the period used the word “redeem” to mean both “to deliver (a person, a soul, etc.) from sin or damnation” as well as “to free, recover (mortgaged property, something put in pledge, etc.) by payment of an amount due or by fulfilment of an obligation”. Redemption, in fact, has always carried spiritual and economic resonances, and often both simultaneously, as with Christ’s redemption of mankind on the cross. Tragicomedy is therefore a genre of both ambiguity and redemption, an attempt, by machinery both monetary and divine, to reconcile and synthesize early modern uncertainties.

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Graphic Text – Art

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Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht.