

Saint Omobono of Cremona and the English Merchant on Page and Stage*

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For the English-speaking world, St. Omobono of Cremona (d. 1197), patron of businesspeople and entrepreneurs, has been an opaque, even anonymous, figure. For nearly eight hundred years, he has suffered from scholarly inattention and lack of popular devotion due to the rarity of documents regarding his life. Amazingly, no complete English translation of these documents exists (until now). This article provides some important biographical details from these early documents and then examines the early literary representation of the merchant character in Chaucer and Shakespeare. The Church recognized in 1199 that the commercial life could produce men and women of holiness. Shakespeare likewise understood that the rule of law needed to be governed by prudence and ethics in order to create a more human and humane world.

Introduction

On June 24, 1997, then Pope John Paul II issued an apostolic blessing addressed to Giulio Nicolini, Bishop of Cremona.¹ In this letter, John Paul II briefly recounts the history of St. Omobono, patron of Cremona, merchants, and entrepreneurs, emphasizing that Omobono was “the first and only layman of the faithful, not to belong either to the nobility or to a royal or princely family, to be canonized during the Middle Ages.” The letter, written in recognition of the “Year of St. Omobono” called by Bishop Nicolini and celebrated throughout the Diocese of Cremona from November 13, 1997 until January 12, 1999, is among the few modern Church documents to reference this merchant saint. In the text, John Paul recognizes the profound and “striking parallels” between twelfth-century

Cremona and our contemporary world: “Although distant in time, Omobono does in fact figure as a saint for the Church and society of our time . . . because of the exemplary way this faithful layman worked and lived the Gospel perfection. The striking parallels with the demand of the present time give [this] celebration a profound sense of ‘contemporaneity.’” Indeed, the turbulent economic and social changes faced by Omobono eight hundred years ago mirror our modern world in compelling, fascinating ways. As such, any nuanced understanding or comprehensive account of the Church’s historical relationship with markets and the morality of business must take into account this axial figure. As John Paul tacitly states, failure to explore the life of St. Omobono undermines any claims of authority and betrays an ignorance of the rich traditions of Church history. Today, the rhetoric surrounding markets and morality has reached a fever pitch, often generating more heat than light. Perhaps a humble merchant from Cremona can advance the discussion in a productive fashion.

At first glance, the world of Omobono seems far removed from the complexities of modern-day life. Economic historians invoke terms such as disruption, innovation, and displacement to define market realities in the twenty-first century.² Although the blinding speed with which current technology develops has no genuine historical precursor, numerous examples exist of paradigm shifts and disruptions of large scale: the printing press, the mechanical loom, the steam engine, hydraulics, digital photography, the smart phone, Uber, and other forms of software substitution, to name only a few.³ Each of these innovations produces winners and losers in a free economy, especially when entire industries become redundant and then extinct. In a familiar historical pattern, the printing press displaced the scribe, mechanical looms devastated artisan weavers, digital photography obliterated Kodak, and Netflix bankrupted Blockbuster.⁴ Such moments produce obvious tensions and uncertainties, as traditional methods give way to new realities and the established order unravels, either at the margins or at the very center. As a result of this ubiquitous disruption, critics of the free economy often condemn the market *qua* market and advocate increasing government regulation, taxation, and oversight.⁵ These condemnations, of course, are not confined to professional economists.

Examining a humble merchant who died over eight hundred years ago may seem unlikely to produce much insight into these contentious topics. Nonetheless, Pope St. John Paul II praises Omobono for the virtues he exemplifies and the lessons he can provide to a postmodern audience. As we shall see, the silk merchant sought to find an authentic, charitable, and Catholic path of life in the midst of cultural and economic turbulence, including obstacles from his family, his parish, his guild, and from the “market dynamics” inherent in the profession of a

tailor, merchant, and entrepreneur. The apostolic blessing concludes by noting how the turbulent times of the twelfth century serve as a fitting precursor to our own time of disruption and change. According to the pope, the model provided by Omobono “is exactly what we need in the climate of unremitting transition that we are experiencing; we need it for developing the present positive premises and for responding to the serious challenges deriving from the profound crises of civilization and culture.”⁶ According to the pope, the model presented by this holy layman (the “positive premises”) makes clear that “sanctity is not reserved for some, but proposed to everyone without distinction.”⁷ In that striking sentence, the pope invites an open dialogue and reappraisal of the past, present, and future of a free economy and the role of the people who participate in that economy. In many ways, it is a stunning document and the reclamation of a history that starts with an 1199 canonization and finds expression to this very day.

While Omobono remained a recognized figure throughout Italy, the English-speaking world remained largely unaware of his life and the way he synthesized the worlds of public commerce and private faith. Absent this model of virtue, English authors developed a distinct, yet related, tradition regarding the merchant character on the page (in poems and novels) and on the stage (in plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries). This article explores the life of St. Omobono culled from four separate documents and then briefly juxtaposes that virtuous image with the emerging negative stereotype as found in Chaucer and Shakespeare, a stereotype that continues to depict characters engaged in business and those working in the marketplace as shallow, corrupt, melancholic, and dishonest.

