

THIS IS THE VERY COINAGE OF YOUR BRAIN: SHAKESPEARE AND MONEY REVISITED

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Hamlet: Why, look you there! Look how it steals away!
My father, in his habit as he liv'd!
Look where he goes even now out at the portal!
Exit Ghost.
Gertrude: This is the very coinage of your brain.
This bodiless creation ecstasy
Is very cunning in.
(3.4.139–143)¹

THIS exchange from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* both is and is not about money. What Queen Gertrude calls 'the very coinage of your brain' is her interpretation of her son's apparent mental derangement, as he claims to see the ghost of his father, visible to him and to the watching audience, but not to her.

The subject of money in Shakespeare is an active field of study. There is a well-established tradition of numismatists exploring the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries in the world of English Renaissance drama, trying both to clarify the sometimes confusing terminology and nomenclature of the time for a modern audience and also to gain insight into how the coins of the time operated within the economic and social context of the age.² More recently, scholars of English literature and theatre history have been interrogating the economic, commercial and monetary aspects of the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries in some detail.³ This builds on older work that includes Sandra Fischer's invaluable *Econolinguua: A Glossary of Coins and Economic Language in Renaissance Drama*.⁴ Article literature on similar themes is considerable.⁵ Then of course there is the role of money in Shakespeare's professional and personal life, as well as his works: the economics of the theatre business and money's important part in the Shakespeare biography; silver as 'thou common drudge tween man and man', as *The Merchant of Venice* has it (3.2.105–6).⁶ The purpose of this article is to revisit Shakespeare's dramatic works from a numismatic perspective, in particular as an appreciative response to Allen and Dunstan's 1941 contribution to this *Journal*.

Plotting with money

References to coins and money in Shakespeare fulfil a range of functions and purposes. At a basic level of the dramatist's craft, money and coins act as a plot-motor, whether across the whole arc of a play, as in *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Timon of Athens*, or at a sub-plot level, to kick-start a train of events or just stimulate a dramatic confrontation, as with the accusations of monetary misappropriation in the clash between Bolingbroke and Norfolk that opens *Richard II* (1.1.88–90) or the argument over military supply between Brutus and Cassius in *Julius Caesar* (4.2.133–140), as tension between the tyrannicides sets in. But this is rarely money as a simple device to get things moving: money is always more resonant and

¹ References to Shakespeare are taken from Bate and Rasmussen 2007.

² Allen and Dunstan 1941 was a pioneering part of this literature. A recent addition also in *BNJ* is Wong 2012.

³ Recent books include Graf 2008, Deng 2011 and Landreth 2012.

⁴ Fischer 1985; Fischer's definitions are not always wholly accurate, but her volume remains an exceptionally valuable collection of material, even despite the availability of modern research tools of the range and calibre of EEBO (Early English Books Online, <http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home>), much consulted for this paper.

⁵ See, for example the articles in Woodridge 2003.

⁶ Recent books include Aaron 2006, Knutson, 2006 and Leinwand 1999.

pervasive. If the plot of the play is based around money, then the society of the play is also based around money. The two main plots of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* – Falstaff’s delusory hopes of seducing Mistresses Page and Ford and thus gaining access to their husbands’ wealth and the campaigns of the rival suitors for the heiress Anne Page – circle and interweave, but always to show that money makes this little provincial world go round, a world as close to Shakespeare’s own Stratford as he would go.⁷ Anne Page’s successful suitor, Fenton, makes explicit the intricately interwoven emotional, moral and monetary motivations of the play:

Albeit I will confess they father’s wealth
Was the first motive that I woo’d thee, Anne;
Yet, wooing thee, I found thee of more value
Than stamps in gold or sums in sealed bags;
And ‘tis the very riches of thyself
That now I aim at.
(3.4.14–19)

Love has triumphed, as it is a comedy, in the wry words of Master Ford:

Stand not amazed; here is no remedy:
In love the heavens themselves do guide the state;
Money buys lands, and wives are sold by fate.
(5.5.191–192)

Perhaps it is worth considering in a little detail some of the plays with money at their heart: an early work like *The Comedy of Errors*, a popular Elizabethan hit like *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Timon of Athens*, often characterised as a Jacobean problem piece. *The Comedy of Errors* is something of a *jeu d’esprit*, full of farce and slapstick and intricate plotting, an early work that shows off the author’s gifts. Plautus’s Roman comedy, *Menaechmi* (not then translated into English), already had a complicated-enough plot of separated identical twins, to which Shakespeare adds a second set of separated twins borrowed from Plautus’s *Amphitryon*, just to make life harder, and encloses all this within a framing structure derived from Apollonius of Tyre. But the ancient Ephesus of the setting is a place where money really does drive everything. A trade war with Syracuse is the back-story of the plot and its characters are merchants and businessmen. The arrival of the unsuspecting Antipholus of Syracuse to bewilderingly intercept the money and valuable objects intended for his long-lost twin sets off a riot of panic over seemingly stolen coins, allegedly missing valuables and apparently unpaid debts that swallows up character after character in a maelstrom of money-inspired confusion, to conclude in ‘a circuit of monetary redemptions’, as a recent study describes.⁸ ‘Say, wherefore didst thou lock me forth today?/ And why dost thou deny the bag of gold?’ despairingly cries Antipholus of Ephesus, locked out of his house and arrested for debt (4.4.86–87). What was in the bag of gold? In this case, it was ducats, as this Antipholus had spelled out earlier, when sending for his treasure to foil the debt-collectors:

To Adriana, villain, hie thee straight;
Give her this key, and tell her, in the desk
That’s cover’d o’er with Turkish tapestry,
There is a purse of ducats; let her send it;
Tell her I am arrested in the street
And that shall bail me;
(4.2.102–108)

In this play Shakespeare is unusually loose with his money terms, as though he had not quite worked out how to deploy this sort of reference: there are ducats, angels (‘Here are the angels that you sent for to deliver you’, 4.3.32), guilders (‘I am bound/ To Persia and want guilders for my voyage’, 4.1.3–4) and marks (‘He asked me for a thousand marks in gold’, 2.1.59), all referenced as current in ancient Ephesus more or less interchangeably, in a prodigal

⁷ For an interpretation that ascribes to Shakespeare a particularly acerbic attitude in this play, see Grav 2006.

⁸ Raman 2005, 204.

welter of anachronistic coin names. Overall, we get a sense of a place dripping with international money, but also full of worry and tension should the golden chain of debt and payment be broken (a lovingly described and valued jeweller's golden chain is actually one of the misapplied items of the plot). If debt is denied, characters are labelled as mad and race across the stage, pursued by doctors and law-enforcement waving forms of physical restraint. As so often, farce has a monetary dark side.

Monetary dark sides rarely come darker than in *The Merchant of Venice*, with its difficult mix of money, anti-Semitism and fairy-tale plotting. First produced in 1596, it was, it seems, popular at the time: it was praised as one of the author's best comedies by Francis Meres in 1598; it was often alluded to and echoed by other playwrights and writers (especially the 'pound of flesh') and revived by Shakespeare's playing company in the Jacobean period, when it received a performance at court. There was also a fairly early publication in quarto form in 1600, which referenced its recent performance, and which also does not mince words about the plot:

The most excellent historie of the *Merchant of Venice*,
with the extreame crueltie of Shylocke the Iewe
towards the sayd Merchant, in cutting a full pound
of his flesh: and the obtaining of Portia
by the choice of three chests,
As has beene divers times acted by the Lord Chamberlaine his servants,
Written by William Shakespeare'

We are clearly in Venice, with ducats mentioned throughout, most often as, of course, the three thousand ducats advanced against the surety of a pound of flesh from Antonio, the Merchant of Venice himself. The Venetian ducat was familiar enough to Shakespeare's audience, many of whom would have a reasonable idea of its value. Three thousand ducats was a very large sum, about £1,000 in contemporary English terms; it was the annual income of the wealthy, if hopeless, gentleman Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night* (1.3.17). Shakespeare's audience knew the value of this loan and knew also the prodigality of Shylock's daughter Jessica, eloping with her Christian boyfriend and her father's looted treasure chests.

Tubal: Your daughter spent in Genoa, as I heard, in one night fourscore ducats.

Shylock: Thou stickest a dagger in me. I shall never see my gold again; fourscore ducats at a sitting!
Fourscore ducats!

(3.1.72–74)

This was many years' income for many spectators watching *The Merchant* in the yards at the Theatre in Shoreditch or the Swan in Southwark in the mid-1590s and they are unlikely to have thought Shylock's level of outrage unreasonable in itself. Presumably they would have laughed at his fury, but perhaps also felt sympathy wane for the absconding Jessica. In the play's other main plot, pointed up in the quarto's synopsis, another transactional scenario is played out over Portia and her inheritance. A woman and her wealth are to go to whoever chooses correctly between three caskets, of gold, silver and lead. Portia is able to manipulate her dead father's will to get the result and husband she wants. In the 'Quality of mercy' judgment scene, where the two plots meet, Shylock, the moneylender, repeatedly refuses money to forgo the pound of flesh. He is offered six thousand ducats, twice the original loan, by Bassanio, beneficiary of that loan, raised initially to fund his campaign to woo Portia, and now successful and newly rich as her husband. Shylock refuses:

If every ducat in six thousand ducats
Were in six parts, and every part a ducat,
I would not draw them, I would have my bond.
(4.1.86–88)

In *Timon of Athens* of course money is even more all-pervading. Dating probably to around 1607, it may never actually have been produced in the theatre.⁹ Timon's lavish – indeed

⁹ For a useful discussion of the play, see Grady 2006.

pathologically needy – generosity bankrupts him and earns him no reciprocal help when he needs it. The speech from Act 4, Scene 3, where the ruined Timon finds a hoard of gold while grubbing for roots in a forest was, unsurprisingly, Karl Marx's favourite bit of Shakespeare.¹⁰

What is here?
 Gold? Yellow, glittering, precious gold? No, gods,
 I am no idle votarist; roots, you clear heavens!
 Thus much of this will make black white, foul fair,
 Wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant.
 Ha, you gods! Why this? What's this, you gods? Why, this
 Will lug your priests and servants from your sides,
 Pluck stout men's pillows from below their heads.
 This yellow slave
 Will knit and break religions, bless the accursed,
 Make the hoar leprosy adored, place thieves
 And give them title, knee and approbation
 With senators on the bench; this is it
 That makes the wappen'd widow wed again;
 She whom the spital-house and ulcerous sores
 Would cast the gorge at, this embalms and spices
 To the April day again. Come, damned earth,
 Thou common whore of mankind, that put'st odds
 Among the route of nations, I will make thee
 Do thy right nature.
 (4.3.25–45)

In Timon's world money is both 'yellow slave' and 'visible god', 'sweet king-killer' (4.3.384) and 'bright defiler' (4.3.385); those that have it may 'have the world in empire' (4.3.395). When it gets to specifics, the main form of money in *Timon* is the talent, a term familiar then from both the Bible and classical literature. The talent was, of course, actually a measure of silver and indeed a very large one, rather than a coin: historically the Athenian talent was 50 kg of metal; the biblical talents larger still. The text of *Timon* has some awareness of the scale of the talent – one, two or five talents are sums mentioned, more or less reasonably, although on other occasions fifty or even a thousand talents are spoken of – unfeasibly huge sums.

