The Merchant of Venice

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Like much of the rest of Europe, England severely restricted the rights of Jews. In fact, Jews were banished completely from England in 1290 by King Edward I, and were not officially allowed to return until 1655, when Oliver Cromwell allowed Jews to return. This exile was technically in effect during Shakespeare's time, but scholars believe that a few hundred Jews still lived around London in the guise of Christians. One of the reasons Renaissance Christians disliked Jews was the Jews' willingness to practice usury—the practice of charging interest or "use" on borrowed money. There was a long tradition in Classical and Christian moral thinking against usury. Shakespeare's contemporary, the philosopher and statesman Sir Francis Bacon, argued in his essay *On Usury* that it was "against nature for money to beget money."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Though some describe *The Merchant of Venice* as a comedy because it ends with the marriage of its heroes Portia and Bassanio, it can also be described as a kind of "revenge tragedy." Typically, a revenge tragedy revolves around the quest of its central character to avenge a wrong committed against him, which usually leads to the deaths of many characters, almost always including the revenge-seeker himself. Shakespeare wrote several revenge tragedies, including *Hamlet*. Shakespeare's late romance, *The Tempest* (1510–1) takes the form of a "revenge tragedy averted," beginning with the revenge plot but ending happily. *Merchant of Venice* might be described as a revenge tragedy *barely* averted, as Portia swoops into the courtroom scene and saves Antonio from Shylock. Perhaps the most important related work for *Merchant of Venice*, however, is Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1589-90), which tells the story of the moneylender, Barabas, who has all his wealth seized by the Maltese government in order to finance the defense of the island against invading Ottoman Turks. Barabas revenges himself against the governor who seized his property, allies with the Turks, and briefly becomes governor of Malta himself, before the Maltese regain control of the island and put him to death.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Merchant of Venice*
- **When Written:** 1596–8
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1623
- **Literary Period:** The Renaissance
- **Genre:** Comedy/tragicomedy; Revenge tragedy
- **Setting:** Venice, and the nearby country estate of Belmont
- **Climax:** The trial of Antonio, the merchant, and Shylock, the Jewish moneylender
- **Antagonist:** Shylock

EXTRA CREDIT

"Which is the merchant here? And which the Jew?" Modern audiences of *Merchant of Venice* often mistake Shylock for the "merchant" of the title—which actually refers to Antonio.

PLOT SUMMARY

In Venice, Bassanio, a not-so-wealthy nobleman, asks to borrow money from his dear friend and wealthy merchant Antonio, in order to have the funds to woo Portia, a wealthy noblewoman. Although Antonio doesn't have cash handy, because all of his ships are at sea, he gives Bassanio permission to borrow as much money as he needs on Antonio's credit.

Meanwhile, at her nearby country estate of Belmont, Portia laments to her serving woman Nerissa about her father's will, which stipulates that any man who wants to marry Portia must answer a riddle by choosing one of three "**caskets**," or chests (one gold, one silver, and one lead). Only the man who chooses correctly can become Portia's husband. Portia has been disgusted with all of her suitors thus far. Still, Nerissa reminds Portia of a fine Venetian marriage prospect—Bassanio.

Bassanio asks the Jewish moneylender, Shylock, to lend him 3000 ducats. After much hesitation, Shylock agrees—Antonio will guarantee the loan with his property as collateral. However, when Antonio himself arrives and begins insulting Shylock for committing usury (charging interest on his loans), Shylock proposes a bizarre alternative. He will not charge Bassanio any

interest for three months. However, if Antonio defaults, Shylock will be entitled to cut one pound of flesh from anywhere on Antonio's body that he likes. Confident that his ships will return to Venice, with many times 3000 ducats, well before Shylock's deadline, Antonio accepts.

At Belmont, the Prince of Morocco arrives to try his luck at the riddle of the caskets. He chooses incorrectly (gold), and leaves in defeat. Meanwhile, in Venice, Lorenzo, a friend of Bassanio's, has fallen in love with Shylock's daughter, Jessica. One night, when Shylock goes out, Jessica steals a large sum of money from her father and elopes, as planned, with Lorenzo. Lorenzo and Jessica, along with many others, then travel with Bassanio to Portia's estate.

The Prince of Aragon is the next of Portia's suitors to try to solve the riddle of the caskets. After much deliberation, he chooses silver, which is wrong. As the Prince of Aragon leaves, Bassanio arrives, laden with gifts for Portia.

A few weeks pass, and news arrives that Antonio's ships have been lost at sea. Though Shylock has been unable to locate Jessica, he consoles himself that he will have his revenge in the form of the pound of flesh promised to him by his contract with Antonio.

Back at Belmont, Portia and Bassanio, who have spent all this time together, have fallen in love. Portia begs Bassanio to wait before facing the riddle, because she can't bear the thought of losing him if he guesses wrong. But he insists on going ahead. To their joy, he chooses the correct casket (lead). To seal their betrothal, Portia gives him a **ring**, instructing him never to lose it or give it away. Then Nerissa and Bassanio's vulgar friend Gratiano announce that they, too, intend to wed. However, just then, a letter arrives from Antonio, with news of his lost ships and Shylock's intention to collect his pound of flesh. Alarmed, Portia gives Bassanio enough money to repay the loan many times over. As Bassanio hurries off to Venice, Portia hatches a plan of her own to save Antonio.

In the court of Venice, the Duke is presiding over Antonio's trial. Shylock resists their requests that he show mercy and insists on pursuing his "pound of flesh," despite the fact that Bassanio has offered him 9000 ducats instead. Nerissa and Portia arrive on the scene, disguised as a law clerk and a lawyer, respectively. Portia points out that the contract Shylock holds doesn't give him the right to take any blood from Antonio, and that if Shylock sheds even a drop of blood while cutting Antonio's flesh that all of Shylock's wealth will be confiscated by the state. She further finds Shylock guilty of conspiring to kill a Venetian citizen, and therefore must hand over half of his wealth to Antonio and the other half to the state. Antonio and the Duke decide to show mercy, however: Shylock must only give half his wealth to Antonio, and promise to leave the other half of his wealth to Jessica and Lorenzo after his death. In addition, Shylock must convert to Christianity. Devastated, Shylock accepts.

As Portia is leaving, Bassanio (who still thinks she is Balthazar, the lawyer) tries to offer her money in thanks for her favorable judgment. She refuses, asking for his the ring that he is wearing instead. Thinking of his vow never to part with it, Bassanio hesitates. But after some prodding from Antonio, he gives in. Gratiano also gives his ring to Nerissa.

Back at Belmont, Lorenzo and Jessica have been enjoying an idyllic romantic evening. Shortly before dawn, Portia and Nerissa arrive, soon followed by Bassanio, Gratiano, and Antonio. The women feign indignation that their husbands lost their rings. However, they soon end the game and confess their role in the court scene. The couples are reconciled, and news arrives that Antonio's lost ships have returned safely to port, bearing great riches.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Shylock - A Jewish moneylender in Venice who has been embittered by years of abuse at the hands of Venetian Christians and Antonio, the merchant, in particular. Shylock's anger and bitterness lead him to sign a contract with Antonio, in which Antonio puts up a pound of his own flesh as collateral for a loan. When Antonio can't cover his loan, Shylock refuses to show any mercy and insists that the law be upheld and that he get to take his pound of flesh. The other characters, including Shylock's own daughter, Jessica, consider him inhuman—bestial or demonic. However, their treatment of Shylock helps illuminate the prejudice and hypocrisy that lies behind many of their stated ideals of human brotherhood and Christian fellowship.

Antonio - A prosperous Venetian merchant, liked and admired by his fellow citizens. To help his friend Bassanio woo Portia, Antonio signs a contract with Shylock, guaranteeing a loan with one pound of his own flesh as collateral. Many critics argue that Antonio harbors an unrequited erotic desire for Bassanio. In contrast to the benevolence that he shows others, Antonio expresses an intense hatred of Shylock and the Jews, though at the end of the play he does argue that Shylock should be shown mercy and not be condemned to death.

Portia - A beautiful, clever, and wealthy noblewoman who lives in the country estate of Belmont, outside Venice. Portia is bound by a clause in her father's will, which obligates her to marry whoever solves the so-called riddle of the **caskets**, by choosing the correct chest from one of gold, one of silver, and one of lead. After despairing over a parade of suitors whom she finds distasteful, Portia does get to marry her true love, Bassanio, who happily makes the correct choice. She also saves Antonio's life, during his trial with Shylock, dressed up as a lawyer named Balthazar. For centuries, Portia was admired as an ideal of feminine virtue. However, many modern critics have

pointed out that Portia, though seemingly a genius and a perfect wife, regularly displays a vicious prejudice toward non-Christians and foreigners.