Like a Lily Among the Thorns

Saint Omobono, while largely unknown in the English-speaking world, presents a compelling model for today’s lay merchant and anyone engaged in the world of commerce. We need to consider this figure for a fully nuanced historical appreciation of the complex world of economic history. On the micro level, he is a model worth recalling, especially for those who strive to find a synthesis between markets and morality, for a harmony between the quest for profit and the quest for integrity. On the macro level, the history of St. Omobono provides a compelling and important dimension to the often-vitriolic debates over the free economy and the common good. For a variety of reasons, the veneration of Omobono never migrated far beyond Cremona or its environs; it certainly never made it to England or the United States. However, the canonization of St. Omobono in 1199 remains a seminal, even if largely unrecognized, event for the Church.⁸ As a lay saint without ties to a religious or monastic community, Omobono developed his

reputation for holiness outside of the channels traditionally regarded as suitable for personal sanctification. According to Augustine Thompson, these lay saints were extremely uncommon and “were above all good neighbors, exceptional principally in the intensity with which they lived the common religiosity.”⁹ No English language biography of the saint exists, and this perhaps accounts for the benign neglect. Although the first English biography is forthcoming, a brief biographical summary will help establish the context for a greater appreciation.¹⁰

Father Daniele Piazzi’s biography of St. Omobono, written in Italian, provides a concise picture of the merchant from Cremona.¹¹ Four extant documents (only recently translated into English) provide the basis for this biography and all subsequent scholarship: *The Bull of Canonization (BC)*, issued by Pope Innocent III on January 12, 1199); *Cum Orbita Solis (COS)*, published very shortly after the *BC*); *Quoniam Historiae (QH)*, published between 1230 and 1240); and *Labentibus Annis (LA)*, ca. 1260). Space limitations preclude a full analysis of these important documents in this article, but a brief biography will provide a working context.

Omobono Tucenghi came from a family of tailors residing in the city of Cremona. He inherited the family business and became a successful merchant and tradesman in his own right—buying and selling a variety of products—and finally becoming something of an entrepreneur. He lived a conventional life with his wife and children; he was prosperous, hard-working, intelligent, and widely admired. He was marked by a conspicuous piety and extreme acts of charity to his neighbors. Although he lived to the robust age of eighty years, according to the document, around the age of fifty, his “formerly calloused preoccupation with increasing his wealth began to cool,” and he shifted his attention to a life of prayer and charity, largely abandoning the world of business and giving himself over to the penitential life. This transition caused some strife, even division, within the Tucenghi household (especially with his status-conscious wife). Omobono died in November 1197 while lying prostrate before the altar during the consecration. Given his reputation, his death generated great expressions of sorrow in Cremona and the surrounding areas; as a result of this spontaneous veneration, Bishop Sicard shortly presented his case for canonization to Rome. After a formal and detailed investigation, Omobono was canonized by Pope Innocent III, only fifteen months after his death. In June 1202, his body was removed from his home parish of Saint Giles (where he died) to the cathedral (where his uncorrupted body remains today under the high altar).

In addition to a biography with charming details, these documents also provide an impeccable case for canonization and a rich account of the prevailing attitudes toward the market and commercial activity at the close of the twelfth century. Moreover, the *BC* represents a significant step in the reservation of saintly canon-

ization to the papacy. In the document, Innocent III not only presents the personal holiness and public miracles of Omobono, he also sets forth a comprehensive account of the “theology of sainthood.” Innocent emphasizes both personal holiness and divine endorsement, both the virtue of life and virtue of signs. The document asserts that “two things are necessary for one to be venerated as a saint in the Church Militant, namely a holy life *and* the power of miracles, that is to say works of piety in life and the signs of miracles after, *both* are required.”¹² Pope Innocent III especially cites Omobono’s piety and his devotion to worship, prayer, almsgiving, the sacraments, and other Catholic practices almost to the complete omission of his life as a merchant. In fact, the earliest document all but ignores his professional life, seemingly embarrassed to broach the subject at all. The review of conduct clearly demonstrates a deep and profound piety, and Innocent spends much of the document presenting these virtues. This document of canonization *hints* at the corrosive possibilities of business and worldly affairs and, by juxtaposition, establishes the exceptional nature of Omobono’s holiness: “He did not frequent the company of worldly men, among whom he was distinguished like a lily among the thorns.” In this sense, worldly meant commercial—men of business affairs. Such earthly concerns were hardly seen as compatible with holiness. Thus, Innocent highlights the conspicuous piety of the merchant, suggesting that his ability to avoid contamination largely resulted from the daily practices of his faith. Mixing with worldly men meant engagement with the corrosive power of worldly *concerns*. Without these saving graces realized by his religious practices, the thorns of commerce (assumed but never fully articulated) would certainly wither the beautiful flower. The message is clear and conventional: Sanctification and worldliness are largely, but not fully, incompatible. The merchant from Cremona, Pope Innocent implies, provides a heroic model of this possibility.