Setting the scene: foreign coins

Despite the ducats of *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Merchant of Venice* and the talents of *Timon of Athens*, perhaps the most obvious point to make about Shakespeare's monetary language is that, in his plays' plots and dialogue he overwhelmingly uses the money of his own daily world, English coin-names and measures of value. As noted, he can reference foreign coins and even ancient coins, but he does this to the same purpose as he used English terms. And this purpose is clarity. Coins, expressions of monetary value and the use of monetary metaphors are all present as tools to assist the audience, one of the ways the playwright could make character, motivation, plot and significance understood by those first Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences in the open-air theatres such as the Curtain, Rose, Swan and Globe. Other motives, in particular local colour, can also be present, but never in a way that obscured clarity.

This can seem ironic nowadays, as references that were included to assist a contemporary audience can easily be baffling and opaque to a modern one. In performance texts, these are often excised and trimmed out of the dialogue, presumably simply because they are not likely to be understood. There are, however, losses involved in doing this. For example, the dialogue of Falstaff above all is so densely packed with coin references – especially in the form of puns and jokes – that quite serious damage would be done to the presentation of his character by slicing out too much of this material.

Yet, for his time, Shakespeare was in some ways quite moderate and limited in his vocabulary of coin references, if not in their quantity. As Sandra Fischer pointed out, his plays are

¹⁰ See Marx 1887, 132.

not in fact as rich in unusual coin names as some of his contemporaries.¹¹ One has to go to Jonson, Dekker or Beaumont for the asper and bagatine, the gazet, moccinigo and stiver or even the more familiar pistole and pistolet, named in several Elizabethan royal proclamations. Beyond English monetary terms, Shakespeare employs a fairly small repertoire of other names repeated across several plays. There are a few singleton exceptions to this generalization, but one can make a case that each of these reflects a relatively familiar and topical usage. All are to be encountered in other playwrights' work, whereas his plays are never the sole source of any coin-name.

There are four non-English coin names that recur in Shakespeare's plays in any quantity. The ducat has already been mentioned as occurring frequently in *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Merchant of Venice*. It was familiar enough in England both as term and as object. A hoard of gold coins deposited at Bisham Abbey in Essex in about the year of Shakespeare's birth included a Venetian ducat.¹² Ducats pervade Shakespeare's work, with more than fifty references across ten plays. Some other playwrights use it, from Robert Wilson's *Three Ladies of London* of 1581 (with its positive depiction of a Jewish businessman) the earliest to survive, through Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* and works by Dekker and Middleton, but Shakespeare does seem to outscore the rest put together in his recourse to it.¹³

The ducat was, in origin, the defining gold coin of Venice. Its prime locale was always Italy and unsurprisingly, most Shakespearean references are in Italian-set plays. In the Paduan setting of *The Taming of the Shrew*, one of Bianca's suitors offers a dower of property in Pisa and 2,000 ducats 'by the year of land' (2.1.371). In Verona Romeo pays 40 ducats for a dram of poison (5.1.62–63) and in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the servant Speed pointedly notes the lack of a ducat tip (1.1.121). Both Padua and Verona were part of Venice's *terrafirma* empire in Shakespeare's day. A hefty 1,000-ducat bribe propels the plot of the Sicilian-set *Much Ado About Nothing* (2.2.35), while in the Italianate Illyria of *Twelfth Night* (very much Venice's historic stamping ground) Sir Andrew Aguecheek has his excellent income of 3,000 ducats a year.

Yet the term ducat also meant any coin of the same standard and many lands had their own versions. Whether Shakespeare knew this, or if he was just using the term as a generic international gold coin, ducats feature several times in Denmark in *Hamlet* (for example, 'How now! A rat! Dead, for a ducat, dead!', 3.4.27) and in Viennese-set *Measure For Measure* ('his use was to put a ducat in her clack-dish', 3.1.43–44), both territories which had their own local ducats. Most unexpected and the only completely unrealistic usage is the 10,000-ducat wager on the fidelity of Imogen in the ancient British and Roman world of *Cymbeline* – admittedly the setting of the bet is in Rome, but with a Frenchman, Dutchman and Spaniard in attendance, historical fidelity is barely a factor (1.4.93–94).

Even more familiar than the ducat to Shakespeare's audience was the contemporary French gold coin, the *écu à la couronne*,¹⁴ usually known in English texts of the period as the 'French crown', appearing in seven of Shakespeare's plays.¹⁵ A 'French crown weight' was a familiar measure of the Elizabethan period, practically standard usage in medical treatises and chemical handbooks.¹⁶ A general sense of its value seems clear from a popular song recorded in 1609:

¹¹ Fischer 1985, 30–1.

¹² Keary 1877; Allen and Blackburn 2011, 240–2.

¹³ This is suggested by Fischer's references, although some caution is needed, as her citations are representative, not exhaustive, for 'more common terms in non-Shakespearean plays' (Fischer 1985, 36) (although whether a given term is common or not is not specified and it might seem that any foreign coin name would not be viewed as common). A search on EEBO (see n. 4) for plays appearing in print during Shakespeare's working life which referenced ducats only added Robert Armin's *Two Maids of Moreclacke* (1609) and Robert Daborne's *A Christian Turn'd Turk* (1612) to Fischer's examples, followed after 1620 by Fletcher's *The Tragedy of Thierry King of France* (1621) and Massinger's *The Duke of Millaine* (1623).

¹⁴ The relatively plentiful occurrence of these coins as English finds confirms the point; they have been most recently catalogued in Kelleher 2007; there are also French crowns in a 2012 hoard from Holy Island (Treasure reference: 2012 T19).

¹⁵ Allen and Dunstan 1941, 288, may overstate the likelihood that many crown references relate to French crowns, even if this is not specifically stated; it is more reasonable to assume that references to an otherwise undifferentiated crown, especially in an English context (as in the *Henry IV* plays), are to the English coin.

¹⁶ For example, the 1578 plague orders issued by the queen include medical instructions: 'take of this powder a french crown weight, and assoone as you suspect yourself infected, dissolue it into tenne spoonfulles of posset ale, & drinke it luke warme, then go to bed and prouoke your selfe to sweating'.

Mault's come downe, mault's come downe from an old Angell to a French crown,
 There's neuer a maide in all this towne, but well she knowes that mault's come downe,
 The greatest drunkards in this towne, are very glad that mault's come downe.¹⁷

Certainly, Bottom's costume-and-make-up rhapsody on yellow in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seemed to assume audience recognition:

'I will discharge it in either your straw-colour beard, your tawny-orange beard, your purple-in-grain beard, or your French-crown colour beard, your perfect yellow'.
 (1.2.68–70)

Peter Quince makes a somewhat opaque response: 'Some of your French crowns have no hair at all and then you will play bare faced' (1.2.71–72). This usage is also found for (presumably English) 'bald crowns' in other plays,¹⁸ and it has caused some puzzlement, since neither English nor French crowns normally had a portrait, with or without hair. Since 'crown' was often used to mean 'head' and, of course, an item of royal regalia, it seems multi-level punning is here at work. John Donne's elegy *The Bracelet* has much to say about a range of coins, in relation and in contrast to English angels as the coins about to be melted down to make a bracelet, among them French crowns:¹⁹

Where they but crowns of France, I cared not,
 For, most of these, their natural country rot
 I think possesseth; they come here to us
 So lean, so pale, so lame, so ruinous.
 And howsoe'er French kings most Christian be,
 Their crowns are circumcised most Jewishly.

It may be that Donne is here making a similar complaint to that of Peter Quince: that French crowns in England are often clipped and poor quality.²⁰ A reference in John Marston's *The scourge of villanie* to 'a false French-crowne' echoes the implication that the French crowns that ended up in England were not always of the best quality.²¹

However, Peter Quince's comment has also been interpreted as a reference to baldness as a symptom of syphilis, 'the French pox', and a usage in *All's Well That Ends Well* seems to carry a similar association of this coin and sexual misconduct ('As fit . . . as your French crown for your taffety punk' (2.2.14–15), a taffety punk being a well-dressed prostitute. A joke in John Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* (1604) definitely associated the French crown and French pox ('doe you give them, the french Crowne, they give you the french pox', 1.1.122–3), but it seems the weight of this joke rests on the reference to the French, rather than a usual understanding of the coin in such a way. Marston first used this joke in *The scourge of villanie Three bookes of satyres* (London, 1598). An anti-papal treatise, John Hull's *The unmasking of the politique atheist* (London, 1602) [at p. 101], similarly calls up the disreputable aura that hangs around French-ness: 'Agrippa reporteth of a Bishop, that boasted at his table, that he had in his diocesse eleauen thousand priests, which paid yearely a *French crowne* for whores keeping'.

It is perhaps no surprise to find French crowns in *Henry IV Part 2* and *Henry V*, in the latter additionally under its French name of *écu* as well, in the mouth of a French soldier: 'Gardez me vie, et je vous donnerai dues cent ecus'. 'He is a gentleman of a good house and for his ransom he will give you two hundred crowns', is the translation provided by the Boy for Pistol, who has captured the Frenchman at Agincourt (4.4.37–40). King Henry V himself draws upon a range of coinage references to gee up his soldiers, mocking the gilded garb of the French leaders.