Bassanio - A nobleman from Venice, who is a kinsman, close friend, and longtime debtor of the merchant, Antonio. Because he wants to woo the noble Portia, but cannot himself afford to do so, Bassanio borrows 3000 ducats from Shylock, with Antonio as his guarantor. His status as Portia's suitor and, later, her husband, makes Bassanio the romantic hero of the play. However, his character is deeply flawed. At best clueless, and at worst consciously selfish and manipulative, he always manages to avoid earning his own way: first, he exploits the generosity of his friend Antonio, and then he freely passes on the money and gifts that Portia gives him.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Gratiano - A notoriously vulgar Venetian and friend of Bassanio. While Bassanio courts Portia, Gratiano falls in love with and eventually marries her servant, Nerissa.

Jessica - Shylock's daughter, who moves from merely disdaining her father to actually robbing him, eloping with a Christian Venetian, Lorenzo, and converting to Christianity.

Lorenzo - A Venetian and friend of Bassanio and Antonio, who is in love with Shylock's daughter Jessica. Lorenzo elopes with Jessica, taking money and precious items that she has stolen from her father.

Nerissa - Portia's servant and confidante, Nerissa ultimately marries Bassanio's companion, Gratiano.

Launcelot Gobbo - A clownish servant, who leaves Shylock in order to work for Bassanio.

Salerio - A Venetian nobleman, friendly with Antonio, Bassanio, Gratiano, and Lorenzo.

Solanio - A Venetian nobleman and good friend of Salerio.

Prince of Morocco - A Moorish prince who comes to woo Portia at Belmont. He asks Portia not to judge him by the color of his skin, but incorrectly picks the gold casket.

Prince of Aragon - A Spanish nobleman who woos Portia at Belmont. He incorrectly picks the silver casket.

Duke of Venice - Presides over the trial of Antonio. Although the Duke attempts to persuade Shylock to show Antonio mercy, he knows that Venice's commercial interests depend on a consistent application of its laws, so he can't make an exception to help Antonio.

Old Gobbo - Launcelot's blind father.

Tubal - A Jew in Venice, and Shylock's sole friend and confidante during the course of the play.

Doctor Bellario - Portia's cousin and a well-respected lawyer in Padua. He never appears on stage.

Balthazar - The servant Portia sends to obtain her letters of introduction and costume from Bellario. Balthazar is also the name Portia takes when she impersonates a lawyer at court.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

PREJUDICE AND INTOLERANCE

The Venetians in *The Merchant of Venice* almost uniformly express extreme intolerance of Shylock and the other Jews in Venice. In fact, the exclusion of these "others" seems to be a fundamental part of the social bonds that cement the Venetian Christians together. How otherwise would the ridiculous clown Launcelot ingratiate himself with the suave Bassanio? Or why would the sensitive Antonio tolerate someone as crass as Gratiano? It is possible to argue that Shakespeare himself shares his characters' certainty that the Jews are naturally malicious and inferior to Christians because of Shylock's ultimate refusal to show any mercy at all and, as a result, his pitiful end.

Yet there are also reasons to think that Shakespeare may be subtly criticizing the prejudices of his characters. Shylock's fury comes not from some malicious "Jewishness" but as a result of years of abuse. For example, though he is criticized by Antonio for practicing usury (charging interest on borrowed money) Jews were actually barred from most other professions. In other words, the Christians basically forced Shylock to work in a profession that the Christians then condemned as immoral. Shylock insists that he "learned" his hatred from the Christians, and it is Shylock alone who argues that all of the characters are the same, in terms of biology and under the law. Viewed this way, *The Merchant of Venice* offers a critique of the same prejudices that it seemingly endorses?

HUMAN AND ANIMAL

Closely related to the theme of prejudice and intolerance is the theme of humanity—and the inhumanity of which various characters accuse one another. In insulting and abusing Shylock, the Venetians frequently denigrate him as an animal or devil. Shylock, in turn, seeks to reduce his debtor Antonio to the status of an animal whose body can be bought or sold. In the courtroom scene, he justifies his purchasing of a pound of Antonio's flesh as being fundamentally similar to the way in which other Venetians might buy slaves or livestock.

Shakespeare was writing *The Merchant of Venice* as a

philosophical movement called "Renaissance humanism" became prominent. This philosophy defined humans as exceptional beings, existing outside of the chain of being of God's other creatures. Yet, *The Merchant of Venice* shows how this type of humanism can be used to abuse outsiders. After all, if being "human" ceases to be based on biology, then exactly who is human and who isn't becomes a matter of interpretation. The play's Christian characters clearly believe that being Christian is a primary requirement for being human, as both the insults aimed at Shylock and the Prince of Morocco suggest. In his famous speech justifying his desire for revenge in 3.1, Shylock explicitly rejects the humanist definition of "humanity," describing his similarity to the Venetians in terms of biological functions that all human beings share: tickling, eating, bleeding, dying. Constant references in the play to "flesh and blood" further highlight humans' biological, "animal" origins..

LAW, MERCY, AND REVENGE

Both the central action of *The Merchant of Venice*—Shylock's attempt to revenge himself on the Christian Antonio—and the romantic subplot—between Bassanio and Portia—explore the relationship between law, mercy, and revenge.

Shakespeare's contemporary, the philosopher Francis Bacon, defined revenge as a "kind of wild justice." When one private individual decides to revenge himself on another, he is going outside the official justice system. And yet, as the phrase "wild justice" suggests, the revenger is responding to what he sees as a "higher law." The revenger takes the law into his own hands when he feels that the state is not capable of or refuses to enforce justice. Therefore, while law and revenge are technically opposed to each other, since revenge is illegal, they also overlap. Shylock, pursuing Antonio's "pound of flesh," exposes the intimate connection between law and revenge. He seeks vengeance against Antonio precisely by sticking to the letter of the law within the Venetian justice system.

In the courtroom scene of Act 4, scene 1, both the Duke and Portia present mercy as a better alternative to the pursuit of either law or revenge. Shylock explicitly refuses to show mercy, while the Christians, in sparing Shylock's life in the end, claim that they have. Yet, when they do, Shylock himself asks to be killed. He says that, having had all of his possessions confiscated and his religious identity revoked (which would also make it impossible for him to work as a money-lender, since Christians were not allowed to practice usury), he has nothing left to live for. The question of who is or is not merciful, therefore remains open.

GREED VS. GENEROSITY

The primary grievance that Antonio has against Shylock is that he is greedy—for charging interest to those who borrow money from him when they are in need. The Venetians implicitly contrast Shylock's greed with the generosity that they show one another. For instance, Antonio is willing to place his whole "purse and person" at Bassanio's disposal and regularly saves other Christians from having to pay interest to Shylock by paying off their debts for them.

It seems that, like love or mercy, generosity is limitless, unbounded. However, *The Merchant of Venice* also frequently begs the question of whether friends aren't using friends, or lovers their lovers, for materialistic reasons. For instance, why is the perpetually indebted Bassanio so intent on wooing the rich Portia? And as Portia's and Nerissa's anger over the rings that their husbands give away in the final scene reflects, even the freest gift-giving comes with strings attached, like the rules governing Shylock's more frankly capitalistic contracts.

READING AND INTERPRETATION

Instances of reading and interpretation occur many times in *The Merchant of Venice*. An early scene in which Shylock and Antonio bicker over the meaning of Biblical scripture shows that the all-important distinction between Jews and Christians basically boils down to interpretive differences—different ways of reading and understanding a shared heritage of texts.

The play also stages "scenes of interpretation"—in which the act of reading becomes a dramatic event. The first major instance, connected to the themes of both law and love, is when the Prince of Morocco becomes the first suitor to try to solve the riddle of the caskets, with major consequences for both Portia and himself depending on whether he interprets it correctly. This scenario repeats with both the Prince of Aragon and Bassanio. The courtroom scene, in which Portia must find an alternative way to read and understand the law in order to save Antonio's life, similarly turns an act of interpretation into a highly dramatic game with very high stakes. *The Merchant of Venice* shows how the practice of reading (and not just reading literature) is woven into the structures of prejudice and intolerance, love, law, and justice—how it is central to everyday life.

LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

In connection with mercy and generosity, *The Merchant of Venice* also explores love and friendship between its characters. The central romantic relationship of the play is that between Bassanio and Portia. Their marriage is paralleled by several others: the elopement of Shylock's daughter, Jessica, with the Christian, Lorenzo; and the marriage of Portia's servant, Nerissa, to Bassanio's companion, Gratiano. In addition, numerous critics have suggested that the strongest friendship in the play—between Antonio and Bassanio—also approaches romantic love. In

addition, the play shows how strong the amicable ties are that connect all the various Venetian characters.

Given the generosity that they motivate between characters, love and friendship might seem to offer alternatives to the ugly emotions of prejudice, greed, and revenge on display in *The Merchant of Venice*. However, beginning with Bassanio's borrowing money from his friend Antonio in order to woo Portia, the play also demonstrates that the apparent purity of love and friendship can be tainted by selfish economic concerns. In addition, love and friendship are also at the mercy of the law, as seen in Portia's being subject to the terms of her father's riddle of the **caskets**.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

STONES, RINGS, AND CASKETS

When Shylock raves about the "stones" that Jessica has stolen from him, part of the joke is that in the Renaissance "stones" was a slang word for the testicles. And indeed Shylock's only child's renouncing her father, eloping, and converting to Christianity is symbolically tantamount to castrating him, cutting off his family name. Multiple characters undergo kinds of symbolic castration throughout the play. Antonio, who seems not to expect to marry or have children, refers to himself as a "wether," or neutered ram. Portia's suitors, who vow never to seek other wives, also forfeit their ability to produce heirs.

The chests that Portia's suitors must open, like the rings that she and Nerissa give their husbands to safeguard, none-too-subtly evoke the female genitalia. In the final scene, when Portia and Nerissa pretend to have slept with the lawyer and the law clerk to whom their rings were given, they make this connection explicit. By using precious objectsand, in the case of the stones and the rings, *objects of commercial exchange*to stand for human sex, Shakespeare links the supposedly pure spheres of love and marriage to the play's exploration of money and greed.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Simon & Schuster* published in 2009.

Act 1, scene 1 Quotes

In sooth, I know not why I am so sad.

Related Characters: Antonio (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.1

Explanation and Analysis

The merchant Antionio begins this play, just as Portia will begin the following scene, by expressing sadness. Although Portia's sadness is easier to explain -- she is not truly weary of the world in general, but is tired of being pursued by suitors, who must follow her father's test in order to try for her heart -- Antiono's sadness is more inexplicable. He protests, to his friends, that he is not worried about his ships, which are spreading his wealth abroad (and would sink his wealth if they are ruined). He claims that he is not pining for love, either. We might blame other characters of the play -- the villain Skylock or Antonio's friend Bassanio -- for Antonio's sadness, but ultimately Antonio's emotions remain enigmatic as the play continues. They provide a fitting backdrop for this comedy, though; this melancholy opening puts a stale pallor over the action of the play, which can only be removed as characters form new social bonds or receive new material goods (or, occasionally, experience both of these processes together).

I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano—
A stage, where every man must play a part;
And mine a sad one.

Related Characters: Antonio (speaker), Gratiano

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.81-83

Explanation and Analysis

This is not our famous "All the world's a stage" moment in Shakespeare's "As You Like It;" it only briefly presents the view that men occupy different roles and does not present the seven general stages of a man's life. This statement is, however, an apt method of describing the broader pallor of emptiness which Antonio (who is the titular Merchant of Venice) introduces to the play's opening. According to this personal perspective, every individual "must play a part"; some must win, some must lose. The world is "but as the world," a bland reality that lacks imaginative possibilities, and, every man has "a part." Antonio is an individual, but he is also interpreted in association with other parts and is

made up of a combination of various social, racial, ethnic, and religious categories. Tensions between these categories will develop as the play continues.

> In my school-days, when I had lost one shaft,
> I shot his fellow of the selfsame flight
> The selfsame way, with more advised watch,
> To find the other forth; and by adventuring both,
> I oft found both.

Related Characters: Bassanio (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.140-144

Explanation and Analysis

Before Bassanio explains his desire to pursue Portia as a suitor, he discusses his pre-existing debts to his friend Antonio. Bassanio already owes Antonio (and others) a fair sum of money and gratitude, but he is about to ask for additional monetary assistance. Although Antonio will not withhold his money, and will be quite generous because of his friendship, Bassanio still provides an analogy that might convince Antonio to lend him money. Bassanio references how, once he lost an arrow, he would often shoot another arrow and more carefully watch the second arrow's flight, in order to find both arrows at once. Bassanio suggests that he will do the same with money; by paying more attention to the way he spends new loans, he will be able to repay his old and new debts to Antonio.

Act 1, scene 2 Quotes

> They are as sick that surfeit with too much, as they that starve with nothing.

Related Characters: Nerissa (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.2.5-6

Explanation and Analysis

Nerissa, Portia's servant and companion, provides this saying while she is discussing Portia's downcast emotions. After Nerissa mentions that Portia is blessed with an abundance of gifts, she gives this adage and reminder that too much material wealth can be as unfortunate as too little. This also serves as a warning against greed; the lust to accumulate more wealth and possessions can be as damaging as these possessions themselves, as the character Skylock will demonstrate through his avarice.

With these blunt words, Nerissa seems to offer her lady a similar sort of "economic" friendship as Antonio's friends have provided him. This underscores the importance of such fraternal bonds in *The Merchant of Venice*, which only develops its plot because a merchant is willing to share his wealth with another, in friendship.

> When he is best, he is a little worse than a man; and when he is worst, he is little better than a beast.

Related Characters: Portia (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.2.88-89

Explanation and Analysis

As Portia and her handmaiden Nerissa discuss many of the suitors which are striving to marry her, Portia does not attempt to fabricate her opinions with any false positivity or pretense. She even compares the Duke of Saxony's nephew (one of her suitors) to an animal, introducing this play's focus on human and animal categories, and the arbitrary way we can decide who and who isn't a "man" or a "beast." Portia's suitors represent many of the world's ethnicities, races, and nations; in her opinions towards these men, we first see the stereotyping and classification that will pervade the play's action.

> I dote on his very absence.

Related Characters: Portia (speaker), Bassanio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.2.300

Explanation and Analysis

After detailing her many suitors, and revealing her dislike of their behaviors and appearances, Portia declares to Nerissa that she will remain chaste as the goddess Diana, unless one of her suitors manages to win her in the way her father ordered before his death. Portia claims "I dote on his very absence," in reference to all of her potential suitors.

Yet, after Portia makes this extravagant claim, Nerissa reminds her of Bassanio; surely Bassanio was deserving, according to Nerissa. Portia does indeed remember Bassanio, and agrees that he was the suitor she preferred most. We thus begin to see a possible relief from the play's current aura of banality and absence.

> I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you.

Related Characters: Shylock (speaker), Bassanio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.3.35-38

Explanation and Analysis

Shylock utters these words during his first interaction with Antonio and Bassanio in the play, an interaction which reveals how complicated a figure Shylock will become in *The Merchant of Venice*. He will have more pitiful moments like this, despite his more general role as antagonist who seems to literally seek Antonio's flesh and blood. Here, as Shylock describes the rules he follows as he interacts with society, he also expresses the categorical isolation he feels as a member of the Jewish community, who is largely excluded from social aspects within the Christian Venice. He can participate in the public space of the marketplace and engage in commerce (and "buy," "sell," and "walk" with others), but he cannot (or *will*not)enter the more intimate spaces (to engage in worship or participate in meals). Here, though, Shylock is delivering these words in a public street; we cannot be sure whether he is accurately describing his own feelings of isolation, or merely harnessing this social reality to suit his needs in this conversation.

> The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.

Related Characters: Antonio (speaker), Shylock

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.3.107

Explanation and Analysis

As Antonio strives to procure a loan from Shylock, and Shylock displays the full force of his animosity, Antonio does not restrain himself from denigrating Shylock -- even as "the devil." Of course, Antonio is here providing a general saying, but the thinly veiled implication is that Shylock is functioning as the devilish figure in this interaction. Antonio has, at other occasions, more directly spat on Shylock or referred to him as a dog, so this wording is perhaps unsurprising.

It also, though, emphasizes the extent to which the Jewish and Christian communities in this play isolate themselves from each other theologically. The devil is the common enemy of both religious traditions, but in this colloquial saying, Antonio is associating Shylock with the devil.