It would be a mistake to underappreciate the significance of this canonization. At this early stage in premodern economic history, the Church already recognized that no station of life existed outside the possibility of grace and redemption. All professions, entered into with honesty and integrity—genuine human virtue—could lead to holiness and veneration. The Church did not issue generalized, rhetorically inflamed condemnations of an entire system or group of people. However, until Omobono, canonizations largely involved those in the religious life and martyrs to the faith. Workers who toiled in agriculture or the growing number of merchants certainly could find edification in the heroic virtue of a holy monk or blessed martyr, but they could not find actual peers. This changed with Omobono. Suddenly, participating in the various and sundry activities of the market was not, *prima facie*, seen as excluding one from the redemptive

possibilities of grace and sanctification. Blanket denunciation of the commercial life *in toto* would effectively close the door to salvation for entire communities of people. This watershed event directly reached a burgeoning class of people.

After the canonization in 1199, additional material about Omobono was gathered (perhaps by Bishop Sicard himself) and published as *COS*. This “liturgical life” contains nine meditations/readings for use in the Diocese of Cremona for the Matins night prayers of the divine office. The document expands considerably on the Bull of Canonization, adding colorful details about the saint’s family and business activities. Moreover, *COS* also captures more expressly some of the accumulated bias against the merchant class and those who engaged in the professions ruled by the guilds. The first reading directly addresses people engaged in commerce and commercial activity and again asks them to “rejoice,” for one of their own rank has been enrolled in the catalogue of saints. These people now have a model—one of their very own—to venerate and emulate. These merchants needed such edification, for the reading equates the life of commerce with a “grindstone,” a constant pulling away from family and the life of contemplation and prayer. Commercial activity is thus depicted as a barrier but not as a disqualifier to holiness. The passage presents the classic battle between *otium* and *negotium* played out in the liturgy.¹³ Those who engage in commerce, the readings warn, can do lasting damage to their soul and the life of contemplation. But the reading makes clear that a path does exist and states that Omobono successfully managed to escape “the perverse and depraved practices of the market to the state of blessed contemplation.” Once again, the reading does not enumerate or define the “perverse and depraved practices of the market,” but it takes little imagination to conjure up examples of theft, fraud, extortion, and a host of shady and illegal activities rife within commercial culture. It is clear that even in precapitalist Europe, the “market” (variously defined) already had a stigma attached to it and that one ought to heed *caveat emptor* very carefully. Only heroic efforts can overcome this stain and allow one to find holiness of life.

It is important to note, however, that this passage does not fault the market *qua* market. The critique is not the mechanism of trade itself—the contracts of fair exchange entered into willingly and without coercion or fraud. It does not condemn the quest for profit or the collateral damage produced by innovation. The words do not question the morality of commerce and negotiation *per se*, but rather the individual *practices* of the agents conducting the business. This is no trivial distinction, as the condemnation is clearly not of the *use* but of the *misuse* of the market. In order for markets to work, the document suggests, genuine human virtue must be present. The word *depraved*, of course, carries strong theological connotations. Deprave, from the Latin *depravare* (to pervert),

means to corrupt or to remove. Thus, the behaviors of some participants in the market lack integrity or display an absence of the good, rendering the remnant immoral or evil. The notion of the “deprivation of the good” leading to evil dates at least from St. Augustine of Hippo (and was reformulated in Aquinas). Vices of the soul, Augustine asserts, are simply privations of the natural good and the consequent evil has no existence once the privations have been rectified or healed. The market is not, the document asserts, inherently evil and sinful, but some practices, deprived of goodness, can become infected and could allow the contamination to spread without proper virtue acting as a safeguard.

The second reading presents another stigma often associated with the practice of business and commercial activity: Business owners often must place the demands of business above all else—faith, family, and friends. The second reading admits that bias by stating that the “business of the market” (i.e., the realm of buying and selling), requires such efforts and concentration that “it is difficult for one who practices business to divest himself of religious indifference.” Such a preoccupation with work stymies the development of a serious and rich inner life because the demands of the market simply appropriate all available time. This charge against business still resonates today, as many believe the world of commerce to be incompatible with an inner life of the mind. This critique recalls Max Weber’s assessment of the so-called “Protestant Work Ethic.”¹⁴ In short, these two examples mined from the original sources present the seeds for a “Catholic Work Ethic” and a serious reflection on the proper meaning of markets and morality.

Yet English writers developed another narrative when depicting characters engaged in the world of business, and this representation did not include much shading or nuance. Rather, English writers tended to concentrate on the flaws and foibles of the merchant character, depicting them as unimaginative drones blinded by the pursuit of profit and the working of the capricious, uncaring market.