¹⁷ Ravenscroft 1609, [p. 29].

¹⁸ For example, in *Henry IV, Part 1* (2.4): 'Thy state is taken for a joined-stool, thy golden sceptre for a leaden dagger, and thy precious rich crowns for a pitiful bald crown!' There are 'bald French crowns' in Jonson's *The Case is Altered* of 1597. Fischer (1985) complicates her crown references by including French crowns in a general crown entry.

¹⁹ For a detailed discussion, see Wong 2012, 129–30.

²⁰ See Hunt 2000–01, 433–4. However, this would not explain the non-French 'bald crown' references.

²¹ Marston 1598, [p. 40].

Indeed, the French may lay twenty French crowns to one they will beat us, for they bear them on their shoulders. But it is no English treason to cut French crowns, and tomorrow the King himself will be a clipper.

(4.1.181–184)

French crowns being clipped, again. In the much earlier *Henry VI Part 2*, the low-born rebel Jack Cade jeers ‘Go to, sirrah, tell the king from me, that for his father’s sake, Henry Fifth, in whose time boys went to span-counter for French crowns, I am content he shall reign, but I’ll be Protector over him.’ (4.2.123–125).²² A French crown is casually mentioned in each of the French-set plays *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (3.1.102) and *All’s Well That Ends Well* (2.2.14), and – less appropriately – in a throw-away joke in the Viennese-set *Measure for Measure*, simply, it would appear, as something familiar to the English audience (1.2.36). The majority of these references come in the mouths of comic and relatively humble characters: Bottom and Peter Quince in *The Dream*, Peter Bullcalf in *Henry IV Part 2*, Lucio in *Measure for Measure*, Costard in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and the Clown Lavatch in *All’s Well That Ends Well*; even Henry V is pretending to be a common soldier when he makes his use of the term. It is hard to know whether this is meaningful.

Ducats and French crowns are the foreign gold coins Shakespeare uses repeatedly. Two other foreign coin names get some mileage, though neither is gold and both are names that became thoroughly anglicised. Dollar, along with other versions such as dalder (this formulation perhaps registering the Dutch daalder) was the English version of thaler, used for any number of large silver coins.²³ The 1577 edition of Holinshed’s *Chronicle* reported of the ‘dalders, and such often times brought ouer, but neuerthelesse exchanged as bullion, according to their finenesse and weight, and afterward conuerted into coine, by such as haue authoritie’.²⁴

Shakespeare tended to use ‘dollar’ not in a realistic way, in plays set in lands that actually used such coins or with any sense of what the coin actually might be, but for its punning potential as a homonym – dollar as dolour, or grief. The exception is perhaps a reference in *Measure for Measure*, its setting of Vienna was of course no stranger to the real thaler coin, but the occasion for the use is a punning one: in patronising Mistress Overdone’s brothel Lucio has purchased diseases ‘to three thousand dolours a year’ (1.2.34). All of the dollar references occur in later, Jacobean, plays: as well as *Measure for Measure*, the term occurs in *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *The Tempest*; the dollar/dolour wordplay is explicit in the latter two, as it is in *Measure for Measure*, for example the Fool’s mordant joking in *King Lear*.

‘Fathers that wear rags
Do make their children blind;
But fathers that bear bags
Shall see their children kind.
Fortune, that arrant whore,
Ne’er turns the key to th’ poor.’
But for all this, thou shalt have as many dolours for thy daughters as thou canst tell in a year.
(2.2.225–232)

The fathers that bear bags in the rhyme are accumulating money-bags, but in the explanatory pay-off the Fool predicts that Lear will accumulate as many dollars – griefs – for his daughters’ behaviour as he can reckon up – tell – in a year. It’s a highly cynical interpretation of the ties that bind, but as it turns out very accurate. Lear’s great troubles indeed begin in this very scene, at the end of which he will exit furiously into the storms. We can have a sense here of the complex layers monetary punning could offer.²⁵

²² *Arden of Faversham* of 1592 may be the only earlier known play with a French crown reference. Characters reference span-counters in many plays of the period, including Nashe’s *Summer’s Last Will and Testament*, Beaumont’s *The Woman-hater*, Dekker’s *Northward Ho*, John Day’s *Humour Out Of Breath*, and Chapman’s *Two Wise Men And All the Rest Fools*.

²³ The Holy Island Treasure (2012 T19) included a German thaler of Maurice of Saxony, 1548.

²⁴ Holinshed 1577, *Of the Coynes of England*, cap. 20.

²⁵ Shakespeare’s use of dollar was fairly unusual and is almost an exception to the idea that he used familiar terms that other playwrights also used. A reference in Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus* (4.5.13–14) is the only other example Fischer (1985) was able to find and I have not yet found any others.

The other anglicized coin name of foreign origin is *doit*, a very low-value piece originating as the *duit* of the Low Countries. Although *duits* were in production in the contemporary Dutch Republic and there are rare references to a ‘Hollanders *doit*’ in works that clearly have a Dutch perspective or origin,²⁶ there was probably not much sense to an English audience that it was a foreign name, except insofar as people knew there was no English coin worth a *doit*. During Shakespeare’s active life, there were not even *farthings* and a *doit* was a fraction of a *farthing*.²⁷ *Doits* were brought into play in general terms to mean a virtually valueless piece of money. It might have been Thomas Nashe who brought the term into frequent literary use, since he used it in a couple of pamphlets in the 1590s, *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), pairing *doit* and *dandyprat* (‘So likewise of his syder, the pore man might haue his moderate draught of it (as there is a moderation in all things) as well for his *doit* or his *dandyprat*’) and *Have with you to Saffron Walden* (1596). This was not necessarily before the earliest Shakespearean use of the term, in *Henry VI Part 2*, which was almost certainly performed before 1592. Here the Duke of Gloucester rebuffs accusations of financial malfeasance by piling on the low-value coin-names for effect.

I never robbed the soldiers of their pay,
Nor ever had one penny bribe from France.
So help me God, as I have watch’d the night,
Ay, night by night, in studying good for England,
That *doit* that e’er I wrested from the King,
Or any groat I hoarded to my use,
Be brought against me at my trial day!
(3.1.109–114)

However, Nashe was also a writer with some connection to Shakespeare, being, in some opinions, the likely author of Act 1 of *Henry VI Part 1* (a play possibly written after the plays we now know as *Henry VI 2* and *3*).²⁸ This reference and one in *The Merchant of Venice* (1.3.131) appear to be the only dramatic usages of the *doit* as a coin name in the Elizabethan period, although a third would be the off-stage character ‘little John *Doit* of Staffordshire’ in *Henry IV Part 2* (3.2.14), if we assume this is a joke name based on a small coin.²⁹ In the seventeenth century, however, Shakespeare and several of his contemporaries utilized it much more frequently.

Yet Shakespeare came to have his own, slightly unusual role for *doit*, making it his default term for near worthless coin outside a specifically English context.³⁰ In fact, it became the standard term he used for low-value coins in the ancient world, with several references in *Coriolanus* (‘Friends now fast sworn,/ . . . Unseparable, shall within this hour,/ On a dissension of a *doit*, break out/ To bitterest enmity’, 4.4.15–21; see also 1.5.6 and 5.4.50) and others in *Timon of Athens* (1.1.235) and in *Pericles*, where the brothel servant Boulton proclaims that for

²⁶ For example, in the English translation, *John Huighen van Linschoten. his discours of voyages into ye Easte & West Indies Devided into foure bookes* (London, 1598).

²⁷ Other contemporary playwrights did reference the *farthing*, even if no actual coin currently existed. In plays and other literature the phrase ‘to the utmost (or uttermost) *farthing*’ was a conscious echo of the familiar English translation of Matthew 5.26. This usage appears in Drew’s *The Duchess of Suffolk* and Heywood’s *The Fair Maid of the West* and *A Maidenhead Well Lost*. Yet *farthing* values and perhaps coins occur in plays of the 1580s (Wilson’s *The Three Ladies of London*; the anonymous *The True Tragedy of Richard III*), and 1590s (Lyly’s *Mother Bombe* and Henry Porter’s *The Two Angry Women of Abingdon*). Sometimes the name is used simply for the punning potential (*Eastward Ho*: ‘Come away *Sinne*, we shall as soone get a fart from a dead man, as a *farthing* of court’sie here.’) or as a measure below the level of English coinage, as with the line from *The London Prodigal* (a play published in 1605 as by William Shakespeare), ‘faith, we haue not a *farthing*, not a myte’.

²⁸ See, for example Vickers 2007.

²⁹ Two playwrights use *Doit* or *Doyt* as the name of an actual character; these are comic servants or functionaries. One appears in John Marston’s *What You Will* (1607), and the other was created by Thomas Dekker, who has a double-act of *Doyt* and *Dandyprat*, echoing Nashe’s usage, in *Blurt Master-Constable* (1602), with monetary jokes spinning off from their names. An earlier character with a low-value coin name is the boy Halfepeenie Sperantus in John Lyly’s *Mother Bombe* (published in 1594, but probably written and performed before 1591), whose entry also sets off a cascade of coin jokes.

³⁰ Other playwrights tended to use *doit* in contemporary settings and city comedies. Apart from the use of *doit* in ten of Shakespeare’s plays, Fischer (1985) only quotes two other occurrences in the works of other dramatists, Beaumont’s *The Beggars’ Bush* (1622) and Heywood’s *A Woman Killed With Kindness* (1603). Others include Heywood’s *If You Know Not Me You Know Nobody Part 2* (1606), which has Queen Elizabeth herself as a character, Chapman’s *Mayday, a Witty Comedy* (1611) and the anonymous *The Honest Lawyer* (1616).

the virgin Marina ‘I cannot be bated one doit of a thousand pieces’ (4.2.53–54). The doit is twice name-checked as the price of the cheapest entertainment, once more in the ancient world when in a quarrel Antony threatens Cleopatra with her place in Caesar’s triumph: ‘most monster-like be shown/ For poor’st diminutives, for doits’.(4.12.35–39).