> Many a time and oft
> In the Rialto you have rated me
> About my moneys and my usances:
> Still I have borne it with a patient shrug,
> For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.
> You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
> And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,
> And all for use of that which is mine own.

Related Characters: Shylock (speaker), Antonio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.3.116-123

Explanation and Analysis

As in many other moments of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock here describes the type of prejudice and discrimination that he faces, and that "all our tribe" faces, in Venice. Yet here Shylock also explains that the very individuals who denigrate him as a "misbeliever" or "cut-throat dog," also use him as a money-lender, borrowing his own funds -- "that which is mine own." Shylock exposes the unfortunate contradiction that Venetians mistreat the individuals whom they need, the money-lenders who fulfill an essential and respectable function in society. The injustices he lists here also serve to make Shylock a more complex character -- one who is portrayed as a caricatural villain, but who has possibly been made that way by the prejudice of a "Christian" society.

> Let the forfeit
> Be nominated for an equal pound
> Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
> In what part of your body pleaseth me.

Related Characters: Shylock (speaker), Antonio

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 1.3.160-163

Explanation and Analysis

While Shylock is bartering with Antonio and Bassanio in order to arrange their new loan, he decides to ask for an unusual form of repayment, should Antonio default on the loan: a pound of Antonio's flesh. This strange request captures the way that human actors are intrinsically associated with their financial means in this play, but it also provides a platform for subsequent reflections on honesty (would Antonio truly allow his blood to be spilt over a legal agreement?), mercy (might Shylock be overcome with mercy shortly before he would witness Antonio become injured), and violence (would this act of violence be enough to satiate Shylock's lust for revenge)?

Act 2, scene 1 Quotes

Mislike me not for my complexion,
The shadow'd livery of the burnish'd sun.

Related Characters: Prince of Morocco (speaker), Portia

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 2.1.1-2

Explanation and Analysis

The Prince of Morocco's first words to Portia are an earnest request to refrain from judging his physical appearance -- specifically, his dark "complexion," the physical aspect tied to racial and social categorization. He has clearly faced prejudice and dehumanization before, and so immediately apologizes for himself in the face of society's disapproval. But although the prince begins with this entreaty, he will adopt a more defensive and affirmative stance by the end of his speech: "I would not change this hue, / Except to steal your thoughts, my gentle queen." Here, the prince echoes Skylock's conflicting confidence and concerns over discrimination, suggesting that this process of adapting to stereotyping extends through the play's different forms of categorization and separation.

Act 2, scene 6 Quotes

All things that are,
Are with more spirit chased than enjoy'd.

Related Characters: Gratiano (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 2.6.13-14

Explanation and Analysis

Gratiano and Salarino converse as they wait for Lorenzo. Although Bassanio initially (in the play's first scene) commented that Gratiano tends to speak "an infinite deal of nothing," here Gratiano seems to arrive at a universal truth: individuals are more attracted to phenomena (or, in Gratiano's words, "all things that are,") while they are still pursuing them. People and objects become less fascinating once they are attained. This certainly applies to lovers -- particularly because the lovers Lorenzo and Jessica are about to appear onto the stage -- but also has relevance for financial and material pursuits. This fleeting comment calls into question all of the striving and seeking (for a lover, for a reputation, for greater material or financial well-being) that occurs throughout *The Merchant of Venice*.

But love is blind, and lovers cannot see
The pretty follies that themselves commit.

Related Characters: Jessica (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 2.6.37-38

Explanation and Analysis

When Lorenzo comes to Jessica, Shylock's daughter and his beloved, they have a brief conversation before Jessica gathers the rest of her belongings and joins him in their elopement. Jessica is disguised as a boy, and she claims she is grateful that Lorenzo does not see her in such a strange costume. During this conversation, she also more abstractly comments that "love is blind" -- a statement that is not literally true in Belmont, where Portia has certainly noticed her suitors' appearances and ethnicities (although it could be argued that this is because she doesn't truly love them). Yet, lovers are, indeed, often unaware of "pretty follies that themselves commit." In this very play we will observe several instances where lovers are unaware of the tricks and devices which their lover plays on them.

Act 2, scene 7 Quotes

All that glisters is not gold.

Related Characters: Prince of Morocco (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.7.73

Explanation and Analysis

As the Prince of Morocco opens the golden casket during his pursuit of Portia's hand in marriage, he uncovers the already common saying "All that glisters is not gold" (which was earlier expressed by Chaucer, among other writers). This trite warning against greed seems out of place at Belmont, where Portia's wealthy father has left her an expansive and an incredible quantity of money. It reminds us of this play's tension between love and the ownership of property -- a tension which Antonio faced in the first scene, when he decided to forsake his own property out of love for Bassanio (and to let his friend Bassanio hopefully win Portia's love and Portia's property, through Antonio's love and property).

This warning against greed is written on a scroll within the casket, and this casket is the first of many objects to be associated with writing. Though the casket itself is a golden expression of wealth, the words written within it also make it an expression of love. Portia's father likely included the golden casket to prevent suitors from winning over Portia out of their desire for her inheritance. Gy forbidding suitors who chose the golden casket from attaining Portia through marriage, Portia's father protects his daughter through his writing.

Act 3, scene 1 Quotes

If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge.

Related Characters: Shylock (speaker), Antonio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.1.52-53

Explanation and Analysis

Salarino claims to be "sure" that Shylock will not take Antonio's flesh because there is no clear use for Antonio's skin and blood (as Salarino implies with his blunt question "what's that good for?"). Shylock glibly comments that Antonio's flesh could be used to "bait fish," before he more directly claims that Antonio's flesh would "feed my revenge." It would allow Shylock to finally avenge the way that Antonio and others mistreat him (and other members of the Jewish community). By claiming that acts of vengeance would "feed" his revenge, Shylock implies that revenge is a natural human desire, like sexual desire or physical hunger -- and it is sated not by anything technically "useful," but only by inflicting more pain and spreading one's bitterness to others.

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.

Related Characters: Shylock (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.1.57-67

Explanation and Analysis

In the street, Shylock converses with Salanio and Salarino. He discusses his daughter Jessica's sudden leaving, and Salarino asks whether Antonio has lost his wealth at sea, from shipwrecks. Shylock comments that he will indeed seek a pound of Antonio's flesh if Antonio cannot repay his debt. After Salarino expresses his surprise, asking how Shylock could actually use Antonio's flesh for any purpose, Shylock quickly replies that Antonio's flesh could bait fish -- and suit his lust for revenge. Shylock describes that he has a drive for revenge, as any other individual supposedly does, and then gives us this famous declaration that Jewish individuals are largely the same as any others.

This plea for the Jewish people is thereby inscribed within Shylock's lust for revenge, and should not be taken out of context. Although *The Merchant of Venice* does certainly include Shylock's passionate defenses of himself and of his people, this message against stereotypes is tainted by its association with Shylock's individual bloodthirsty personality. The play does not form a clear platform for crying out against anti-Semitism, although it certainly

depicts the prejudice that confronts a people of individuals, which perhaps unfortunately includes Shylock.

> The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard, but I will better the instruction.

Related Characters: Shylock (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3.1.70-72

Explanation and Analysis

As Shylock closes his defense of his behavior, and his larger declaration that Jewish and Christian peoples are not as different as they seem to be in Venice, he claims that he has learned his lust for greed and revenge from the Christian individuals who have so mistreated him. He suggests that his own behavior is a reaction to the intolerance which he has faced and which he is currently confronting. He alludes to the fact that Venice's current social currents have been prefaced by prior stigmatization and discrimination, and this perspective certainly makes him a more complicated and sympathetic character than he may have initially appeared to be.

Act 3, scene 2 Quotes

> If he lose, he makes a swan-like end,
> Fading in music.

Related Characters: Portia (speaker), Bassanio

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 3.2.46-47

Explanation and Analysis

While Bassanio chooses between the lead, silver, and gold caskets to hopefully win Portia, Portia leads other members of her household in song, which will either provide Bassanio with "a swan-like end, / Fading with music" or will surround Bassanio's victory with appropriate fanfare. In this play, music will reappear in the context of Lorenzo and Jessica's moonlit love; music serves as an indicator of feelings which require a higher register in order to be truly expressed. Portia also relies on animal imagery, which reappears to either further denigrate characters such as Shylock or further elevate figures such as her ideal suitor Bassanio.

> Tell me where is fancy bred,
> Or in the heart or in the head?
> How begot, how nourished?
> Reply, reply.
> It is engender'd in the eyes,
> With gazing fed; and fancy dies
> In the cradle, where it lies.
> Let us all ring fancy's knell;
> I'll begin it – Ding, dong, bell.