In Sooth, I Know Not Why I Am So Sad

In absence of a model provided by Omonbono in the English-speaking world, the literary depiction and subsequent depiction of character developed outside the religious tradition in an organic, secular fashion. These negative stereotypes exist over centuries and provide an indelible (and flawed) portrayal of the commercial life. While a full survey of the hundreds of merchant representations on page and stage falls outside the scope of this article, two basic stereotypes of businessmen (and they are almost always men) begin to emerge in English literature. The first caricature presents men of commerce as philistines—people so dedicated

to making money and conducting commercial affairs that they become vapid, parochial, and incapable of an inner life. The second representation turns the merchant (and eventually the broker, banker, and investor) into a greedy, evil, and exploitive demon. The numerous representations carry very little nuance. One early example will highlight the common conception of the preoccupied merchant. *The Canterbury Tales*, written by Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343–1400) in the late thirteenth century, displays a remarkable panorama of English life. Chaucer himself was not a merchant, but he certainly worked among and with the emerging merchant class in his capacity as royal servant, diplomat, judge, Member of Parliament, and especially in his role as a customs official collecting taxes at the port of London.

In his profession, Chaucer would have interacted with merchants and traders on a daily basis, and his varied experience “explains the breadth of knowledge and the kind of temperament which made Chaucer one of the best recorders of the medieval world.”¹⁵ In this collection of tales, Chaucer presents a number of familiar character types traveling together to the tomb of St. Thomas Becket, the murdered archbishop of Canterbury.¹⁶ Chaucer provides vivid descriptions of these pilgrims, including clerics (the monk, friar, pardoner, and summoner) and religious (the nun’s priest and the prioress) as well as a knight, squire, miller, lawyer, franklin, and physician. Chaucer famously includes a wide “slice of life” from English society and provides details about their appearance, habits, clothing, and demeanor. The narrator largely avoids passing judgments on the characters, but rather compels the reader to discover the discrepancies and the ironies in each depiction. In the *General Prologue*, Chaucer also includes a portrait of the Merchant with a “forked beard,” an especially current fashion for facial hair. The short description is worth recounting in full:

He was dressed in an outfit of many colors, just like the players in the Mysteries, and rode on a high saddle from which he looked down at me. He wore a Flemish hat of beaver, in the latest style, and a pair of elegant as well as expensive boots. When he expressed an opinion, he did so carefully and solemnly; he was always trying to weigh the likely profit to be gained from it. He commented, for example, that the sea between Holland and England should be defended at all costs. He was good at exchanging dealings, as you would expect, and in fact this worthy gentleman was canny in every respect. He was so dignified in his business, in his buyings and in his sellings, in his barterings and in his tradings, that no one would ever know if he was in debt or not. What a notable man! Funnily enough, I did not discover his name. I never bothered to ask him.¹⁷

Although a rather short description, the sketch itself provides a rich array of cultural stereotypes about the established merchant class current in England. Chaucer here notices a manifest preoccupation with matters of commerce—the buying, selling, trading, and bartering. The merchant obviously personifies *negotium*—the active life of the world of commerce and industry. While necessary, *negotium* needs proper balance with *otium* (the philosophical reflection and contemplation about life’s proper meaning). As noted above, a primary critique of the world of commerce was the sheer amount of time one must dedicate to running a business, preventing a rich inner life from developing. Clearly the merchant places far too much emphasis on the external world and as a result sacrifices the interior or spiritual dimension of life: Work indeed becomes the proverbial grindstone. Business preoccupations, and a subsequent narrowness of life and mind, remain a prominent feature in most representations of the merchant character in literature. Few commentators at this time saw business as a morally or intellectually serious endeavor.

Chaucer’s merchant fits this stereotype, for he always spoke carefully and solemnly—weighing the potential *profit* (“wynnyng”) that might be gained or lost from any utterance.¹⁸ The concern with profit thus colors all actions of the merchant and reduces him so much that he never reveals his proper name. Chaucer’s brief description also introduces the secondary trait employed by writers when depicting the merchant: The focus on the material, especially clothing and personal appearance. The emphasis on the material becomes abundantly clear in the merchant’s dress: colorful outfits, expensive boots, and Flemish hats (in the latest style, of course). For such a “notable” man, the externals become an essential part of the occupation. His high saddle literally places him above the others, forcing the merchant to “look down” upon the world from his exalted position. The *appearance* of success takes precedence over actual success. According to the narrator, the merchant might be fully leveraged and in great debt, but from external appearance, one could never tell.

The emphasis on the material requires some context, as materialism has always been considered an enemy to the cultivation of the spiritual. The Decalogue warns against the sinful nature of coveting a neighbor’s goods and letting material possessions have sway over the mind and soul. One must be in the world but not of the world, as the Gospel of John proclaims (see John 17:14–19). Even today, the phrase “keeping up with the Joneses” resonates with an antimaterialist message. In fact, merchants help fuel and satisfy these desires for material goods. In sharp contrast, Omobono did not wear expensive, fancy clothing (the hallmark of a tailor), but rather made modest sartorial choices. The merchant of Cremona “wore linen and black lamb’s wool, he avoided colorful fabrics, and wore the dark cloth

of Bergamo.”¹⁹ Omobono did not wear silk, satin, velvet, mink, ermine, gold, or any of the other conspicuous fashion statements so common among tailors and merchants, suggesting an unusual modesty and prudence.²⁰ In his deportment, he displayed humility while avoiding the dress and affairs of worldly men.