The same comparison in another perspective is to be found in the *Tempest*, as Trinculo muses on the potential for profit in the monstrous Caliban:

A strange fish! Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver. There would this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes a man. When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian.
(2.2.24–27)

1613 probably saw the production of Shakespeare’s last work in the theatre, the lost *Cardenio*, but it also saw King James I’s authorization of an issue of farthings, the first since the 1520s; not silver from the royal mint but tokens in copper, produced under private patent. In the last years of his life he would have held and used an actual English copper coin – England’s long-overdue answer to the doit.

There is a pair of other low-value foreign coin-names Shakespeare used on occasion in an analogous way: the term mite or *mijt*, like *duit* a Dutch-derived term, makes its single appearance in *Pericles*, in the mouth of the Chorus figure, the medieval English poet Gower:

I’ll show you those in troubles reign,
Losing a mite, a mountain gain.
(2.Chorus, 7–8)

Mite was a term then far more widely used than doit (it can seem that there is hardly a sermon or treatise of the Tudor and Stuart periods that did not utilize the mite, whether or not it was explicitly the biblical widow’s or poor woman’s mite in question), so Shakespeare’s restraint is notable.

Setting the scene: English money

In contrast to this solitary Jacobean mite, there are three Elizabethan deniers, in plays of the 1590s: ‘My dukedom to a beggarly denier./ I do mistake my person all this while’ ironically exclaims Richard of Gloucester in *Richard III* (1.2.261–2), while the pair of reprobates Christopher Sly in the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew* (Induction.1.6) and Falstaff in *Henry IV Part 1* (3.3.55) each refuses to pay as much as a denier of their extensive tavern bills. As these are all English-set scenes, there is no sense of local colour being employed, unlike, say, the *quart d’écu* that makes an appearance in the French milieu of *All’s Well That Ends Well* as a coin appropriate for tipping (5.2.23). (This was probably a topical reference anyway, since this coin made something of a foray into English currency in the early seventeenth century.)³¹ Denier, like doit, is just a way of suggesting low value.

In many of the plays that reference foreign coins, these appear to mingle easily with English coins, however remote the setting from England and at any time in history. We have seen this in *The Comedy of Errors* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* has ducats jostling with testers in the same quick-fire exchange. This is a common Shakespearean practice – in which a bit of numismatic local colour, however approximate, is matched by the routine appearance alongside of standard English currency. In the remote early Rome of *Coriolanus* there are drachmas and doits alongside groats and threepences, and there are ducats and crowns, sterling and half-pennies together on the battlements of Elsinore in *Hamlet*, French crowns and three-farthing pieces in the Navarre of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, ducats and halfpence in the Sicily of *Much Ado About Nothing*, and so on in *Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure*, *All’s Well That Ends Well*.

³¹ See Besly 1987, 63. The coin was given a value in a 1625 proclamation of Charles I and appears in John Taylor’s poem *The Travels of Twelvence* (published 1621) and Fletcher and Massinger’s *The Elder Brother*, performed c.1625 and published in 1637.

In some distant settings, English money is the only kind there is. While *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is set in a wood near mythic Athens and has a core story derived from elements in Ovid, Lucian and Plutarch's *Life of Theseus*, Bottom's French crown reference and his possible reward of 'sixpence a day for playing Pyramus' (4.2.12–15) show an untroubled, un-rigorous and thoroughly Elizabethan monetary environment. Theseus and Hippolyta, Hermia and Lysander mingle with very English 'low mechanicals' and equally English fairies, so perhaps there is no dissonance with English money providing yet another native element. Similarly there are references to crowns and pennies under the walls of Troy in *Troilus and Cressida*. There is a certain logic to this, the references to English money are placed in the mouths of the more contemporary types of characters and the light-relief – it is Bottom not Theseus, who uses the English monetary terms; the railing Thersites not Achilles; servant characters like Speed in *Two Gentlemen*, and Pompey in *Measure for Measure*, the Clowns in *All's Well and The Winter's Tale*. In *Cymbeline* the generic ducat and doit are there, as are general references to 'pieces of gold', but there are also pounds and pennies, from the 3,000 pounds annual tribute to Rome claimed from King Cymbeline (3.1.9) to 'the charity of the penny-cord', the hangman's rope as apostrophised by the First Gaoler (5.3.263).

Yet there is a sense in some plays of at least a degree of consistency, of a desire to maintain a sense of local appropriateness or perhaps just to avoid any sense of discordance. In the ducat-dominated world of *The Merchant of Venice*, one English coin is name-checked, but precisely in terms that indicate its foreignness, as the Prince of Morocco reverently references the angel as an alien and exotic item:

They have in England
A coin that bears the figure of an angel
Stamped in gold, but that's insculp'd upon;
(2.7.55–57)

In other plays Shakespeare seems to veer around coin names. In *Othello* there are several references to money in general, or to pieces of gold, but there are no ducats (the obvious coin for the play) and the only coin name is (a little strangely) the crusado, spoken of by Desdemona.

Believe me, I had rather have lost my purse
Full of crusadoes and, but my noble Moor
Is true of mind and made of no such baseness
As jealous creatures are, it were enough
To put him to ill thinking.
(3.4.19–23)

Why a Venetian lady on a Cyprus under Turkish threat would have a purse of Portuguese gold coins is not obvious, unless the name was chosen by Shakespeare because of its linguistic resonance. In English usage at the time, crusado was more commonly the word for crusade, the holy war declared by the pope. A contemporary writer Barnabe Barnes made the connection of coin, violence and pope explicit in his *The Devil's Charter*, based on the life of the notorious Borgia pope Alexander VI.³² Here a character prepares for murder inspired by 'a rich purse cram'd with red crusadoes/ Which doth inspire me with a martial spirit' (3.5).

The history plays set in England, unsurprisingly, offer a rich supply of monetary references. In some cases historic monetary malfeasance culled from Shakespeare's source books resurface in the plays: the accusations of misuse of funds (specifically 8,000 nobles) between Bolingbroke and Norfolk that sets off the action in *Richard II* is one; another is the numismatic accusation laid against Cardinal Wolsey by Suffolk in *Henry VIII*:

That out of mere ambition you have caused
Your holy hat to be stamped on the King's coin.
(3.2.385–386)

Another such reference occurs in *Henry VI Part 2*, with the rebel Jack Cade's optimistic economic policy: 'there shall be no more money; all shall eat and drink on my score' (4.2.54–55).

³² Barnes 1607.

Coins and customs

Characters in the plays use coins and money to give each other information or, perhaps more usually, to comment on or even undermine other characters' actions and speech. These exchanges can help give insights into the social role of money and can be found throughout Shakespeare's career. In one of his earliest plays, *Henry VI Part 1*, written in or around 1590, Joan la Pucelle (a disorienting version of Joan of Arc, to modern perceptions: aggressive, sneering and literally a fiend-raising witch) enters Rouen in disguise with soldiers, offering practical advice on their conduct:

Take heed, be wary how you place your words;
Talk like the vulgar sort of market men
That come to gather money for their corn.
(3.2.3–4)

So we have a pin-hole view of the rural use of coinage, seasonal and occasional, given with all the familiar knowledge of a shepherd's daughter, as imagined by a Warwickshire man with his own strong rural background. As Joan is carried to the pyre, she rejects and abuses her father, the Shepherd, claiming to be of noble birth, to which he replies

Tis true, I gave a noble to the priest
The morn I was wedded to her mother.
(5.4.23)

What appears to be another little note of a custom of the time.

Meanwhile, over twenty years later, the Old Lady in *Henry VIII*, hearing Anne Bullen disclaiming any thought of being queen 'for all the riches under heaven', comments dryly 'Tis strange. A threepence bowed would hire me,/ Old as I am, to queen it.' (2.3.44–45), knowingly referencing the bending of a coin as a lover's gift.

Shakespeare can even offer a taste of how dreams were interpreted – we know from Shylock that to dream of money bags was ill-omened:

I am not bid for love; they flatter me:
But yet I'll go in hate, to feed upon
The prodigal Christian. Jessica, my girl,
Look to my house. I am right loath to go:
There is some ill a-brewing towards my rest,
For I did dream of money-bags to-night.
(2.5.14–19)

Proverbial money

Shakespearean money references can veer easily towards the proverbial and aphoristic: such usage is nearly as common in Shakespeare as money as metaphor. This speech from *The Taming of the Shrew* is quite representative, in concluding with a proverbial flourish:

Why, give him gold enough and marry him to a puppet or an aglet-baby, or an old trot with ne'er a tooth in her head, though she has as many diseases as two and fifty horses. Why, nothing comes amiss, so money comes withal.
(1.2.71–74)

'Caesar gets money where/ He loses hearts', comments Pompey in *Antony and Cleopatra* (2.1.16–17); but money-proverbs from a grandee like Pompey are fairly rare. 'He that wants money, means and content, is without three good friends', grimly notes the impoverished shepherd Corin in *As You Like It* (3.2.18–19). 'I begin to love as an old man loves money, with no stomach' says the Clown [Lavatch] in *All's Well That Ends Well* (3.2.11–12) and 'These wise men that give fools money get themselves a good report—after fourteen years' purchase', jokes Feste in *Twelfth Night* (4.1.14–15), as an aggravated Sebastian tips him to go away.³³ It is here, lower down the social order among peasants and servants, that we are most likely to

³³ Camille Slights 1982, 541–2.

encounter this sort of money-centric folk-wisdom, nowhere more so than in the bottomless pit of monetary references that is *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Ford: Good Sir John, I sue for yours: not to charge you; for I must let you understand I think myself in better plight for a lender than you are:
the which hath something embolden'd me to this unseasoned intrusion; for they say, if money go before, all ways do lie open.
Falstaff: Money is a good soldier, sir, and will on.
(2.2.115–119)

Falstaff's propensity to use, or invent, monetary sayings is perhaps just one of the many ways in which he is marked as firmly down-market.³⁴ This is not to say that kings and lords refrain from monetary aphorism – far from it – but Shakespeare rarely gives them this distinctive tone of homespun sententiousness.

The selfish manipulation of proverbial speech was also used by Shakespeare. Timon helps his friends in need generously, but in his own crisis one of those 'friends' refuses to help in return, confecting a specious justification – that he wasn't asked first: 'Who bates my honour, shall not know my coin' (3.3.23).

