

that there is a point in asking why denial of the number nought can ever be made at all. And I express this by saying that we can reasonably ask 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' or 'Why is there anything at all?' I am not contesting analyses of existence like those offered by Williams (though some do). But I am asking why we are in a position to offer such analyses at all. It seems to me reasonable to do this, and that, in a nutshell, is why I think that there is still some life in the Cosmological Argument, even though some versions of the argument strike me as misguided or difficult to decide upon.

Wisdom as Touchstone in

The Merchant of Venice

Frank McCombie

In distinguishing between character and role in Shakespeare's plays, Peter Ure once wrote:

It is often because we are made aware of the gap, not the consonance, between the man and the office that the situation becomes profound and exciting, and permits rich inferences about what the hero's inward self is like.¹

Few critics spoke with greater conviction about the "inward self" of the Shakespearean protagonist, but it is with the outward selves of the protagonists of *The Merchant of Venice* that we shall be concerned in what follows. It is at least arguable that the somewhat confused state of debate about this play is owing to the resolute concentration of attention upon the "inward selves" of Portia, Antonio, and Shylock, and to the too-easy assumptions that are made about the nature and importance of their roles. To suggest that the fabric of meaning in *The Merchant of Venice* depends absolutely upon the identification of roles in the terms in which Shakespeare conceived them is not to underestimate the interest and importance of the ways in which character regularly pulls against role, for what Peter Ure said is perhaps more true of this

play than of many. This, nevertheless, is a truth which can be apprehended only if the conception of role is properly appreciated; if it is not appreciated, neither is the nature or purpose of the tension Peter Ure was attempting to define.

The story of *The Merchant of Venice*, if we put matters of character aside, tells how a lady "of wondrous virtues", a "mortal breathing saint", an "angel", is sought by a variety of foolish and short-sighted men who constantly confound her virtue with that of silver and gold; how finally a perceptive suitor secures her; how she then descends from her "beautiful mountain" of Belmont to rescue a righteous man from the clutches of his wicked and ungodly enemy; and how she then returns in or to the company of all who love her. This is the story of Wisdom as it is presented in those three centrally important books of the Bible's wisdom literature, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, *Ecclesiasticus*, and *Proverbs*. The somewhat limited research there has been into Shakespeare's knowledge of the Bible suggests that he was reasonably familiar with *Ecclesiasticus*, and it may have been out of that familiarity that the idea of writing a "wisdom play" first grew.²

Certainly, in *Ecclesiasticus* Shakespeare could have found much to his point on the nature of the "faithful friend" (6: 14-17); a warning against niggardliness and acting the miser in one's own house and at one's own table (14: 3-10); a commendation of the man who tracks Wisdom like a hunter (14: 20-22); a warning to Jewish fathers about the perils of daughters and the need to disown those who cannot be kept under control (22: 3-5); the promise of Wisdom that she will come down from the high places (24: 3-7); a commendation of the good wife and her beauty, like that of golden pillars on a base of silver (26: 13-23); a warning to all merchants about the difficulty of engaging in commerce without becoming defiled (26: 30-27: 3); a warning to the man who digs a pit for his enemy, lest he fall into it himself, since vengeance waits for him like a lion (27: 26-29); a warning to the vengeance-seeker who, having no mercy, need expect none (28: 1-4); an exhortation to lend in mercy (29: 1-2), and to appreciate the risk the lender may take with his life in making the loan (29: 18-23); a warning to the foolish against attaching importance to dreams (34: 1-2). It is almost certainly on passages in this book that Shakespeare bases Portia's mercy-speeches.³ There is here, no doubt, something more than a generalised underpinning of the central ideas and oppositions of *The Merchant of Venice*, but in itself *Ecclesiasticus*, a long and wide-ranging book, could be thought to offer only generalised guidance in the identification of role. For more than this we must turn to *Wisdom* and *Proverbs*, and here the guidance is remarkably specific.