Related Characters: Portia (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3.2.65-73

Explanation and Analysis

The song which Portia leads, while Bassanio is pondering and making his voice between the three caskets, is appropriately focused on true love, or "fancy." According to the song's words, love begins with visual cues or "in the eyes" -- which the Prince of Morocco knew as well, when he urged Portia to refrain from judging him based on his appearance (as he knew she was apt to do). Besides the song's content, the mere fact that Portia is fostering this music confirms that Bassanio is her suitor of choice; we are inclined to compare Portia's reaction to his suit to her earlier reactions to prior suitors, and we can measure the extent of her approval by this comparison.

> There is no vice so simple but assumes
> Some mark of virtue in his outward parts.

Related Characters: Bassanio (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 3.2.83-84

Explanation and Analysis

As Bassanio chooses between the gold, silver, and lead caskets, he delivers an ornate speech about the deceptive nature of ornament -- in fields as diverse as law, religion, and beauty. In doing so, he connects these separate topics which resurface throughout the play, emphasizing the importance of substance over style. He interprets the caskets correctly, or as Portia's father would, at least, and and will choose the appropriate casket as he rejects "gaudy gold" in favor of "meagre lead." Of course, he is still drawn to Portia's beauty, and his speech is delivered with a sheen of eloquence, so the content of his speech is not entirely convincing,

especially in this play which is otherwise occupied with wealth and disguises.

I am a tainted wether of the flock,
Meetest for death: the weakest kind of fruit
Drops earliest to the ground.

Related Characters: Antonio (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.116-118

Explanation and Analysis

When Antonio hears that his ships, and therefore his wealth, has been destroyed at sea, he delivers a seemingly Biblical description of himself as the "tinted wether of the flock" who is destined for death. Here, he describes himself using animal symbolism (a wether is a castrated male sheep), denigrating himself as he has earlier denigrated Shylock on so many occasions. Shylock here is in the position of authority, as the language of Antonio's defeat suggests. Finally, Antonio is no longer in a position of power, and we might guess, along with Antonio, that Shylock will take advantage of this new situation and make good on his desire to get revenge over Antonio.

I never knew so young a body with so old a head.

Related Characters: Duke of Venice (speaker), Portia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.164-165

Explanation and Analysis

In his letter to the court's judge, Doctor Bellario describes the young lawyer who will be replacing him. This lawyer is Portia in disguise-- a fact which the audience can realize but Bassanio and the rest of the court cannot. This description of Portia, then, deals with multiple layers of deception; it is associated with Portia's deception as a male lawyer and this supposed disguise of wisdom and maturity within a young body.

In the crucial court scene, Portia will indeed live up to this weighty description; she delivers an eloquent, passionate speech about the power of mercy and also manages to use details of law and reason to spare Antonio's life. She lives up to the disguise she is inhabiting, temporarily transforming into an accomplished lawyer when the opportunity presents itself to her.

Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?

Related Characters: Portia (speaker), Antonio, Shylock

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.176

Explanation and Analysis

As Portia is pretending to be a young lawyer, she asks one of the most simple yet central questions of he play: who is the Jew, and who is the merchant? This suggests that Jews are so defined by their religious and ethnic identities that their Jewishness obfuscates their professional roles; thus, we see the play's prejudices. More broadly, though, this moment captures the importance of societal functions in constructing an individual's identity. A person's identity is always somewhat questionable and ambiguous because it only exists in relation to other phenomena and systems of exchange larger than any one person. Arguably, Shylock is only the dehumanized "Jew" because society has forced him to play that role, while Antonio has been able to inhabit the more socially-approved role of "merchant."

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'T is mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's,
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.

Related Characters: Portia (speaker), Shylock

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.190-208

Explanation and Analysis

Portia's eloquent speech describing and lauding the benefits of mercy extends beyond this theme to other notions which appear and reappear throughout the play. Here, in the courtroom, this speech is not exactly a defense of Antonio according to Venetian law; it instead transgresses into religious territory. It raises questions about public versus private duties, religious salvation versus worldly justice, Old Testament versus New Testament ideals, and antagonistic relationships versus social cohabitation. Yet Portia's speech addresses so many other concerns because it almost entirely consists of abstractions. Thus it's not surprising that Portia's words don't even begin to appease Shylock's lust for revenge, or his specific desire to attain a piece of Antonio's physical body.

> My deeds upon my head! I crave the law,
> The penalty and forfeit of my bond.

Related Characters: Shylock (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.213-214

Explanation and Analysis

Shylock is the first to respond to Portia's famous speech about the benefits of mercy. As Shylock advocates that Antonio's flesh should indeed be cut, he justifies his desire by appealing to "the law." As he disguises his craving for revenge as a case of "I crave the law," he suggests the connection between volatile personal emotions and the authoritative, ever impersonal realm of the law. Shylock specifically longs for "the forfeit of my bond." He also elicits questions of ownership and possession; Shylock had a legal claim to Antonio's flesh -- the skin that only physically belongs to Antonio.

> Nay, take my life and all; pardon not that:
> You take my house when you do take the prop
> That doth sustain my house; you take my life
> When you do take the means whereby I live.

Related Characters: Shylock (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.390-393

Explanation and Analysis

Once the Duke has declared that half of Shylock's wealth will go to Antonio and the other half will go to the state, Shylock, in his dismay, provides a powerful description of the connection between one's life and one's wealth. He claims that his property sustains his life, so taking his property is the same as taking his life. Similarly, for Shylock, his wealth sustains his property, so an individual takes his property by taking his wealth. Here, Shylock articulates an indirect but powerful link between his life and his wealth, a direct correspondence which is not surprising given Shylock's generally greedy nature and concern with material possessions. Yet, after Shylock utters this statement, Portia immediately asks Antonio what "mercy" he might render Shylock, continuing to insert the notion of mercy into the courtroom even while simultaneously doling out arguably cruel, unmerciful punishments to Shylock.

Act 5, scene 1 Quotes

> The man that hath no music in himself,
> Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
> Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
> The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
> And his affections dark as Erebus.
> Let no such man be trusted.

Related Characters: Lorenzo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.1.92-97

Explanation and Analysis

After musicians play for the lovers Jessica and Lorenzo, Lorenzo declares that people who are not moved by music are the worst kind, the kind who deserve the worst that others have to offer them ("treasons, stratagems, and spoils"). This exclamation does more than just continue to reflect on the properties of music, and music's associations with love and goodness; it invites questions about who might deserve violence, and why. Does one deserve violence for being an intrinsically malignant individual, a character such as Shylock who is unmoved by others' pleas?

Or, does one deserve such negative consequences for specific actions, for breaking specific agreements? This play raises questions about who should be culpable, and why, but does not answer them -- even the relatively virtuous Bassanio and Gratiano (as well as Portia and Nerissa) break promises to their respective lovers.

> We will answer all things faithfully.

Related Characters: Portia (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5.1.321

Explanation and Analysis

Now that Portia and Nerissa have revealed their deception, Portia assumes that Bassanio and Gratiano are likely unsatisfied by their explanations thus far. So she urges them to go in, so that they may begin interrogating her and Nerissa.

Here, Portia promises to be faithful in her answers about "all things." She seems to have quickly forgotten how Bassanio and Gratiano were themselves unfaithful when they gave away their rings at the courthouse, despite their prior vows to Portia and Nerissa that they would never part from these rings. We are left, at the play's end, with a promise for full disclosure in the future. This provides a fitting end to our beginning, when Antonio's sadness was unexplained and unclear. Now that these relationships have formed over the course of the play, they can perhaps begin to remove the secrecy and unrevealed nature of characters' internal experiences -- although these relationships themselves are framed by such uncertainty, because of their connections to Portia and Nerissa's rings, and any clarity must necessarily occur off the stage, beyond the edges of the play's artificial world.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

On a street in Venice, the merchant Antonio tells his friends Solanio and Salerio that he feels "so sad" (1.1.1) but doesn't know why. Salerio proposes, with Solanio's agreement, that Antonio must be worried about his ships at sea. But Antonio insists that he's confident his ships are safe. Then, Salerio guesses, Antonio must be in love. Antonio dismisses this possibility at once. Salerio concludes, jokingly, that if Antonio is neither worried about his investments, nor melancholy because of lovesickness, then he must simply be "sad because [he] is not merry" (1.1.47–8). Salerio advises him to shake off his bad mood because it would be just as easy "to say you are merry because you are not sad" (1.1.49–50).