Aristocratic monetary references can themselves reinforce this association of money with the lesser sort. A serial offender here is the proudest aristo of all, Coriolanus, supported by his fearsome mother Volumnia and his fellow patricians, as when Coriolanus puzzles rhetorically why his mother advises him to be less abrasive with the lowly plebeians:

I muse my mother
Doesn't approve me further, who was wont
To call them woollen vassals, things created
To buy and sell with groats, to show bare heads
In congregations, to yawn, be still and wonder,
When one but of my ordinance stood up
To speak of peace or war.
(3.2.8–14)

Tips and testers

Outside the plays such as *The Merchant of Venice* that are focussed overwhelmingly on money, it often seems to be the case that one character above all gets the lion's share of coin and money references in a given play. As has been noted, money references tend to cluster around figures at the lower level of society, and many such characters get a stream of coin jokes and puns. Costard in *Love's Labour's Lost* is just such a figure, distracted from a cheap tip of one of the smallest available coins by the extravagant language used by the giver:

Now will I look to his remuneration. Remuneration! Oh, that's the Latin word for three-farthings; three-farthings – remuneration. – 'What's the price of this inkle?' – 'One penny' – 'No, I'll give you a remuneration. Why, it carries it. Remuneration! Why it is a fairer name than French crown. I will never buy and sell out of this word.
(3.1.98–102)

He runs with the word throughout the play, getting a much better tip of a shilling under the Frenchified term 'gardon', beating the latinate 'remuneration':

Gardon, O sweet gardon! Better than remuneration, a 'levenpence farthing better: most sweet gardon!
I will do it sir, in print. Gardon! Remuneration!
(3.1.128–130)

Before getting his own back at the end:

Hold, there is the very remuneration I had of thy master, thou halfpenny purse of wit, thou pigeon egg of discretion.
(5.1.50–51)³⁵

³⁴ For the use of the language of credit and debt by Falstaff and other characters, see Levine 2000; also Fischer 1989, especially at pp. 160–3.

³⁵ This subplot of the play would be compressed into a comic anecdote in Gervase Markham's *A health to the gentlemanly profession of servingmen* (London, 1598).

A paper could be written just on the tips in Shakespeare and the range of coins they cover. Sir Toby Belch gives a sixpence for a song in *Twelfth Night* (2.3.20); Lafeu in *All's Well* disdainfully tips a quart d'écu (a decent sum) to the down-at-luck Parolles (5.2.23), while Cassio in *Othello* anxiously tips with 'a poor piece of gold' to get access to Desdemona to ask for her intercession (3.1.20). He is the best tipper in the plays, matched perhaps by Prince Hal, who tips Falstaff's page a crown, while Poins gives him a more usual sixpence (*Henry IV Part 2*, 2.2.52–54).

In the most extended tipping scene in Shakespeare, the servant Speed in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* implies that he expects a ducat and is outraged by the tip of a testern or tester:

To testify your bounty, I thank you, you have testerned me; in requital whereof, henceforth carry your letters yourself: and so, sir, I'll commend you to my master.
(1.1.125–128)

Falstaff and Andrew Aguecheek also give a tester or testril (*Henry IV Part 2*, 3.1.201 and *Twelfth Night* 2.3.21). These do not overtly inspire annoyance in the receiver in the dialogue, although it might be implicit through the expression of their particular characters and the indications of annoyance left to the discretion of the actors of the parts receiving the coin. So, what is a tester? In origin it must certainly be the old bad shillings of the Great Debasement, known initially as testoons, the best of them current for just over fourpence before their final demonetisation early in Elizabeth's reign. However, it seems the term long outlasted the coins themselves in popular and literary memory. This is the interpretation previously followed by the current author: that Shakespeare's testers are to be understood as poor quality money.³⁶ However, it also seems that tester was shifting into being a fairly neutral coin-name for a specific sum in comic and popular literature. The 1578 translation of Rembert Dodoens *A newe herbal, or the historie of plantes* describes as particular husk as 'very large, of the quantitie of a groote, or Testerne', which suggests the groat and testern concerned were viewed as relatively close in size and thus that this testern might not be a shilling.³⁷

A Gallant gives a tester as alms to a beggar in Antony Copley's *Wits, Fits and Fancies* of 1595³⁸ and gets back the offer of prayer rather than scorn; still, this would not necessarily indicate that tester is here a neutral term for a sum of money, since the anecdote may well be opposing the meanness and humility of the two participants. John Dando's comic dialogue *Bankes Bay horse in a trance* has 'stewed prunes, nine for a tester', which does seem to imply an understood value.³⁹ In Thomas Middleton's satiric *Micro-cynicon* 'little Dicke the dapper singing knave',

'... had a threadbare coate to make him braue:
God knowes scarce worth a tester, if it were
Vallewed at most, of seuen it was too deere.'⁴⁰

Which would suggest the tester was worth sixpence and indeed an explicit confirmation of this is to be found in Thomas Morley's *A plaine and easie introduction to practicall musicke*, using monetary analogies to make a technical musical point about crochets and semibreves:

and I thinke none of vs but would tsiinke a man out of his wits, who would confesse, that two testers make a shilling, and denie that sixe peeces of two pence a peece, or twelue single pence do likewise make a shilling.⁴¹

So a tester is sixpence, it seems, the value to which the base shillings were first re-valued in 1551, fully established by at least the mid-1590s and a standard usage in later seventeenth-century

³⁶ Cook 2012, 44.

³⁷ Dodoens 1578, [p. 153]. It is the case that many of the monetary terms in this work relate explicitly to German or Flemish denominations, so there may be some ambiguity about this reference. Yet certainly by the early years of the seventeenth century, the bigness or broadness of a tester could be offered as a reference in English sources without qualification, in sources such as Samuel Rid's *The art of juggling or legerdemaine*: 'couer the same with a peece of lether as broad as a tester' (Rid 1612, [p. 30]).

³⁸ Copley 1595, 30.

³⁹ Dando 1595, [p. 17].

⁴⁰ Middleton 1599, Satyr 4, [p. 29].

⁴¹ Morley 1597, 55.

reports on money, for example the fairly chaotic coin guide in Randal Holme's *The academy of armory* of 1688 has:

A *Sixpence*, or *Tester*, answereth the Kings Four pence in all respects, having this mark VI or a Rose; if it have neither, it is a *half Faced Groat*, and goeth for no more. It is an Inch in Diameter.⁴²

In Shakespeare's usage of the 1590s we seem to be on the cusp of this shift – a tester tip can both arouse scorn and be accepted as simply meaning a sixpence and a perfectly acceptable reward, at least to the giver. On the one hand, testers can be tipped without comment in Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* (published 1611) and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1630), Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Scornful Lady* (1616), with similar usage in Heywood's *The Late Lancashire Witches* (1634). On the other hand, usages such as 'to the last tester' retain the sense of low value or even disdain attaching to the name.⁴³ There does seem to emerge a sense that to tip with either a sixpence/tester or shilling is to make a judgement on the service provided, an alternative offered in *Greene's Tu quoque, or, The City Gallant* (1614) and also appearing in religious tracts, such as Henry Mason's *Hearing and doing the ready way to blessednesse*:

For what a shame is it that a labouring man should willingly take so much paines for a tester or a shilling, when we think so little paines to be overmuch for obtaining of eternall life and the Kingdome of heaven?⁴⁴

Money as metaphor

We have often seen topical and punning monetary language in the mouths of less-elevated characters rather than the grander sort, but this tendency does not hold good when money is principally being used as a metaphor, using terms taken from the manufacture and use of money. Richard of Gloucester himself is one of the first of these in the early scenes of *Richard III*, identifying himself as 'rudely stamp'd' – a mis-struck coin (1.1.16), cursing about the 'beggarly denier', and punning on the noble whilst picking a quarrel with Queen Elizabeth Woodville and her family:

Your brother is imprison'd by your means,
Myself disgraced, and the nobility
Held in contempt, whilst many fair promotions
Are daily given to enoble those
That scarce, some two days since, were worth a noble.
(1.3.76–80)

Much later in *Richard III* in Act 4 Richard, now king, draws on another aspect of monetary life:

O Buckingham, now do I play the touch,⁴⁵
To try if thou be current gold. Indeed,
Young Edward lives: think now what I would say.
(4.2.9–11)

The only other user of such a monetary reference in the play appears similarly early, when the defeated Queen Margaret also draws upon the idea of stamping coins to rebuke one of Edward IV's upstart courtiers, whose newly acquired noble status is compared to a coin straight from the mint that has barely entered currency:

Peace, master marquis, you are malapert:
Your fire-new stamp of honour is scarce current.
O, that your young nobility could judge
What 'twere to lose it, and be miserable.
(1.3.256–259)

⁴² Holme 1688.

⁴³ Barnes 1606, 173; Browne 1642, 155.

⁴⁴ Mason 1635, 41.

⁴⁵ See below, pp. 157–8, for more on touching and related terms.

Richard and Margaret's vivid use of the metaphor of currency is echoed in *Henry IV Part 1*, when Hotspur praises his new Scottish ally:

Well said, my noble Scot: if speaking truth
 In this fine age were not thought flattery,
 Such attribution should the Douglas have,
 As not a soldier of this season's stamp
 Should go so general current through the world.
 (4.1.1–5)

These suggest that other, less-elaborated uses would still offer a living sense of the coining process, as when Commius identifies his blood-drenched enemy Coriolanus across the battlefield: 'He has the stamp of Martius' (1.6.26), Martius being one of Coriolanus' names.