The Wisdom of Solomon is concerned to define the nature and role of wisdom in Man's destiny and in his history. Like *Ecclesiasticus*, or *The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach*, *The Wisdom of Solomon* was bound with the Old Testament in the Bibles Shakespeare knew; the Authorised Version (1611) and subsequent Protestant Bibles printed the Apocrypha in a separate volume. Neither book is included in the Jewish canon of scripture. *The Proverbs*, with which both the apocryphal books share a highly epigrammatic and often very poetic style, as well as a high density of content, is, of course, an accepted book of the Old Testament. The other books of the "wisdom literature" are *Job* and *Ecclesiastes*, or *Qoheleth*. *Proverbs* is much concerned with the correct and incorrect uses of wealth.

In *Ecclesiasticus*, *Proverbs*, and *Wisdom* – the most determinedly poetic of the three – Wisdom is repeatedly personified as a woman, but in *Wisdom* and *Proverbs* frequently in a manner which suggests hypostasis. In *Wisdom*, Chapters 8 and 9, it is possible to take this female figure to be a poetic metaphor for the Spirit of God; and in *Proverbs* 8: 22ff it is easy to believe that it is the Son of God who is Wisdom. In fact, the Genevan marginal commentary says quite explicitly that it is:

He declareth hereby the divinity and eternity of this wisdom, which he magnifieth and praiseth through this book: meaning thereby the eternal Son of God Jesus Christ our Saviour, whom St John calleth the word that was in the beginning.⁴

Modern commentators speak with greater caution and discrimination.⁵ Shakespeare, whose theology was a great deal more circumspect than he is given credit for, was equally cautious, confining Wisdom to a virtue of God freely available, like grace, to men of good will, so that he was able to take up the convenient female personification without any of its theological overtones.

Portia, I shall then argue, is Wisdom: the play upon who is or is not wise, and why, culminates in Bassanio's courteous:

Most worthy gentleman, I and my friend
Have by your wisdom been this day acquitted.

(iv 1 403-4)⁶

In surprising detail, it is possible to tell the story of *The Merchant of Venice* in the terms of *Wisdom* and *Proverbs*, many of which Shakespeare seems deliberately to have taken over; and to do so is to speak of the play strictly in terms of the roles involved in its moral confrontations and resolutions. To account for the play thus is to provide a counterbalance against accounts which are too exclusively concerned with nuances of character, and, I should

wish to argue, to indicate the manner in which Shakespeare intended the tension between character and role to be understood in this play.

The embryonic situation is one in which the ungodly (those who belong to the devil) are acting in wickedness, having rejected true wisdom:

Because wisdom cannot enter into a wicked heart, nor dwell in the body that is subject unto sin. For the Holy Spirit of discipline fleeth from deceit and withdraweth himself from the thoughts that are without understanding, and is rebuked when wickedness cometh. (*Wisdom 1: 4-5*)⁷

Such people need not think that their wickedness will go undetected, or that they will be able to avoid giving an account of themselves:

therefore he that speaketh unrighteous things, can not be hid: neither shall the judgment of reproach let him escape. For inquisition shall be made for the thoughts of the ungodly, and the sound of his words shall come unto God for the correction of his iniquities. (*Wisdom 1: 8-9*)

Such are the oppressors of the poor, whom they calculatedly and ruthlessly exploit:

Let us oppress the poor, that is righteous: let us not spare the widow, nor reverence the white hairs of the aged, that have lived many years.

Let our strength be the law of unrighteousness: for the thing that is feeble, is reproved as unprofitable.

(*Wisdom 2: 10-11*)

Particularly are they incensed with those who publicly accuse them, and they will seek their deaths:

Therefore let us defraud the righteous: for he is not for our profit, and he is contrary to our doings: he checketh us for offending against the Law, and blameth us as transgressors of discipline. (*Wisdom 2: 12*)

Let us condemn him unto a shameful death.

(*Wisdom 2: 20*)

To accomplish this evil, the ungodly will lay traps for the righteous man:

A wicked man deceiveth his neighbour, and leadeth him into the way that is not good.