By emphasizing that he doesn't know the cause of his sadness, Antonio creates mystery around his character—mystery that demands that other characters "interpret" what's wrong with him. Some critics feel that Antonio's forceful denial that his sadness has anything to do with love actually hints that it does have to do with love. Salerio's conclusion that Antonio's mood is simply a whim, which can be changed by changing perspective, further underscores how different interpretations can create vastly different outcomes.

Bassanio, a relative and close friend of Antonio's, enters with his friends Lorenzo and Gratiano. After politely greeting the newcomers, Solanio and Salerio exit.

Polite manners cement friendly relationships between the noblemen of Venice.

Lorenzo and Gratiano announce that they must depart, but will see Bassanio again at dinner. Before leaving, though, Lorenzo notes that Antonio looks unwell. Antonio responds that, on the "stage" of the world his part is to be "sad" (1.1.78–9). Gratiano interrupts that he would rather play the happy role of a "fool" (1.1.79) and teases Antonio, telling him to lighten up. Lorenzo reproaches Gratiano for talking too much and repeats that they will rejoin Bassanio for dinner. They exit.

Antonio's comment about the stage and that it is his "part" to be sad indicates that there is some mysterious aspect of his personality that ensures his sadness. Gratiano's crass jokes reveal him to be less sensitive—despite the fact that he's a noble Venetian. Throughout the play, his bad manners raise the question about who is civilized and who is not.

Once alone, Bassanio apologizes for Gratiano's insensitivity and reveals why he's come to see Antonio. He is in love with Portia, a wealthy noblewoman, and hopes to seek her hand in marriage. However, he lacks the financial means to do so. He has many debts he must clear before he can woo her, including debts to Antonio.

That Bassanio needs cash to woo Portia introduces a connection between love and money that will persist throughout the play. That he already owes Antonio money hints that he is willing to use his friend for material purposes.

Antonio replies that he will do anything for his friend and is happy to place both his "purse" and his "person" at Bassanio's disposal. Though Antonio has no cash available at the moment because he's invested everything in his ships currently at sea, he says that Bassanio can use his "credit" (Antonio's known wealth and good reputation) in order to get a loan from someone else in Venice.

Bassanio's ulterior motives contrast with the pure devotion and generosity of Antonio's friendship. In fact, Antonio acts so selflessly toward Bassanio that many critics argue that Antonio is actually in love with Bassanio. These critics think Antonio's sadness results from his unrequited love.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

At her estate in Belmont, near Venice, Portia complains to her servant Nerissa that she's "aweary of this great world" (1.2.1–2). Nerissa observes that to be rich and have everything, as Portia does, is just as depressing as having nothing: it would be better if she could choose to live a more moderate, ordinary life.

Like Antonio in the first scene, Portia complains to her trusted friend about being sad. Nerissa, like Salerio, first offers a materialistic explanation—Portia is depressed by having too much money and possessions.

Portia replies that in fact she's frustrated by her total lack of control over her romantic situation. Portia and Nerissa discuss this situation: Portia's dead father specified in his will that she couldn't choose her own husband. Instead, when he died, Portia's father left behind a riddle. Anyone who wants to marry Portia must choose one of three "caskets" (chests), each marked with a clue. One is made of gold, one of silver, and one of lead. Only the man who chooses the correct casket can take Portia as his bride.

Portia has more concrete grounds for being depressed: her father's will has entrapped her in a legal contract that leaves her with no control over her love life. The will gambles her whole fate on the—as yet, mysterious—riddle of the caskets, which her suitors must interpret.

Nerissa asks what Portia thinks of the foreign princes who have come to woo her so far. Nerissa lists their names, and Portia mocks them one by one. The Neapolitan? He reminds her of a horse. The prince from Palatine? Humorless. The Frenchman? Boring. The British Baron? Too ignorant even to speak to Portia, knowing neither Latin, Italian, nor French—and badly dressed, to boot! The Scottish lord? Didn't even have enough money to come on his own; he had to borrow from the Englishman. The German Duke's nephew? A drunk who is "little better than a beast" (1.2.89). Nerissa observes that, in any case, Portia is safe because none of these suitors has agreed to try his hand at the riddle. Portia resolves, in turn, that, despite her frustration, she will obey her father's decree.

Portia's speeches show that she's witty and self-possessed, but also cruel and prejudiced—as well as materialistic, on occasion (for instance, when she rejects the Scottish lord for not having enough money). Dismissing her German suitor as a "beast," she also makes the first of a number of animal insults that occur throughout the play, usually applied to Shylock and used by the Venetians to question the humanity of Jews. Yet, despite her frustration, Portia will remain within the legal framework willed to her.

Nerissa asks Portia whether she remembers a Venetian man who once came—Bassanio. Portia does, fondly. Just then, a servant enters. He informs Portia that the suitors who have been at Belmont are departing and that the Prince of Morocco is coming that night. Portia remarks that she's happy to see the others go, but that she would rather be murdered than marry a man with the "complexion of a devil."

For the first time Nerissa and Portia show some hopefulness about a prospective suitor. But, confronted with the prospect of Morocco, Portia again demonstrates her bleak outlook about her marriage. She also gives a hint of ethnic prejudices she will later reveal more fully.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

Back in Venice, Bassanio is trying to convince Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, to lend him 3,000 ducats for three months, with Antonio bound to repay the debt. Frustrated by Shylock's stalling, Bassanio demands an answer. Shylock concedes that Antonio is a "good man" (1.3.16)—that is, Shylock believes Antonio will be good for the money that Bassanio wants to borrow. Therefore, after a little more waffling, he accepts the terms that Bassanio has proposed.

Even in this brief exchange, Shylock shows that he interprets the world through a different framework than Bassanio: he understands "good" as meaning "having enough money" whereas Bassanio, in theory, values other "good" qualities in his old friend. (Though Bassanio also, clearly, appreciates Antonio's money.)

Shylock then asks whether he can speak with Antonio himself. Bassanio invites Shylock to dine with them both that night, but Shylock declines. Although he will do business with Christians, he explains, it would go against his religious principles to eat or drink or pray with them.

By distinguishing between business activities and his private life, and by refusing Bassanio's offer to share a meal, Shylock shows that he has religious differences that set him apart from the Christian Venetians.

By coincidence, at this moment, Antonio appears. Although Shylock notices Antonio at once, at first he ignores him, remarking privately that he harbors an "ancient grudge" (1.3.47) towards the "Christian" (1.3.42). Shylock explains to the audience that he hates Antonio because he "lends out money gratis" (1.3.44), or free of interest, thereby bringing down interest rates for professional moneylenders such as himself (who are almost all Jews). More importantly, Antonio has repeatedly insulted the Jewish people in general and Shylock in particular. Shylock is determined to get revenge on Antonio not only for himself, but also for his "tribe" (1.3.51).

Shylock reveals his prejudice against Christians and explains the way in which he has experienced anti-Semitic prejudice himself. Notably, both groups' ideas of the other revolve around ideas of commerce: the Christians believe it is wrong to practice usury (lending money for interest), whereas the Jews—who were forbidden by law from engaging in most other professions—often resorted to usury as a way to make a living. Being treated badly has given Shylock a desire for revenge.

Antonio approaches Shylock, saying that he ordinarily would not take part in a transaction involving interest but that, this one time, he will break his personal principle in order to help his friend. Shylock agrees to lend Bassanio the money.

After stating his "Christian" business principles (and denigrating the Jews' principles), Antonio publicly declares that there are no limits to what he will do for Bassanio.

Shylock then defends his practice of charging interest by citing the Biblical story of Jacob. When Jacob was working as a shepherd for his uncle Laban, Shylock reminds Antonio, he found a clever way to earn interest for his efforts. He cut a deal with Laban in which he got to keep any sheep that were born with a "streaked" color. Then he employed a magic trick to get all the sheep to breed streaked lambs, which he was, by contract, entitled to keep for himself. Shylock defends this kind of behavior, similar to his own, as representing "thrift" (1.3.90) rather than theft.

Citing the Book of Genesis, Shylock shows how different interpretations are the basis of his religious and personal differences with the Christians. The Christians believe that usury is immoral because it is unnatural to breed money from money. But Shylock interprets the Bible to say that charging interest is no different than Jacob's breeding of animals, which Christian law would permit as totally natural.