In several of these phrases involving both stamp and touch, current is an accompanying world and concept – it is the right stamp and the right standard in combination that defines the current coin and gives it its role. Questions of worth, authenticity, acceptability and function swirl around the three words: touch, stamp and current. This is obvious in one sense, but it is the little additional linguistic flourish that makes the monetary analogy absolutely clear and brings the metaphor to life. Currency itself can form the main focus of the language, as with Sebastian's thanks to Antonio in *Twelfth Night*:

My kind Antonio,
 I can no other answer make but thanks,
 And thanks; and ever thanks; and oft good turns
 Are shuffled off with such uncurrent pay:
 (3.3.14–17)

In more negative vein, John of Gaunt rebuts Richard II's insincere good wishes for long life:

Thou canst help time to furrow me with age,
 But stop no wrinkle in his pilgrimage;
 Thy word is current with him for my death,
 But dead, thy kingdom cannot buy my breath.
 (1.3.223–226)

Kings have power to end life, but not to extend it. King Richard himself only turns to monetary language when fallen very low indeed. In the anguished deposition scene he asks for a mirror 'if my word be sterling yet in England'. Soon after, imprisoned by the new king Henry IV, he is visited by his former groom:

Hail royal prince!;
 Thanks noble peer;
 The cheapest of us is ten groats too dear.
 (5.5.67–69)

Richard is here commenting on his fallen state: he is no better, no more valuable, than his lowly visitor. Ten groats (forty pence) is the difference between a ryal and a noble, or at least was.⁴⁶ By Shakespeare's day it no longer applied, but seems to have become a sort of fossilised joke that would still be understood. A probably apocryphal anecdote of Queen Elizabeth had her making the same joke when a preacher shifted from 'royal queen' to 'noble queen'.⁴⁷

King John and half-faced groats

The relatively neglected *King John* is perhaps a play all numismatists should know better, as it is such a store of monetary references. The play has some sort of relationship to an older

⁴⁶ The noble was worth 80 pennies and survived as a name for this sum when the coin had ceased to be produced; when introduced in 1464 the ryal was worth 10 shillings (120 pennies); under Elizabeth I it was a coin of 15 shillings.

⁴⁷ A note in vol. 11 of *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, edited by Samuel Richardson, George Steevens (*sic*) and Isaac Reed (London, 1802) reads: 'Mr John Blower, in a sermon before her Majesty, first said 'My royal Queen', and a little after, 'my noble Queen.' Upon which says the Queen: "What, am I ten groats worse than I was?"' This is to be found in Hearne's *Discourse of Some Antiquities between Windsor and Oxford*. However Thomas Hearne's *A letter containing an account of some antiquities between Windsor and Oxford* ([Oxford?], 1725), which this appears to mean, does not include this anecdote.

anonymous play, *The Troublesome Raigne of John, King of England*, published in 1591.⁴⁸ The usual interpretation is that Shakespeare took the older play, retained its action and structure, while almost wholly rewriting the dialogue. This interpretation is not completely accepted, but if this was the genesis of *King John*, Shakespeare was interpolating monetary references into the play, where they were previously absent.⁴⁹ Most fall to the character of Philip, the Bastard of Faulconbridge, illegitimate son of Richard the Lion-heart and the play's only really likeable character.⁵⁰ He jokes about half-faced groats and about his own skinny appearance, looking like a three-farthings piece if he put a rose behind his ear;⁵¹ he hopes to have angels to salute his palm and jauntily proclaims:

Bell, book and candle shall not drive me back,
When gold and silver becks me to come on.
(3.2.23–24)

His monetary language interweaves with reflections on family resemblance, as Philip does not physically resemble his purported father as his younger brother does, but instead, as their mother confesses, the late, great King Richard. Philip at first resents the attack on his inheritance:

Because he hath a half-face like my father!
With half that face he would have all my land-
A half-faced groat five hundred pound a year!
(1.1.93–95)

A profile resemblance brings out a coinage reference. But why half-faced groat specifically, when nearly all the silver coinage of the age had a profile portrait? The groat was far from being the lowest-value coin, but it was perhaps viewed as the standard coin of daily business, as other Shakespearean usage seems to suggest⁵² and as other authors confirm. Thomas Morton, a pamphleteer writing to confute the Jesuit Robert Parsons in 1610, parades half-faced groats in just this way

Come Sir, What sort of gold will you be paid in? Will you have it in Spanish Pistolets? Portugall Cruzadoes? French Crownes? Zechnies of Venice? Dallers of Germanie? or English Angels? And his Creditor shall answer him, Sir, any kind of coyne would content mee, although it were but half-faced groats, or single-pence, so I might have it.⁵³

Contrasting different levels of coinage, groats or even pennies, will do as well as gold, so long as payment is made. Morton goes on to refute Parson, to his own satisfaction, concluding with another monetary flourish:

I hope, he will haue cause to say I deale not vnonestly with him, when I pay him with his owne coyne, that is, whilst I confute him with his owne Answeres, albeit they are sometimes (I confesse) more *bare* then *halfe-faced groats*.

Half-faced groats here definitely have a dismissive ring, reinforcing the view of the groat as a fairly trivial coin.

So, while Shakespeare might be just throwing 'half-faced' in as a descriptive element to drive home the portrait point, he is, it appears, echoing a current verbal practice. But why 'half-faced groats', whether or not it was his formulation? There were unlikely to be any other sorts of groat available in Shakespeare's time, since the last issue of groats with anything other than profile portraits were the debased issues in the name of Henry VIII, coins with a three-quarter facing portrait, long since purged from currency. It is possible that Shakespeare was utilizing a snippet of fossilised terminology, a differentiation between good and bad

⁴⁸ See, for example, Vaughn 2003.

⁴⁹ The only sustained treatment of money in *The Troublesome Raigne* is a knockabout scene of raiding abbey treasure and friar-bashing that Shakespeare avoids.

⁵⁰ For an interesting discussion of the character, see Van de Water 1960.

⁵¹ See below, p. 156.

⁵² See, for example, *Coriolanus* 3.2.8–14, quoted on p. 151 above. In an early play by Robert Wilson, *The Three Ladies of London* (1581), a character condemns alehouse gamblers for 'Hauing greater delight to spend a shilling that way, than a groat at home to sustaine their needie children and wiues'.

⁵³ Morton 1610, 41.

groats perhaps, that emerged in the mid-Tudor period of debasement and monetary crisis, just as testers survived in the language long after they left the currency.

The term ‘half-faced’ was one with widely-used double meanings and there was rarely a double meaning that Shakespeare resisted. ‘Half-faced’ meant straightforwardly in profile, but it also meant double-dealing, deceitful and hypocritical. A pamphlet of the Civil War period by Daniel Featley (1626) conflates the two usages in exactly the way that we can assume Shakespeare was doing. The pamphleteer is describing people who will not come off the fence, who shift between both sides of the conflict, trying to keep in with each – perfectly reasonably in most people’s minds, one might think, if not to a committed protagonist. They offer ‘four-penny friendship’. ‘Let these half-fac’d groats be for ever reckoned amongst clipt silver, and never goe for currant coyne that are so light in the balance’ – a very Shakespearean-style riff with monetary metaphor. In the 1620s, a religious pamphleteer scorns a rival’s thesis as ‘a halfe faced groat of the Semipelagian alloy’, a formulation that also seems to bring into play the long shadow of the Great Debasement.⁵⁴

The Bastard goes on to make similar verbal play derived from the physical appearance of silver coins, in his complicated (and, in the modern theatre, utterly baffling) joke about himself risking being taken for a three-farthing piece if he put a rose behind his ear (1.1.144). The rose comes from the design of the coinage, the placement of a rose behind the queen’s head on alternating silver denominations to make differentiation easier.⁵⁵ The Bastard has selected one out of the four available denominations for which this joke worked and, in what was presumably a knowing piece of self-deprecation; he has chosen the lowest value of them all: indeed the lowest-value coin available for much of Elizabeth’s reign. Although the halfpenny was restored to currency in the early 1580s, the three-farthings seems to have embedded itself in the literature of the time and in the minds of the authors active in the 1590s (who presumably grew up with it) as a shorthand for low-value coin, appearing in such a role in, for example, Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus* (written before 1594)⁵⁶ and Jonson’s *Every Man in His Humour* of 1598 (‘He values me, at a crackt three-farthings, for ought I see’).⁵⁷

Shakespeare certainly used the three-farthings to stand for very low-value coin in other contexts,⁵⁸ but in this case there is the added factor that the obverse design of the tiny late-Elizabethan halfpenny (a portcullis, without either a royal portrait or a rose behind it) would not have allowed this joke to be made:⁵⁹ Shakespeare picked the lowest-value coin for which the joke worked. There is an odd gender-blindness in these jokes: the Bastard compares both himself and his brother to portraits of female monarchs, since the groats in currency in the 1590s (so far as hoard evidence suggests) were of the female rulers, Mary and Elizabeth.

The Bastard quickly comes to surrender his inheritance to his brother, to take his chance as a member, if illegitimate, of the royal family, recognised by his grandmother Queen Elinor and uncle, King John:

⁵⁴ Featley 1626, [p. 6]. ‘Semipelagian’ was a term that emerged in the late sixteenth century to describe an attempt to compromise between the theologies of Pelagius and St Augustine and was used by Reformed Protestant theologians to attack anyone deemed to deviate from Augustine’s ideas, which to them included Arminians and Catholics. The idea of Semipelagianism being neither one thing or the other, a sort of half and half, made it an appropriate way of referencing counterfeits.

⁵⁵ There was a rose on the three-farthings, not on the penny; on the three-halfpence, not on the half-groat and so on up to sixpence, with rose, and shilling, without rose.

⁵⁶ Christopher Marlowe, *Dr Faustus*: ‘Now, sir, I thinking that a little would serve his turn, bad him take as much as he would for three farthings: so he presently gave me my money and fell to eating; and, as I am a cursen man, he never left eating till he had eat up all my load of hay.’

⁵⁷ Similar usage of the three-farthings can be found in Thomas Lodge’s *A fig for Momus* and Anthony Copley’s *Wits, fittes and fancies*, both published in 1595; in the translation of Tomaso Garzoni’s *The hospitall of incurable fooles* of 1600 and in John Weever’s *The mirror of martyrs* of 1601. It then fades away fairly quickly in the seventeenth century, perhaps echoing a declining currency role as halfpennies and, after 1613, the new copper farthing tokens took over the role of low-value coin. In 1613 Beaumont and Fletcher’s *The Scornful Lady* provides evidence of a monetary fraud, turning three-farthings into pennies: ‘he had a bastard, his own toward issue, whipt, and then cropt for washing out the roses, in three farthings to make ‘em pence’.