He shutteth his eyes to devise wickedness: he moveth his lips, and bringeth evil to pass. (*Proverbs 16: 29-30*)

Even as he is plotting murder, he pretends that it is his wish only to be his victim's friend, and that his trap is merely a merry sport:

As he that feigneth himself mad, casteth fire-brands, arrows,
and mortal things,
So dealeth the deceitful man with his friend and sayeth,
Am not I in sport? (*Proverbs* 26: 13-19)

Nothing he says may be believed, for all is in hate:

He that hateth, will counterfeit with his lips,
but in his heart he layeth up deceit.
Though he speak favourably, believe him not: for there
are seven abominations in his heart. (*Proverbs* 26: 24-25)

But the righteous are protected:

But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,
and no torment shall touch them. (*Wisdom* 3: 1)

The machinations of the ungodly will bring them nothing but pain and condemnation:

But the ungodly shall be punished according to their imaginations: for they have despised the righteous, and forsaken the Lord. (*Wisdom* 3: 10; cf. *Proverbs* 8: 35 and 11: 12)

Heaven, in the person of Wisdom, will come to the aid of the righteous man:

Then shall the righteous stand in great boldness before the face of such as have tormented him, and taken away his labours. (*Wisdom* 5: 1)

It is the upright who will prevail, and riches will not save the wicked:

The uprightness of the just shall guide them: but the frowardness of the transgressors shall destroy them. Riches avail not in the day of wrath: but righteousness delivereth from death. (*Proverbs* 11: 3-4)

The ungodly (like everyone else) will be astounded to see the easy escape of the righteous man from their clutches, and dismayed to find that they have fallen into their own trap:

When they see him, they shall be vexed with horrible fear, and shall be amazed for his wonderful deliverance. (*Wisdom* 5: 2; cf. *Proverbs* 19: 28-29)

For it is a truth that:

He that causeth the righteous to go astray by an evil way, shall fall into his own pit, and the upright shall inherit good things. (*Proverbs* 28: 10; cf. *Proverbs* 26: 26-27)

Then the city will rejoice that justice has been done:

In the prosperity of the righteous, the city rejoiceth, and when the wicked perish, there is joy.

By the blessing of the righteous, the city is exalted: but it is subverted by the mouth of the wicked.

(*Proverbs* 11: 10-11)

The ungodly will ask themselves:

What hath pride profited us? or what profit hath the pomp of riches brought us? (*Wisdom* 5: 8)

It is pride that is fed by riches, but those proud in their riches are doubly endangered:

Pride goeth before destruction, and an high mind before the fall. (*Proverbs* 16: 18)

He that trusteth in his riches, shall fall: but the righteous shall flourish as a leaf. (*Proverbs* 11: 28)

And especially must this apply to the usurer:

He that increaseth his riches by usury and interest, gathereth them for him that will be merciful unto the poor.

(*Proverbs* 28: 8)

The marginal note reads:

For God will take away the wicked usurer, and give his goods to him that shall bestow them well.

It will be Wisdom who comes to the rescue of the righteous man and turns the tables on the ungodly:

Wherefore I prayed, and understanding was given me:
I called and the Spirit of Wisdom came unto me.

(*Wisdom* 7: 7)

She is to be valued above all things:

I preferred her to sceptres and thrones, and counted riches nothing in comparison of her.

Neither did I compare precious stones unto her: for all gold is but a little gravel in respect of her, and silver shall be counted but clay before her.

(*Wisdom* 7: 8-9; cf. *Proverbs* 3: 15)

Proverbs is even more insistent on this point, pressing the comparison by using commercial terms of Wisdom as of silver and gold:⁸

Blessed is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding.

For the merchandise thereof is better than the

merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof is better than gold.
(*Proverbs* 3: 13-14; repeated at 8: 10-11. 16: 16. and 22: 1)

Those who, in making direct comparisons of these two kinds of merchandise, fail to evaluate them correctly must, in fact, be thought to despise Wisdom; their hearts' hopes of fair advantage come then to nothing, their labours are lost, and they are made to seem and feel foolish:

Who so despiseth wisdom and discipline, is miserable,
and their hope is vain, and their labours are foolish,
and their works unprofitable. (*Wisdom* 3: 11)

Wisdom comes, then, in answer to prayer, and her task is to see that justice and equity are guaranteed for the righteous:

O God of fathers, and Lord of mercy, which hast made
all things with thy word,
And ordained through wisdom, that she should
have dominion over the creatures which thou hast made,
And govern the world according to equity and
righteousness, and execute judgment with an upright heart.
Give me that wisdom, which sitteth by thy throne . . .
Send her out of thy holy heavens, and send her from
the throne of thy majesty that she may be with me,
and labour, that I may know what is acceptable in thy sight.
(*Wisdom* 9: 1-4 and 10)

When Wisdom comes, she can boast:

By me, Kings reign, and princes decree justice.
By me princes rule and the nobles, and all the
judges of the earth. (*Proverbs* 8: 15-16)

She comes preaching mercy, commending the merciful, and condemning those who are cruel:

He that is merciful, rewardeth his own soul: but
he that troubleth his own flesh, is cruel. (*Proverbs* 11: 17)

The sinner despiseth his neighbour: but he that hath
mercy on the poor, is blessed. (*Proverbs* 14: 21)

She commends the friendship that can be relied upon for help in time of trouble:

A friend loveth at all times: and a brother is born
for adversity. (*Proverbs* 17: 17)

He that hath mercy upon the poor, lendeth unto
the Lord: and the Lord will recompense him that
which he hath given. (*Proverbs* 19: 17)

It is the generous friend who will be rescued from the ungodly rich man into whose hands he has fallen by taking the loan:

The rich ruleth the poore, and the borrower is
servant to the man that lendeth.
He that soweth iniquity, shall reap affliction,
and the rod of his anger shall fail.
He that hath a good eye, he shall be blessed: for he
giveth of his bread unto the poor. *(Proverbs 22: 7-9)*

Wisdom will snatch the righteous out of the midst of judgment,
for she will look after those who are her own, and see that they
inherit:

I love them that love me: and they that seek me early,
shall find me.
Riches and honour are with me: even durable riches
and righteousness.
My fruit is better than gold, even the fine gold,
and my revenue is better than fine silver.
I cause to walk in the way of righteousness, and in
the midst of the paths of judgment,
That I may cause them that love me, to inherit
substance, and I will fill their treasuries. *(Proverbs 8: 17-21)*

But if she is to come to the rescue, Wisdom must be sought for
diligently, and her counsels heeded; only those who truly love her
will find her out:

Heare instruction, and be ye wise, and refuse it not:
blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily
at my gates, and giving attendance at the posts of my doors.
For he that findeth me, findeth life, and shall obtain
favour of the Lord. *(Proverbs 8: 33-34)*

Yet though she turn the tables on the ungodly, causing him to fall
into his own pit, she is merciful, as the Lord is merciful:

But thou hast mercy upon all: for thou hast power
of all things, and makest as though thou sawest not the sins
of men, because they should amend. *(Wisdom 11: 20)*

God sees to it that the works of Wisdom are not in vain, and comes
to the aid of the righteous even where he has taken risks with ships
upon the seas:

But thy providence, O father, governeth it: for thou hast
made a way, even in the sea, and a sure path among the waves,
Declaring thereby, that thou hast power to help in all things,
yea though a man went to the sea without means.

Nevertheless thou wouldst not, that the works of thy wisdom should be vain, and therefore do men commit their lives to a small piece of wood, and pass over the stormy sea in a ship, and are saved. (*Wisdom* 14: 3-5)

Wisdom is like a great light, making clear the ways of the Lord:

Therefore thou gavest them a burning pillar of fire to lead them in the unknown way, and madest the sun that it hurted them not in their honourable journey. (*Wisdom* 18: 3)

But the ungodly are denied this light, and with justice:

But they were worthy to be deprived of the light, and to be kept in darkness, which had kept thy children shut up, by whom the uncorrupt light of the Law should be given to the world. (*Wisdom* 18: 4)

Proverbs concludes with a sketch of the virtuous woman, the human personification, as it were, of the figure of Wisdom, the same terms being used of both.⁹

Who shall find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above the price of pearls. (*Proverbs* 31: 10; cf. *Proverbs* 3: 15, and also *Ecclus.* 26: 3)

The heart of her husband trusteth in her, and he shall have no need of spoil. (*Proverbs* 31: 11; *Proverbs* 3: 16, and also *Ecclus.* 26: 1-2)

She feeleth that her merchandise is good: her candle is not put out by night. (*Proverbs* 31: 18; cf. *Proverbs* 3: 14)