Outraged that Shylock would cite the Bible in order to defend what Venetian Christians consider to be the sin of usury, Antonio insults Shylock. Shylock, in turn, cites Antonio's previous mistreatment of him: Antonio has publicly abused him many times and even spat upon his clothing. Why, Shylock asks, should he lend to Antonio as freely as he would to a relative or friend? Enraged, Antonio begins to insult Shylock again. There is no need to pretend to be friends, he says: lend money to him as to an enemy.

Shylock reveals the years of abuse he has received from Antonio and other Venetian Christians as the source of his desire for revenge. By noting that Antonio is not his friend, he shows that this abuse has made it clear to him that he is an outsider to the polite society of Venetian friends on display in 1.1. Antonio, for his part, openly declares Shylock to be an enemy.

Teasing Antonio for getting so worked up, Shylock then goes on to propose an unusual compromise. He says that, this time, he will not charge interest on his loan. However, if Antonio defaults on the loan and is unable to pay, Shylock will be entitled to cut one pound of Antonio's flesh from any part of Antonio's body that Shylock chooses.

The contract Shylock proposes is hard for the Christians, and a modern audience or reader, to understand. By trading in flesh, rather than making money "breed" by usury, Shylock is actually adopting the Christians' stated business principles but directing them toward a monstrous end, which mocks those Christian principles in turn.

Antonio agrees, despite Bassanio's nervousness about binding his friend to such a potentially dangerous contract. Talking to himself, Shylock gleefully hints at the fact that he has achieved the first step in his still-mysterious plan for revenge. But Antonio remains unconcerned: he is sure his ships will return, with three times 3000 ducats, at least one month before Shylock's deadline.

For the first time, Bassanio shows some scruples about putting his greed before his friend—who, by agreeing to put a price on his pound of flesh (and his life) has become like an animal headed to slaughter. Antonio will not be held back in his generosity, and by signing the contract agrees to be bound by law. So Shylock's revenge plot starts moving into action.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

At Belmont, the Prince of Morocco has arrived to seek Portia's hand in marriage. He begs her not to dislike him just because of his dark skin, and points out that his blood is just as red as that of the "fairest" European. He adds that he has proven himself brave and won the love of many of the most desirable virgins in his native country, and would only ever wish to change his appearance in order to please Portia.

Anticipating the prejudices that Portia and the other Christian Venetians hold, Morocco's talk of skin color and red blood reduces human beings to meat, recalling the pound of flesh Shylock wants from Antonio. At the same time, Morocco's words establish a basis for equality among all people.

Portia reminds Morocco that what she wants is irrelevant. The riddle of the caskets, devised by her father, has deprived her of the right to choose her husband. Besides, she adds, if she did have any say in things, she would hold Morocco in just as high esteem as any other suitor who has come for her thus far.

Based on Portia's mocking of all of Nerissa's other suitors in 1.2, her seeming compliment to Morocco is actually a sarcastic quip. Yet Morocco can't know this, showing that interpretation is a matter of context.

Morocco rejoices, and asks Portia to bring him to the caskets so he might try his fortune. Portia reminds him that he must abide by even the harshest rule governing the riddle: if he chooses incorrectly, he must "never speak to lady afterward/ in way of marriage" (2.2.41-2). Morocco assures her that he understands and will obey this harsh rule. The two proceed to dinner.

Portia's explanation of the terms of her father's riddle shows the strict legal structure of the riddle. By cutting off the scene here, before Morocco chooses a casket, Shakespeare makes Morocco's eventual reading and interpretation of the riddle much more dramatic and suspenseful. Morocco, unlike the other suitors, proves his valiance in his willingness to risk so much for Portia's love.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Launcelot Gobbo, Shylock's servant, is debating whether to leave his master. Jabbering to himself, he imagines that a "fiend" is urging him to run away, while his conscience instructs him to remain. Launcelot finds himself in a quandary. He feels obligated to stay with his master; yet he thinks it cannot be right to continue serving a Jew whom he considers "the very devil incarnation" (2.2.26).

Launcelot, a kind of clown character, finds himself in a moral dilemma. On the one hand, he has his conscience, which pushes him toward obedience to Shylock, his master. On the other is his prejudice, which he describes as a kind of fiend, and which sees Jews as devils.

Launcelot has just resolved to leave Shylock for good when his father, the blind Old Gobbo, appears. Gobbo asks Launcelot whether he knows the way to Shylock's house. Amused that his father has not recognized him, Launcelot decides to play a prank on him by giving him bad directions. Then Launcelot plays an even crueler trick: he tells Gobbo that his son has died. Only when Gobbo exclaims with grief does Launcelot reveal himself.

This scene of cruelty, in which a child abuses his parent, foreshadows how Shylock's daughter, Jessica, will abandon him. It also makes Gobbo's blindness an interpretive handicap: he literally cannot see things.

After some confusion, Gobbo accepts that Launcelot is indeed his "own flesh and blood" (2.2.88). Gobbo then asks his son how he is doing; Launcelot reveals that he's decided to go work for Bassanio before he is entirely corrupted by Shylock's influence: "I am a Jew if I serve the Jew any longer," (2.2.106–7) he says.

Launcelot speaks of flesh and blood—that is, man's animal being—as the basis for being related. Launcelot also brings up an important question about identity: Can one become a Jew, or is Jewishness inborn and inescapable.

At this moment, Bassanio arrives with Lorenzo and several followers. Launcelot and Gobbo seize the opportunity and beg Bassanio to employ Launcelot so that he can escape Shylock's service. Once he figures out what they're asking, Bassanio readily accepts. Rushing off, Launcelot assures Bassanio that he will "take leave of the Jew in the twinkling of an eye" (2.2.167) and will not even say farewell to Shylock.

Prejudice against Jews is used to cement bonds between Venetians of different social classes. It seems unlikely that Bassanio would have hired Launcelot away from another Christian. Launcelot seems to feel no bond to Shylock despite having served him for years.

As Launcelot is leaving, Gratiano enters. He asks to accompany Bassanio to Portia's estate at Belmont. Bassanio agrees, but with the condition that Gratiano must control his infamous "wild behavior" (2.2.178) to prevent it from reflecting badly on Bassanio. Gratiano teasingly assures his friend that he will "put on a sober habit" and "swear but now and then" (2.2.180–1). Gratiano then says he must go see Lorenzo, but that he will come to Bassanio's house for supper.

By applying the animal word "wild" to Gratiano, when most animal abuses are directed at Shylock, Shakespeare narrows the gap between Venetians and Jews. That Bassanio is willing to take Gratiano on as a companion, despite his evident bad behavior, shows the strength of social bonds among Venetian Christians.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

At Shylock's house, Launcelot bids farewell to Shylock's daughter, Jessica. Jessica says that she will miss him—his presence helped make her life at home more tolerable. Then, she gives him a letter and asks him to pass it on secretly to Bassanio's friend Lorenzo at dinner that night. Tearful at having to leave her, Launcelot takes the letter.

Identifying the defector Launcelot as her ally in her own home, Jessica immediately shows "Venetian"-style prejudice against her own group—the Jews—and hints at the disloyalty and betrayal to which she will subject her own father.

After Launcelot departs, Jessica worries that her shame at being her father's child is a sin. Yet, she reflects, she is daughter only to his "blood" (2.3.18); she does not share his "manners" (19). Then, she reveals why she sent the letter with Launcelot: Lorenzo has promised that he loves her and wants to marry her. If he keeps his vows, she vows that she will convert to Christianity and become Lorenzo's wife.

Jessica's reflections on what it means to be someone's child call into question the division between animal and human traits—that is, "blood" versus "manners." Her blithe betrayal of her father also casts some doubt on Jessica's character, despite the affection that the Christians show for her.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

On the street in Venice, Gratiano, Lorenzo, Salerio and Solanio discuss Lorenzo's plan to elope with Jessica that night, before the dinner at Bassanio's. They are interrupted when Launcelot enters, carrying Jessica's letter.

Unlike Portia, and her suitors who follow her father's legal dictates, by eloping Lorenzo and Jessica circumvent typical legal structures to get married.

Reading the letter, Lorenzo is overjoyed and remarks that Jessica's "fair hand" is "whiter than the paper it writ on" (2.4.12). When Launcelot reports that he is headed back to his former master, Shylock's, house, to invite Shylock to dinner on behalf of his new master, Bassanio, Lorenzo asks Launcelot to secretly bring Jessica the message that Lorenzo will not fail her. Launcelot agrees.

Jews were typically depicted as darker than Europeans. Notice how Lorenzo describes Jessica, who will betray her father and fellow Jews, as white. He seems to believe that Jewishness is more an aspect of personality than biology.