⁵⁸ See above, p. 156.

⁵⁹ The halfpenny references in the plays usually either indicate low cost, as the cheapest available versions of things, made to match the smallest available coin (halfpenny loaves in *Henry VI Part 2* (4.2.49) and halfpenny purses in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (3.5.99) and *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (5.1.51)) or allow jokes about their minute size and interchangeable appearance, as in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *As You Like It*.

Brother, take you my land, I'll take my chance.
Your face hath got five hundred pounds a year,
But sell your face for five pence and 'tis dear.

We are back where we started with jokes about the face as a fourpenny groat.

In *The Face of Mammon*, David Landreth devotes a chapter to 'monetary policy in *King John* and *Measure for Measure*' and engages with the Bastard's monetary language, detecting a pattern of shifting value as the character moves between denominations in his verbal play, between groat, three-farthings and angel. However, these coins and the sums they represent do not offer an obvious trajectory of value along the extensive denominational range of the Elizabethan coinage and they are not related to each other in the play. Each reference emerges from a particular context and a different, less systematic, interpretation is perhaps more plausible. Shakespeare is rather drawing on the physical appearance of specific coins to mediate between, and associate, the quick-witted Bastard and the watching audience, whose purses would be holding these very coins.

The Bastard is not the only character in *King John* to utilise monetary language. He is joined in this by several others, although they steer clear of the workaday currency. As so often, the angel gets more than its fair share of attention.

Cousin, away for England! Haste before;
And, ere our coming, see thou shake the bags
Of hoarding abbots, imprisoned angels
Set at liberty.
(3.2.17–20)⁶⁰

King John himself tells the Bastard, sending him to England to raise funds. Prince Lewis of France is not to be outdone and bribes dissatisfied English nobles to his side with what might seem fairly threadbare noble/angel joking:

Come, come, for thou shalt thrust thy hand as deep
Into the purse of rich prosperity
As Lewis himself. So, nobles, shall you all
That knit your sinews to the strength of mine,
And even there, methinks, an angel spake.
(5.2.60–64)

More emphatically, Constance of Brittany rebukes the king of France for abandoning her cause, striking a well-aimed verbal blow at a king, who by virtue of his office is supposed to be responsible for maintaining good money:

You have beguiled me with a counterfeit
Resembling majesty, which, being touch'd and tried,
Proves valueless.
(3.1.25–27)

The language of touching and trying was embedded deeply in the early modern mind and recurs several times in Shakespeare. These were the available methods of testing the fineness of gold, either visually, judging the look of a smear of gold on a touchstone or needles, or 'trying' by assay. In *Henry IV Part 1*, the rebel armies 'Must bide the touch' on the battlefield at Shrewsbury (4.4.11); Timon of Athens's false friends 'have all been touch'd and found base metal' (3.3.7), and gold itself in that play is 'thou touch of hearts' (4.3.392), the test of humanity, a test that, in *Timon*, humanity largely fails. The touchstone itself occurs so frequently in sixteenth-century literature (above all in religious writings) that it almost seems to have broken free from its origin as an actual object, yet phrases such as the one in *Pericles* ('gold that's

⁶⁰ This is virtually the only place in *King John* where one of Shakespeare's monetary allusions seems to echo the text of *The Troublesome Raigne*, in which the king says 'And toward the main charges of my wars/ I'll seize the lazy abbey-lubbers' lands/ Into my hands, to pay my men of war./ The Pope and Popelings shall not grease themselves/ With gold and groats that are the soldiers' due.'

by the touchstone tried', describing an armorial device, 2.2.48)⁶¹ occur often enough to ground it again in reality. There is of course a Shakespearean character named Touchstone, a jester in *As You Like It* who tests the wit of those around him. The actor who probably first played the part, Robert Armin, was originally a goldsmith, so there was perhaps an in-joke as well.

Money and Merry Wives

Although *King John* is a monetarily rich work, even it pales beside the Falstaff plays, *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, with an epilogue in *Henry V*. Falstaff is a unique character in Shakespeare's work by virtue of being the only one who appears in completely different types or genres of plays (histories and a farcical comedy), and his propensity to use monetary language moves with him.⁶² Acquiring money by fraud and outright theft is part of Sir John Falstaff and his crew's *modus operandi*, and he is perennially in debt as well (the harassed Mistress Quickly his main victim). 'Pay her the debt you owe her, unpay the villainy you have done with her; the one you may do with sterling money, and the other with current repentance', the Chief Justice admonishes him (*Henry IV Part 2*, 2.1.84–86). But Falstaff's own language is a vigorous stream of monetary puns and allusions. He will not walk anywhere for all the coin in the king's exchequer (*Henry IV Part 1*, 2.2.24–25); money-hunting from the Merry Wives, he reports Mistress Ford's control of her husband's purse: 'he hath a legion of angels' (1.3.36–37). Can he trust his cronies, or will they be 'gilt twopences' – half-groats gilded to look like half-crowns (*Henry IV Part 2*, 4.1.396).⁶³ He will not pay his bill, but tells his creditors to coin the ruddy-faced Bardolph's nose and cheeks: 'How! poor? look upon his face; what call you rich?! let them coin his nose, let them coin his cheeks:/ I'll not pay a denier' (*Henry IV Part 1*, 3.3.54–55).

But these money jokes are often part of his defensive strategy, of deflecting accusations and blame through his wit, as with the joke of coining Bardolph's nose. At the end of the great play-acting scene in *Henry IV Part 1*, in which Prince Hal plays the part of the king and Falstaff the part of Hal defending Falstaff, a dark foreshadowing of what will come ('Banish plump Jack and banish the world!'), Falstaff persists almost desperately in his defence, shouting over the hubbub of the sheriff's arrival, 'Dost thou hear, Hal? Never call a true piece of gold a counterfeit. Thou are essentially mad, without seeming so' (2.4.260–261).⁶⁴ He is a true piece of gold. In a similar vein, he deflects the Chief Justice's accusation that he is the Prince's 'ill angel':

'Not so, my lord. Your ill angel is light, but I hope that he that looks upon me will take me without weighing.'
(*Henry IV Part 2*, 1.2.119–120)

Whatever Falstaff is, he is not underweight.

Falstaff dies offstage in *Henry V* and money-jokes seem to die with him. In this play coins are transactional: In the immediate aftermath of Falstaff's death, Ancient Pistol buys reconciliation with Corporal Nym.

Pistol. A noble shalt thou have, and present pay;
And liquor likewise will I give to thee,
And friendship shall combine, and brotherhood:
I'll live by Nym, and Nym shall live by me;
Is not this just? for I shall sutler be
Unto the camp, and profits will accrue.
Give me thy hand.

⁶¹ Shakespeare had expertise in the area of emblems and was paid 44 shillings in gold to create one for the earl of Rutland for a tournament in 1613 (the 44s. in gold reflects a revaluation of the gold coinage in 1611: the old pound sovereign or unite was now 22s., and the other denominations increased accordingly). The emblem in *Pericles* is not a Shakespearean invention, however, but reflects his accurate knowledge of the field: see Young 1985.

⁶² For just one discussion of the character, see Moulton 2006.

⁶³ There is an example of such a coin in the British Museum collection: 1935,0401.2324.

⁶⁴ See Lea 1948; Black 1973.

Nym. I shall have my noble?
Pistol. In cash most justly paid.
 (2.1.80–88)

Pistol owes Nym a betting debt of eight shillings. The accounting noble was 80 pence, well under eight shillings, but presumably it is the whole package of money and other benefits on offer that satisfied Nym, who seems happy enough. Towards the end of the play, Pistol is given a groat by Fluellen to make up for a buffet to the head, this being taken less well: 'I'll take thy groat in earnest of revenge' (5.1.46). It is up to King Henry V himself to make more elevated use of coinage language, rebuking the traitors plotting against him for French bribes:

But, O,
 What shall I say to thee, Lord Scroop? Thou cruel,
 Ingrateful, savage and inhuman creature!
 Thou that didst bear the key of all my counsels,
 That knew the very bottom of my soul,
 That almost mightst have coined me into gold,
 Wouldst thou have practised on me for thy use,
 May it be possible, that for foreign hire,
 Could out of thee extract one spark of evil
 That might annoy my finger?
 (2.2.94–103)

These plays even give us the contents of pockets and purses; 'What money is in my purse?' Falstaff asks his page in *Henry IV Part 2*, to get the discouraging answer 'Seven groats and twopence'; 'I can get no remedy against this consumption of the purse', Falstaff wearily retorts (1.2.161–163). One might assume this was intended to reflect actual coins, although there does seem to have been a habit of expressing sums through coin names, without this necessarily meaning actual coins. In particular there seems to have been a practice of using the groat in this way, reckoning in multiples of fourpence. Ten groats – 40 pence or a quarter-mark – seems to have been a common usage.⁶⁵ In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the half-witted Slender identifies the contents of his stolen purse.

Falstaff: Pistol, did you pick Master Slender's purse?
Slender: Aye, by these gloves, did he, or I would I might never come in mine own great chamber again else, of seven groats in mill-sixpences, and two Edward shovelboards that cost me two shillings and two pence apiece of Yead Miller, by these gloves.
 (1.1.106–110)

There's a slight puzzle here that Allen and Dunstan pointed out.⁶⁶ Seven groats is 28 pennies, not divisible by six, so it seems Slender is valuing his milled sixpences at other than their notional value. One would imagine the value was higher than usual, because of their particularly good quality, since his two 'Edward shovelboards' – fine shillings of Edward VI converted into gaming pieces – are also over-valued (indeed hugely so). Examples of such coins with added silver rims have survived, presumably to assist in the game or just set them apart, and may in help account for this value-rise. Sets of Elizabethan milled sixpences also survive as high-quality reckoning counters,⁶⁷ so perhaps the contents of Slender's purse were not ready money, but his gaming kit. Allen and Dunstan noted another case where the milled sixpences seemed to command a premium, but also quoted from Davenant's *News from Plymouth*: 'A few mill'd sixpences with which/ My purser casts accompt is all I've left.' They understood from this that milled sixpences as counters were thus of little value, but this is not a necessary inference from Davenant's line and would not in itself be likely.⁶⁸ The surviving high-quality

⁶⁵ In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Lavatch jokes about an attorney's fee of this sum ('as fit as ten groats is for the hand of an attorney' (2.2.14).