She openeth her mouth with wisdom, and the law of grace is in her tongue. (*Proverbs* 31: 26)

She overseeth the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness. (*Proverbs* 31: 27; cf. *Ecclus.* 1: 21)

Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vanity: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised. (*Proverbs* 31: 30)¹⁰

Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates. (*Proverbs* 31: 31; cf. *Proverbs* 8: 19 and 21, and also *Ecclus.* 1: 20)

There is little room for ambiguity in the defining of roles. Portia is Wisdom, who comes down from her "beautiful mountain" to see justice done in Venice. Before she arrives, we know her as one little inclined to compromise with wickedness or folly, or even with the vain hopes of limited men. She has not refused the instructions left her by her wise father, however headstrong she may be, and has thus inherited his wisdom. Antonio is the righteous man

she has come to rescue, and it is from the evil machinations of the ungodly and devilish Shylock that she has come to rescue him. There is no room for sympathy for the ungodly one who practises to deceive his righteous neighbour in order to draw him into evil ways where he may fall into the pit prepared for him and be killed. Shylock has been ungodly in prizing riches above true wisdom, in practising usury, and in resenting, to the point of being filled with murderous hatred, the reproof of the righteous Antonio. Because Antonio has limited Shylock's opportunities for profit-making by delivering the poor from his forfeitures, Shylock has plotted his death under the guise of friendship and a merry sport.

Antonio's deliverance from the midst of judgment before the congregated court brings joy to the city of Venice, and no one laments the fall of his would-be assassin. That merciless one has shown himself in every way to be ungodly – misusing holy witness, scorning the law of grace, prizing riches more than people, jewels more than wisdom and love: his riches have profited him nothing, and he has fallen into his own pit. To the amazement of everyone, Portia has brought Antonio out of his clutches, given to him the disposal of Shylock's goods, and her last gesture of support is to give him assurance of the safety of his ships, which have been brought through the perils that had seemed to destroy them. All those who love Portia and respect her – and this includes Lorenzo and Jessica – inherit substance. And Bassanio, of whose moral and intellectual status we might at first have had some doubts, improves constantly in the pursuit of Portia and wisdom and understanding. Like Antonio, he proves to have a good eye, and it is discovered that he knows how to distinguish her worth from that of silver and gold.¹¹ Portia brings light into the lives of all with whom she associates, and all who know how to value her: she keeps the candle burning in her window by night. In her Bassanio wins the wife who is in effect synonymous with Wisdom, knowing that appearance is deceitful, beauty mere vanity, but that his wife is a woman of wondrous virtues, one whose merchandise, termed in gross, far exceeds account.

Gentlemen not actually infatuated with Portia may well regard her as a somewhat alarming prospect as a wife; she has the *Schadenfreude* we are sometimes disconcerted to find in Shakespeare's heroines, and she has a ruthlessness to match that of Shylock. Antonio may be – as many have thought – the oddest hero Shakespeare ever created, and Bassanio (if *he* is the hero) a grave disappointment. Shylock, on the other hand, may evoke in us a very complex response in which sympathy is included. Each is a very complex piece of characterisation; and that, surely, was an important aspect of what Shakespeare had to say: that in being called to

fulfil a role in life, we may be, or feel ourselves to be, quite absurdly inadequate. Nevertheless, whatever we may feel about the adequacy or inadequacy of the characters in *The Merchant of Venice*, and about the complex responses they evoke in us, we ought to be in no doubt about how we are to view their actions. What Portia does is well done, and is backed by the authority of the Bible; Antonio is the righteous man, and Bassanio seeks like a hunter for wisdom. Shylock, perhaps the only unambiguously racially prejudiced character in the play, is condemned, not by the New Testament teachings subscribed to by his antagonists, but out of the books of the Old Testament.¹² He is condemned by his own professed standards – professed but, as we have seen, seriously contravened.