Even at this early date of precapitalist economics, the Church recognized a need to develop a “theology of work” and find models of virtue for the rapidly rising merchant class. According to Thompson, the early emphasis on Omobono’s “lay and civic-minded piety” also grew with later biographers to include his reputation for honesty in business, “thereby recapturing an aspect of his piety missed by the pontiff [Innocent III] but prized in the workaday world of the communes.”²¹ These workers now had a Christian model, one of their own, so to speak, to help them navigate the complexities of the merchant life; the faithful responded by eagerly invoking his aid and patronage. At this early date, the Church also recognized the moral dimension of work and the way that business could actually nourish and even deliver sanctification for the individual. In this sense, dignified, honest work and, by extension, the lay worker, could create a path to holiness generally reserved for the clergy and religious life. The market could create temptations and pose challenges for the individual, but the market by itself did not preclude the noble execution of business. This was an important distinction, because the traditional agrarian economy was about to change, quickly and irrevocably.

Twelfth-century Rome, especially in the second-half of the century, was a place of abrupt economic change and disruption. In Rome and throughout Italy the rise of the merchant and the merchant class upset traditional forms of economic stability and created opportunities for vast wealth creation and material consumption among the so-called middle class. According to Christopher Hibbert, “in Roman society, a new force was developing, composed of craftsmen and skilled artisans, now organized into guilds, of entrepreneurs, financiers, and traders, of lawyers, lesser clergy, and officials employed in the administration of the Church.”²² This new force was the merchant class—the very class in which Omobono flourished in Cremona. At this time, if one walked the myriad streets of Rome, or many cities throughout Italy, a vibrant and lively market would unfold. A wide variety of goods were available, as men sold straw hats and bedding, cobblers repaired and made shoes, fishmonger and fruit sellers shouted into the vast crowds trying to attract buyers. Booksellers and scribes offered reading materials (including popular guidebooks, of which a few examples still survive) to tourists traveling to the various pilgrim sites in the city. Organically and without central planning (absent even a clear animating principle), private enterprise emerged in parallel with the largely guild-regulated economy. More and more people arrived in the

city, creating a need for additional goods and services, and merchants with various types of expertise quickly supplied that demand. During this century and beyond, the merchant class grew in size, scope, influence, and wealth. It was this growing merchant class into which Omobono was born and that he inhabited. Many of these merchants became leading figures in local and national affairs, often acquiring large fortunes and enormous power.

A second English example (appearing two centuries after Chaucer) will further illustrate the ingrained bias against merchants and commercial activities. In Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, the age of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, we tend not to find (for obvious reasons) extended discussions of saints and precise matters of religion on stage. A post-Reformation England did not readily lend itself to robustly Catholic interests in public venues. To be sure, scores of plays examine the “supernatural,” in various forms. Barbara Traister, for example, notes that “for the fifty years from 1570 to 1620 at least two dozen plays involving magicians, conjurors, and enchanters” survive, suggesting a compelling interest in matters spiritual but not formally religious.²³ The stories of the saints, once such a vibrant and essential part of the literary tradition, effectively ended with Henry VIII’s break with Rome. As such, Catholic writers could not use the stage to introduce the compelling stories of heroic virtue in order to educate and entertain the faithful. According to Jose M. Ruano de la Haza, “hagiographical plays were an extremely popular form of theatrical entertainment in seventeenth-century Spain, with no real counterpart in seventeenth-century England.”²⁴ This makes sense on a number of levels.

England experienced a massive shift in religious belief, practice, and sensibilities during the sixteenth century, moving away from the traditional Catholic practices toward a conspicuous Protestantism. This move entailed more than merely a refashioning or reconfiguration; it was more accurately a wholesale rejection of many essential Catholic dogmas, doctrines, and popular pieties.²⁵ The pilgrimage site in Canterbury, for example, dedicated to the murdered Archbishop Thomas Becket almost immediately after his assassination in 1170, and venerated as a holy site, was destroyed by Royal Proclamation in 1538, when Henry VIII determined that Thomas Becket was to be “unsainted” and the shrine itself demolished. According to Robert Scully, the process was part of a larger effort to desanctify and desacramentalize the emergent Anglican faith.²⁶ All trappings of Catholicism needed to be erased or made palatable to Protestant sensibilities. This effort encountered many problems, resulting in a large number of Protestant denominations.²⁷ With this destruction, the incipient “Catholic work ethic” disappeared from the English-speaking world as well.²⁸

The Elizabethan and Jacobean stage frequently made use of the character of the merchant, especially after 1600, when the merchant became a ubiquitous presence on stage. In his magisterial study, W. W. Greg lists 836 printed extant plays, from *Fulgens and Lucrece* (c. 1515) to *The Benefice* (1689).²⁹ The stage in many ways anticipates and reflects this growing concern, as ninety-five separate plays contain a merchant character.³⁰ In other words, over 11 percent of all plays written during this remarkable period contain a merchant character. Shakespeare examines the emergent role of commerce in his famous play *The Merchant of Venice* (1596). Although the moneylender Shylock attracts much of the critical focus, Antonio stands as the actual merchant from the title. His speaking role is rather modest (Portia, Shylock, and Bassanio all have more lines), but he serves as the catalyst for action. As the title character, he speaks the first lines in the play, as he famously describes his acute melancholy:

In sooth, I know not why I am so sad;
It wearies me, you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born
I am [yet] to learn. (1.1.1–5)³¹

To this admission, his companion Salerio offers the obvious explanation: Antonio's mind is vexed, even tormented, because of pressing business concerns. Salerio employs common metaphors for the vexation caused by such commercial activity: "Your mind is tossing on the ocean, / There where your argosies [large merchant ships] with portly sail / Like signiors and rich burgers on the flood." Antonio's ships are so grand and stately (portly), that "they command the high seas" (1.1.7–10). Solanio, the other companion, provides a vivid account of the obvious preoccupation of the merchant and the hazards of the business enterprise:

Believe me, sir, had I such venture forth,
The better part of my affections would
Be with my hopes abroad. I would be still
Plucking the grass to know where sits the wind,
Piring [peering] in maps for ports and piers and roads;
And every object that might make me fear
Misfortune to my ventures, out of doubt
Would make me sad. (1.1.15–22)

In a few short lines, Shakespeare captures one of the central tensions facing the merchant class. Merchants must indeed spend the "better parts of their affections" in business-related activities, concerns, and preoccupations. The

merchant's life affords no opportunity for leisure and harmony. Antonio hardly relishes life or has a tranquility of soul, but rather displays the merchant life as the "grindstone" mentioned in *COS*. Moreover, he has indeed fallen prey to the "snares of the world," a trap Omobono managed to escape. Once Antonio becomes fully immersed with loans, bonds, and lawsuits, he becomes trapped in a vicious cycle and nearly ends up dead. Avoiding this pitfall requires a special temperament and habituation to escape the corrupting influences of the world. Antonio, unlike Omobono, becomes ensnared in the deadly thorns and requires near divine intervention (in the form of Portia) to save him. Omobono achieved holiness, in part, from his refusal to engage fully in the affairs of worldly men; Antonio clearly failed in that regard.

Antonio however rejects these explanations of his melancholy, for he claims to be well-diversified and free from the uncertainties inherent in shipping and trade:

Believe me, no. I thank my fortune for it,
My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,
Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate
Upon the fortune of this present year.
Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.
(1.1.41–45)³²

Yet this explanation strives merely to save face and produce the impression of financial solvency. For all his assurance about his personal prudence and financial security, Antonio provides a very different story to his friend Bassanio when the latter requests a loan to court the wealthy and beautiful Portia. When pressed for assistance, Antonio confesses that he is over-leveraged and his current investments preclude any ready cash for Bassanio's immediate use: "Thou know'st all my fortunes are at sea; / Neither have I money nor commodity / To raise a present sum. Therefore go forth, / Try what my credit can in Venice do" (1.1.177–80). Antonio has every confidence that he will find a loan to assist his good friend in his quest, but his perilous financial condition and unease strike to the very heart of the stereotype of merchants. As seen in the *Canterbury Tales*, one cannot tell, from a glance, whether the merchant is successful or bankrupt. As a result, Antonio must project confidence and he willingly enjoins Bassanio to seek out a loan on his line of credit. This requires Bassanio to visit the famous Rialto. The market has become a veritable rack of torture for Antonio.

The Rialto mentioned by Shakespeare was the world of business and commerce in Venice. According to Peter Ackroyd, the Rialto was the "power station" of Venice, "an island of money-making, from the highest to the lowest. It was a little Venice within the larger Venice, a vivid instance of the commercial life ...

with traders of every description.”³³ By Shakespeare’s time, the Rialto already enjoyed international fame as the center of the world of commerce and finance. William Goetzmann describes Venice as the epicenter of trading and finance, developing innovative financial instruments such as government bonds to help pay debt and finance government services.³⁴ As early as 1298, when Marco Polo was ransomed and returned to his home in Venice, the Rialto

brought together shipping magnates, entrepreneurs, financiers, investors, speculators, bankers, borrowers, insurance agents, brokers, money changers, tax authorities, government inspectors, and even, perhaps, gossips, gamblers, spectators, and tourists to see the financial heart of the greatest commercial center in Europe.³⁵

Shylock, as a moneylender, operates in this realm—the early modern version of the chaotic trading floors of Wall Street. After some discussion, Shylock agrees to offer the loan. Most of the scholarship regarding Shylock focuses on his Jewish religion and his status as a cultural outsider to the corridors of power in Venice. Yet in terms of the comedic genre, Shylock clearly fulfills a common role of “blocking character” or comic villain—the anticomic spirit that stands as enemy to festivity, union, fertility, and renewal.³⁶ Shakespeare enriches the character in many ways and famously grants him a stirring monologue in 3.1.53–73 as he disrupts the stereotypes often found on the Elizabethan stage. But he clearly serves as a foil character to Antonio, as Shylock himself remarks in an aside early in the play. His conspicuous animosity toward Antonio stems more from profession than from religion:

How like a fawning publican he looks!
I hate him for he is a Christian;
But more, for [because] that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis, and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Italy.
(1.3.41–45)

In this passage, religious tension, even outright hatred, obviously fuels Shylock’s quest for revenge, but his primary complaint centers on Antonio’s business practices and the lending of money without interest, thus reducing Shylock’s own profits. The debate over the proper use of money takes a dark and potentially violent turn in this comedy—leaving the merchant at the epicenter of the debate. Shakespeare thus taps into an established tradition of depicting the merchant class as preoccupied and tortured as a result of the demands of the market place.