⁶⁶ Allen and Dunstan 1941, 291.

⁶⁷ There is a set of 205 milled sixpences in a silver triple-cylinder container in the collections of the British Museum, housed in the Department of Britain, Europe and Prehistory, registration number OA.2475.

⁶⁸ Allen and Dunstan 1941, 291. In any case, William Davenant's career was as a Caroline playwright, first active in the 1630s (*News from Plymouth* was licensed in 1635), so his perspective might not be the same as that of an Elizabethan writing forty years before. Allen and Dunstan's (accurate) comment on the poor quality of the odd milled sixpence that stayed in currency and has survived in seventeenth-century hoards would not appear to be strictly relevant.

sets of such sixpence-counters would argue against it. A reference in Thomas Nashe's *The apologie of Pierce Pennilesse* of 1592 seems to confirm the implication of *The Merry Wives*, that sets of milled sixpences were already in use as reckoning counters in Elizabeth's reign ('I had likewise reckond up a ropemaker, that by tormenting of hempe, & going backward (which the Deuill would nere doe) had turnd as many Mill sixpences ouer the thumbe, as kept three of his sonnes at Cambridge a long time').

Money in Elsinore

Hamlet is another play with significant money references. It opens with one more snippet of folk-belief, as Horatio addresses the Ghost, checking off Elizabethan ghost-lore by running through the list of possible spectral motives:

O, speak!
Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life
Extorted treasure in the womb of earth
(For which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death).
(1.1.127–130)

A restless spirit hovering over its buried hoard: Christopher Marlowe in *The Jew of Malta* invokes the same belief, as Barrabas stalks over his own hidden hoard.

Now I remember those old women's words,
Who in my wealth would tell me winter's tales,
And speak of spirits and ghosts that glide by night
About the place where treasure hath been hid

There is an undercurrent in *Hamlet* about the difference between real and apparent value in several of the money allusions in the play, something that the subject lends itself to well. The ever-sententious Polonius doubts whether Ophelia has correctly understood Hamlet's attentions to her:

Think yourself a baby
That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay,
Which are not sterling.
(1.3.109–111)

Hamlet greets the players and notes the growth-spurt of the boy who plays women's parts and hopes his voice hasn't yet broken, using the language of good money, gold that will ring true, not illicit or damaged:

By'r Lady, your ladyship is nearer to heaven than when I saw you last by the altitude of a chopine. Pray God your voice, like a piece of uncurrent gold, be not crack'd within the ring
(2.2.375–378)⁶⁹

A discussion of the current trends of English plays with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern shifts into remarks on changes in fashion closer to home, with an obvious hint to the audience that Hamlet knows his friends are now acting for the new king.

It is not very strange; for my uncle is King of Denmark, and those that would make mows at him while my father lived give twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats apiece for this picture in little. 'Sblood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out.
(2.2.324–327)

'Beggars that I am, I am even poor in thanks, but I thank you. and sure, dear friends, my thanks are too dear a halfpenny', he has already told them (2.2.261–262).

⁶⁹ For both of these usages, see Jacobs 1980. A chopine was a piece of fashionable Jacobean footwear, a woman's shoe built up to raise her height – precursors of platform shoes.

Money and villains

In *Measure for Measure* Angelo, an angel in name and the trusted minister of the Duke who turn out not to be trustworthy at all, is another utilizer of monetary metaphor. When the Duke announces his impending departure, leaving Angelo in charge of Vienna (though planning to remain disguised as a friar and secretly observe), Angelo responds, using the terminology of coin-making – he is having authority (and power) stamped on him as the representative of the absent Duke, just as a blank does in the coining process:

Now, good my lord,
Let there be some more test made of my metal
Before so noble and so great a figure
Be stamped upon it.
(1.1.50–53)

Of course, such a testing is precisely what is going on, although Angelo does not realise it.⁷⁰ His metal/mettle is really going to be tested, his standards checked and weighed, ‘the corrupt deputy scaled’ (3.1.238). This process of weighing and checking is implicit in the very title of the play itself, *Measure for Measure*.

Imposing the death sentence on the young man, Claudio, who has fathered a child out of wedlock, Angelo is petitioned by Claudio’s sister, Isabella, who offers to bribe him ‘not with fond sicles [shekels] of the tested gold’ (2.2.175), but with true prayers to heaven. Angelo will try to seduce and blackmail Isabella into sex, but still threatens to proceed with Claudio’s execution, using strangulated monetary analogies.

Ha! Fie these filthy vices! It were as good
To pardon him that hath from nature stolen
A man already made, as to remit
Their saucy sweetness that do coin Heaven’s image
In stamps that are forbid. ‘Tis all as easy
Falsely to take away a life true made
As to put metal in restrained means
To make a false one.
(2.4.42–49)

His argument is that siring a bastard is equivalent both to counterfeiting coin and to murder – making a ‘false’ life is the same as taking away a life ‘true made’. In this sophistic and dubious argument death is the appropriate fate of all of these offenders: fornicator, counterfeiter and murderer. ‘Tis set down so in heaven, but not in earth’, Isabella stoutly – and accurately – retorts (2.4.50): coin-forgery and murder were undoubted capital crimes, but no-one ever went to Tyburn for simple fornication, as Shakespeare’s audience knew full well. Other similar quasi-monetary wordplay runs through the play, of trying, assaying and especially weighing:

Thus can the demigod Authority
Make us pay down for our offence by weight
The words of heaven; on whom it will, it will;
On whom it will not, so; yet still ‘tis just.
(1.3.5–8)

Paying by weight rather than by tale, by count, is to require absolutely the full payment. The Duke responds to Isabella’s claims against Angelo (which he knows to be true) by feigning disbelief:

if he had so offended,
He would have weigh’d thy brother by himself
And not have cut him off,
(5.1.126–128)

⁷⁰ For a brief discussion of the coining imagery in *Measure for Measure*, see Fisch 1990, 594. There is a lengthier treatment in Landreth 2012, chapter 2.

The habit of giving monetary language to a villain perhaps reaches its climax in *Othello*. Iago enters the scene, railing against his rival Michael Cassio as ‘a great arithmetician’ and ‘counter-caster’ (1.1.19 and 31), and later as someone with ‘an eye that can stamp and counterfeit advantages’ (2.1.241). He rouses Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, with threats to his house, his daughter and his bags – his money-bags (1.1.83).⁷¹ And then there is his cynical bamboozling and manipulation of Rodrigo into continuing his pursuit of Desdemona, with its repeated and almost meaningless refrain: ‘put money in thy purse’, ‘put but money in thy purse’, ‘fill thy purse with money’, ‘make all the money thou can’st’, ‘therefore make money’ (1.3.343–366).⁷² The result is that Rodrigo loses all his money and then his life to Iago and the insidious commodification of Desdemona concludes with Othello calling her a whore and treating Emilia as her bawd:

We have done our course; there’s money for your pains:
I pray you, turn the key and keep our counsel.
(4.2.103–104)

In *Cymbeline*, throwaway monetary remarks are used to categorise the villains – the evil queen, the heroine Imogen’s step-mother, ‘a mother hourly coining plots’ (2.1.45) and her stupid and violent son Cloten, ‘This Cloten was a fool, an empty purse;/ there was not money in’t’, his killer recalls (4.2.147–148). But the hero gets the most extensive monetary language. He is Postumus Leonatus, a low-born man who has married the king’s daughter Imogen. After he is tricked into believing she has been unfaithful, he draws in a negative way on the idea of humanity as coinage, giving it a misogynistic twist.⁷³

Is there no way for men to be but women
Must be half-workers? We are all bastards,
And that most venerable man which I
Did call my father was I know not where
When I was stamped. Some coiner with his tools
Made me a counterfeit.
(2.4.194–199)

Coming to know the truth, with Imogen in peril, in his great prison speech he prays to the gods for her salvation at his own expense.

I know you are more clement than vile men,
Who of their broken debtors take a third,
A sixth, a tenth, letting them thrive again
On their abatement: that’s not my desire:
For Imogen’s dear life take mine, and though
‘Tis not so dear, yet it’s a life. You coined it.
‘Tween man and man they weigh not every stamp,
Though light, take pieces for the figure’s sake.
You rather mine, being your; and so, great powers,
If you will take this audit, take this life,
And cancel these cold bonds. O Imogen!
I’ll speak to thee in silence.
(5.3.121–132)

Here humanity is explicitly the coinage of the gods; Imogen is a more valuable life than his, both high-born and virtuous, but he asks the gods to count by tale, by number, and take his life as equal to hers, lighter and of less worth though it is. There follows the speech of a philosophical gaoler.

A heavy reckoning for you, sir. But the comfort is you shall be called to no more payments, fear no more tavern-bills; which are often the sadness of parting, as the procuring of mirth; you come in flint for want of meat, depart reeling with too much drink; sorry that you have paid too much and sorry that you are paid too much; purse and brain both empty; the brain the heavier for being too light, the

⁷¹ See Arnold 1957, 53.

⁷² See Heilman 1953.

⁷³ For a similar treatment that also draws on *Cymbeline*, see Neill 1996.

purse too light, being drawn of heaviness. Of this contradiction you shall now be quit. O, the charity of a penny cord! It sums up thousands in a trice. You have no true debtor and creditor but it; of what's past, is, and to come, the discharge. Your neck, sir, is pen, book and counters; so the acquittance follows.
(5.3.257–266)

This is a good place to conclude, with Shakespeare in one of his later plays summing up the human condition in the language of money and accounting, the ultimate calling to account, life's ledger.⁷⁴ Here he was a man of his time. In Renaissance England money and its use was thoroughly interwoven with questions of morality and conduct across the whole public realm, the commonwealth, and its use in any sort of discourse was in itself unremarkable. It is money's job to be ubiquitous, current in all spheres of life. But perhaps things are not so different in the modern world. Debates about the future are always expressed in terms of the relationship of economic and social policy, where people and money meet. Shakespeare would have understood, though his speeches would have been better.

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⁷⁴ For Shakespeare's accounting knowledge, see Reynolds 1974.

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