It is commonly acknowledged that *The Merchant of Venice* is a play in which, as Noble put it, “Shakespeare very evidently taxed his Scriptural knowledge”.¹³ I am suggesting here that he made even closer use of the Bible than Noble made out.¹⁴ I am suggesting that in taking up the twin stories of the loan and the caskets, of usurer in pursuit of his victim frustrated by a sharp lady from Belmont, Shakespeare recognised a clearly definable morality play, just as he did in the Two parts of *Henry IV*. How brilliantly he drew story and morality together I have only been able to hint at here. My purpose has been simply to suggest that to take the story without the morality is to be in some danger of missing Shakespeare’s point and of undervaluing his art.

- 1 Peter Ure, “Character and Role from *Richard III* to *Hamlet*”, in *Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies V* (1963); p 10. The essay is reprinted in the collection, *Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama* (1974).
- 2 Richmond Noble, *Shakespeare’s Biblical Knowledge* (1935), is very helpful on borrowed phraseology, less so on the more pervasive influence of thought. His findings suggest that Shakespeare was specially familiar with *Ecclesiasticus*, and this view is supported by Peter Milward, *Shakespeare’s Religious Background* (1973); p 87 *et passim*.
- 3 *Ecclus.* 35: 19: “Oh, how faire a thing is mercie in the time of anguise and trouble! It is like a cloude of raine, that cometh in the time of a drought.” This is noted by Noble (p 167), and he notes two further possible echoes from *Ecclesiasticus*, 2: 21 (at IV.i.193-7), and 28: 2-5 (at IV.i. 200-202).
- 4 All quotations are from the Genevan Bible of 1560, but with spelling modernised. It is generally agreed that Shakespeare either possessed or had access to a copy of the Genevan-Tomson in the 1595 edition. This was a binding of the Genevan OT with Lawrence Tomson’s revision (1576) of the NT. (See Noble, pp 58-89).
- 5 Useful surveys of current thinking in this rapidly expanding field of biblical scholarship may be found in James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (1981), and Gerald T. Sheppard, *Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct* (1980).
- 6 All references are to the *Complete Works*, edited by Peter Alexander (1951).
- 7 For ease and brevity, references in this section are given in brackets.

- 8 J. R. Brown, in his Arden edition of the play (rep. 1961), speaks of Shakespeare employing the language of commerce for the exchanges between Portia and Bassanio “Consciously or unconsciously” (Introduction, p lvi). It seems to me a fully conscious adoption of a usage he must have long been familiar with in *Proverbs*. He employs it also in *Romeo and Juliet*, II.ii.82-4.
- 9 Cross-references are given in brackets where they appear to be either necessary or helpful.
- 10 This verse provides one of only two echoes of *Proverbs* Noble found in *The Merchant of Venice* (at III.ii.88-9). The other is even more doubtful – a distant echo of *Proverbs* 17: 28 (at I.i.95-7), where in fact the whole exchange (picked up again at II.ii. 165ff.) is based on *Ecclesiasticus* 20: 1-8.
- 11 There seems to be some play upon Old Gobbo’s myopia too. He is “gravel-blind” (a Shakespearean coinage), but – perhaps anticipating Gloucester’s seeing blindness in *King Lear* – he seems like Bassanio in being able to make value-judgments confirming that “golde is but a little grauel in respect of” Wisdom (*Wisdom*, 7: 9).
- 12 The fact that *Wisdom* is not in the Jewish canon of scripture (assuming that Shakespeare knew this) is of much less importance here than the fact that it reflects specifically Jewish thinking.
- 13 Noble, p 96.
- 14 He notes only three echoes of *Ecclesiasticus* (see Note 3 above), only two very doubtful echoes of *Proverbs* (see Note 10 above), and none at all from *Wisdom*.

Stories of the Soul

Fergus Kerr O P

When it comes to the crunch, how does one know what other people are thinking, feeling etc? One way – the classical modern-philosophical way – of dealing with this question is to say that one knows what others are thinking etc. from analogy with one’s own case. Another way, however, is to go back to the Aristotelian conception of the soul as form of the body – which rules out radical scepticism about other people’s minds. In comparison with the Platonic story, at any rate, Aristotle’s view seems like plain common sense. On the other hand, the imaginative power of the Platonic story is so immense that liberation from it cannot be easily achieved. It is possible to read Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* as an intervention in this long debate. By resorting to St Augustine’s picture of how (why) an infant acquires language, as