Omobono of Cremona, a merchant saint, provided a compelling model of virtue for the growing number of people in central Italy involved in the ever-expanding world of commerce. This example, unavailable in the English-speaking world, left a void in character representations found on the page and stage. In subsequent centuries, the dominant stereotype for any English figure engaged in the financial world would be one of villainy, greed, oppression, theft, and a whole host of assorted iniquities. In fact, the stereotype became so entrenched that it remains difficult today to find an exception in the myriad novels, movies, television shows, and plays produced in the twenty-first century. Yet history does indeed provide an example of such heroic virtue in the merchant class, and if we look with any care, we too can find scores of real-life examples, within our own communities, of virtue and morality in the market.

Notes

- * I am grateful to the Louise Hord McCollough Charitable Trust and Serviam Partners for generous financial assistance in support of the research for this essay.
- 1. Pope John Paul II, *Letter of Pope John Paul II to H. E. Msgr. Giulio Nicolini, Bishop of Cremona* (June 24, 1997), https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1997/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19970624_nicolini.html.
- 2. See, for example, the influential work of Clayton Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma* (New York: Harpers, 1997). See also Walter Isaacson, *The Innovators* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014); Eric Ries, *The Lean Startup* (New York: Crown, 2011); Peter H. Diamandis and Steven Kotler, *Abundance: The Future Is Brighter than You Think* (New York: Free Press, 2012).
- 3. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) introduced the term “paradigm shifts” to explain advances in scientific knowledge. Although imprecise when applied to technology, many scholars use the word to describe sudden and abrupt changes, as when one worldview replaces another or one way of providing goods and services replaces a previous method. In this sense, it seems synonymous with “disruptive innovation.”
- 4. Peter H. Diamandis and Steven Kotler, *Bold* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015) explore in a compelling fashion the optimistic side of disruption and innovation. The book largely ignores the negative impact of disruption, the losers, including the thousands of jobs lost as a result of new advances in technology. The book provides a “death spiral” of the “Six D’s of Exponential Technology”: digitalization, deception, disruption, demonetization, dematerialization, and democratization. For an economic history of the United States and its fraught relationship with the free economy, see Benjamin C. Waterhouse, *The Land of Enterprise* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2017).

5. Hundreds of examples of anticapitalist critiques exist, both from professional academics and popular movements such as Occupy Wall Street and MoveOn.org. The current celebrity favorite is Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2014). The book, adored by progressives and lionized by Paul Krugman and others, is not without critics. See, for example, former Harvard president and US Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers, “Thomas Piketty is Right About the Past but Wrong About the Future,” *The Atlantic*, May 16, 2014; James K. Galbraith, “*Kapital* for the Twenty-First Century?” *Dissent*, April 28, 2014.
6. Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Bishop of Cremona*.
7. Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Bishop of Cremona*.
8. According to Mary Harvey Doyno, “Lilies Among the Thorns: Lay Saints and Their Cults in Northern and Central Italian Cities, 1150–1350,” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2010), “as the first non-royal layman to be canonized by Rome, Omobono has received a fair amount of scholarly attention.” In support of her assertion, Doyno cites a few books containing chapters or parts of chapters, including the important work by Vauchez and Piazzzi (see below). Neither work has been translated into English. In spite of this impressive research, the life of St. Omobono remains largely unknown to the English-speaking world.
9. Augustine Thompson, OP, *Cities of God: The Religion of the Italian Communes, 1125–1325* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2005), 7. Father Thompson calls lay saints an “exception,” as they appear very rarely in this period. He also includes two other lay saints, Facio of Cremona and Pietro Pettinaio of Siena.
10. Donald Prudlo has translated all four documents into English. Prudlo and Paul Voss are completing the first English-language biography of St. Omobono. All quotes are taken from this forthcoming edition. For decades, the magisterial work of Reverend Alban Butler (1711–1773) provided the most accessible information about the saints for an English-speaking audience. His 1886 edition of *The Lives of the Saints* included a short entry for St. Omobono, but it was not reprinted in all subsequent editions. Butler’s entry included a brief preface: “Trade is often looked upon as an occasion of too great [an] attachment to the things of this world, and of too eager a desire of gain; also of lying frauds and injustice. That these are the vices of men, not the fault of their profession, is clear from the example of this and many other saints.”
11. Daniele Piazzzi, *Omobono di Cremona: biografie dal XIII al XVI secolo* (Cremona, 1991). See also, A Vauchez, *Omobono di Cremona* (Cremona, 2001). Diana Webb, *Saints and Cities in Medieval Italy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) provides English translations and useful commentary of the *Bull of Canonization and Labentibus annis*.
12. Emphasis added. *BC* repeats this requirement later, proclaiming “neither works alone nor miracles suffice, but when one follows upon the other, this offers true proof of

sanctity, and moves us to venerate them as saints who the Lord has shown worthy of such devotion through miracles.”

13. For a classic discussion on the tension between *otium* and *negotium*, see Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1952).
14. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 2002) famously examines the role of Protestantism in forging the American work ethic. Weber, of course, is not without his critics. The embodiment of that ideal can be found in Ron Chernow, *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.* (New York: Vintage, 1998). Chernow states that “Rockefeller was the Protestant work ethic in its purest form” (55).
15. Vincent F. Hopper, *Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales: An Interlinear Translation* (New York: Barrons, 1970): ix.
16. Chaucer did not invent the “collection of stories” format, as famous earlier examples exist, including the *Arabian Knights* and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*.
17. This passage comes from a delightful “retelling” in Peter Ackroyd, *The Canterbury Tales* (New York: Viking, 2009): For a comprehensive academic edition, see *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Here is the passage in the original:

A MERCHANT was ther with a forked berd
 In mottelee, and hye on horse he sat;
 His bootes clasped faire and fetisly,
 His resons he spak ful solempnely,
 Sownynge alwey th’encrees of his wynnynge.
 He wolde the see were kept for any thing
 Bitwixe Middelburgh and Orewelle.
 Wel koude he in eschange sheeldes selle.
 This worthy man ful wel his wit bisette:
 Ther wiste no wight that he was in dette,
 So estatly was he of his governaunce
 With his bargaynes and with his chevyssaunce.
 For soothe he was a worthy man with alle,
 But, sooth to seyn, I not how men hym calle. (270–284)

18. *The Oxford English Dictionary* lists a number of definitions for winning, including the now obsolete sense of “getting of money or wealth; gain, profit; money making” (2.b).
19. From Prudlo translation of *QH*, paragraph 11 (see note 12 above).
20. In the numerous depictions of Omobono in art—the various frescos and icons still prominent in Cremona—the saint is indeed depicted in rich clothing, bright colors,

and lush fabrics. See, for example, Pietro Bonometti, *Omobono: La Figure del Santo Nell'Iconografia: Secoli XIII–XIX* (Milano: Silvana, 1999).

21. Thompson, *Cities of God*, 191.
22. Christopher Hibbert, *Rome: The Biography of a City* (New York: Penguin, 1985): 90.
23. Barbara Howard Traister. *Heavenly Necromancers: The Magician in English Renaissance Drama* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984): 33.
24. Jose M. Ruano de la Haza, “Unparalleled Lives: Hagiographical Drama in Seventeenth-Century England and Spain,” in *Parallel Lives: Spanish and English National Drama, 1580–1680*, ed. Louise and Peter Fothergill-Payne (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1991): 252–66. According to de la Haza, *The Virgin Martyr* by Decker and Massinger is the only exception.
25. A wealth of recent scholarship, much of it revisionist in nature, explores this topic. Among the many, see, for example, the influential work of Eamon Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992); John W. O’Malley, *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Lucy E. C. Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism in Reformation England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000). See also the collections of essays and lectures assembled in Eamon Duffy, *Saints, Sacrilege, and Sedition: Religious Conflict in the Tudor Reformations* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012).
26. Robert E. Scully, SJ, “The Unmaking of a Saint,” *Catholic Historical Review* 86 no. 4 (November 2000): 579–602.
27. See the compelling analysis in Patrick Collinson, *From Iconoclasm to Iconophobia: The Cultural Impact of the Second English Reformation* (Reading: University of Reading, 1986).
28. After the death of Mary I, Queen Elizabeth II decisively transformed the official religion of England from Catholicism to Protestantism. Thus, the emergence of the merchant character on stage took on a decidedly Protestant coloring extolling the virtues of the Protestant work ethic. See, for example, Charlotte Coker Worley, “The Character of the Merchant in English Drama from 1590–1612,” (PhD diss., University of Mississippi, 1985).
29. W. W. Greg, *A Bibliography of the English Printed Drama to the Restoration*, 4 vols. (London: Bibliographical Society), 1939–1959.
30. *An Index of Characters in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. Thomas L. Berger, William C. Bradford, and Sidney L. Sondergard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

31. All references to this play are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995).
32. After this explanation, his other companion suggests that love is the root cause of Antonio's melancholy. Antonio rejects this explanation as well. For a useful collection of essays on the play, see *The Merchant of Venice: New Critical Essays*, ed. John W. Mahon and Ellen Macleod Mahon (New York: Routledge, 2002).
33. Peter Ackroyd, *Venice: Pure City* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 110–11. According to Ackroyd, over forty trading guilds operated near the Rialto.
34. William N. Goetzmann, *Money Changes Everything: How Finance Made Civilization Possible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
35. Goetzmann, *Money Changes Everything*, 227.
36. For an illuminating discussion of the blocking character in comedy, see Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).