Once Launcelot has left, Lorenzo and the others make plans to put on a fake "masque" (costumed show) as a cover to hide the elopement. Salerio and Solanio exit, leaving Lorenzo and Gratiano alone. Lorenzo then tells Gratiano that Jessica's letter contained instructions on how to help her escape from her father's house, where she has stolen gold and jewels from Shylock to take with them. Jessica, Lorenzo concludes, will flee with them tonight, costumed as his torchbearer.

It turns out that Jessica will not only abandon her father and avoid the traditional legal framework for getting married, she is also going to rob her father to provide herself and her husband with money. As in Bassanio's suit of Portia, romantic conquest and commercial gain are mingled. They all seem to think that stealing from a Jew is no big deal.

ACT 2, SCENE 5

On the street in front of his house, Shylock reprimands Launcelot for deserting him, and warns Launcelot that Bassanio will be a harsher master than he has been. Then he summons Jessica. Having informed her that he is going to dinner with Bassanio in spite of himself, he instructs her to lock up and keep an eye on the house. He has had a dream that there will be trouble tonight.

Though the Christians seem to think nothing of owing loyalty to a Jew, Shylock believes differently. Just as Antonio overlooked his religious principles to make a deal with Shylock, now Shylock overlooks his religious principles and heads to dinner at Bassanio's because of business.

Launcelot slyly jokes that Shylock will in fact see a "masque" that night. Irritated and not knowing what Launcelot is talking about, Shylock brushes him off and repeats that Jessica should lock the doors and not look out onto the street. In an aside, Launcelot says that Jessica *should* look out the window—a Christian will come by who will be worth a Jew's eye.

Launcelot, who is in on Jessica and Lorenzo's scheme to elope, can make jokes with her that her father is unable to understand. As Christians (or, in Jessica's case, soon-to-be Christians), they're insiders while the Jewish Shylock is an outsider.

After Shylock and Launcelot leave, Jessica remarks that, if all goes according to her plan, she will have lost a father and he will have lost a daughter.

Jessica reflects that betrayal can sever family ties. From this perspective, family connections are a matter of relationship and legal actions rather than blood.

ACT 2, SCENE 6

As planned, Gratiano and Salerio arrive at Shylock's house in their costumes with the other members of Lorenzo's party—only Lorenzo is late. As they wait for Lorenzo, Gratiano crassly explains his belief that lovers are most interested when they're chasing their beloved, and tend to lose interest after the wooing has been successful and the relationship consummated.

Gratiano, the Venetian nobleman, again displays his basic vulgarity, casually commenting that he thinks this relationship between Lorenzo and Jessica may run out of steam even as Jessica prepares to forsake everything for Lorenzo's love.

When Lorenzo arrives, he makes a joke about his "father Jew" (2.6.25) and calls out to Jessica. Jessica quickly passes the promised casket of gold and jewels down to Lorenzo. Then she herself descends from the same window, dressed as his torch-bearer. She is embarrassed to be "transformed to a boy." But Lorenzo assures her that she looks beautiful and urges her to hurry—they are expected at Bassanio's.

While Jessica expects to lose her father and Jewishness through marriage, Lorenzo's joke implies that escaping one's family is not so easy. Jessica lowering the money from the same window she uses to escape, makes the equation between marriage and wealth all the more explicit.

As Jessica, Lorenzo, and the other "masqueing mates" head out into the street, Antonio intercepts them. He scolds Gratiano for being late to Bassanio's dinner, and says that Bassanio is preparing to leave on a boat for Belmont right away, as the wind is good. They hurry off to the ship.

The rollicking "masque" joins up with the somber Antonio, and the festivities end for the night.

ACT 2, SCENE 7

At Belmont, Portia shows the Prince of Morocco the three caskets. The first is gold and bears the words "Who chooseth me, shall gain what many men desire" (2.7.5). The second, silver, bears the words "Who chooseth me, shall get as much as he deserves" (2.7.7). The third, lead, bears the words "Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath" (2.7.8).

The interpretation of the text that makes up the riddle of the caskets is analogous to Shylock and Antonio's competing readings of Genesis in 1.3 and foreshadows Portia's own legal interpretations in 5.1

Morocco nervously and painstakingly ponders the caskets and their words. He rereads and debates the meaning of each, deciding, ultimately, that it must be the gold because that casket promises "what many men desire." After hesitating a moment longer, Morocco settles on the gold casket. Portia hands him the key and tells him that if her picture lies inside, she will be his wife. Morocco opens the casket, hopefully, but finds only a skull with a scroll stuck in one of its eye sockets. He reads its contents aloud. It is a poem, reproaching him for his choice: "All that glisters is not gold / Often you have heard that told," it chimes. It concludes: "Fare you well, your suit is cold."

Shakespeare prolongs the scene of riddle-decoding—which he has built up since Morocco's first appearance in 2.1—making it a dramatic, as well as interpretive act, all for the sake of love. The metallic character of the caskets also implicitly links the themes of love and greed. When he chooses incorrectly, Morocco is forced to suffer the legal consequences of incorrect interpretation.

Devastated, Morocco leaves. After he is gone, Portia snidely remarks that she hopes that "all of his complexion choose [...] so" (2.7.79).

Portia's prejudice surfaces again.

ACT 2, SCENE 8

On the street in Venice, Salerio and Solanio gossip about Jessica and Lorenzo's elopement and Bassanio's departure for Belmont to woo Portia. They laugh about Shylock's desperate search for Jessica. Upon learning that Jessica had eloped and stolen his money, Shylock cried "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter! / Fled with a Christian!" (2.8.15–6) again and again. Salerio adds that all the boys in Venice now follow Shylock imitating his anguished refrain, demanding: "Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter!" (2.8.17).

In addition to exhibiting more of the Venetians' prejudice against Shylock, this scene reemphasizes the connection between a woman's value and money, by placing "daughter" and "ducats" next to each other. Shylock's crying for justice also shows the turning point where he will really start to push for revenge against the Christians through their own court system.

Their tone suddenly grows somber, though, when Solanio remarks that Antonio may be the one who ends up paying for Shylock's loss. Salerio reports that he has heard rumors that a Venetian ship has been wrecked. He worries it is one of Antonio's. Solanio urges him to tell Antonio, but to break the news gently.

Struggling to make out the truth of rumors and hearsay, Salerio and Solanio anticipate that these events will give force to Shylock's desire for justice and revenge against their friend.

Solanio says of Antonio, "a kinder gentleman treads not the earth." He adds that when Bassanio departed for Belmont, he overheard Antonio tell Bassanio not to worry about the money he had borrowed, but only to think of his courtship of Portia. Solanio remarks that Antonio "only loves the world for" Bassanio (2.8.50). They set off to find Antonio and distract him from his sadness at Bassanio's departure.

Solanio and Salerio describe Antonio as uniquely generous, and identify that generosity as arising from his love for Bassanio. They also convey the intensity of Antonio's love for Bassanio, further raising the question of whether that love is romantic or platonic.

ACT 2, SCENE 9

The Prince of Aragon has arrived at Belmont to try his hand at the riddle of the caskets. Portia tells the Prince the rules of the riddle: if he chooses the casket that contains her portrait, they will be married immediately; if he fails, he must depart without another word. Aragon adds that he is bound by oath to three further conditions: (1) never to tell anyone which casket he chose; (2) never to seek the hand of any other woman in marriage, if he fails; and (3) to leave immediately, if he fails. Portia confirms that anyone who wants to woo her must agree, in advance, to each of these terms.

One again, Shakespeare goes to great length to emphasize the legal ramifications of the riddle. If he should "interpret" incorrectly, the Prince will be unable to produce an heir. He will forfeit his future.

Aragon puzzles over the inscriptions on the three chests. He rejects the lead one ("Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath") because he refuses to give or hazard anything for something so ugly and plain. He also rejects the gold one ("Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire") because he thinks only someone who looks skin deep would take that one and he refuses to be like "many men." Finally, he turns to the silver one: "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves" (36). He notes how much better the world would be if every man only took what he deserved, and asks for the key.

As was the case in 2.7, Shakespeare extends the actual scene of interpretation, making it suspenseful and dramatic. And once again, the struggle to determine whether gold, silver, or lead will lead to love explicitly links love and greed (or commerce), which also appeared together in the course of Jessica's elopement.

Portia gives it to him. But when Aragon unlocks the casket, inside he finds a "portrait of a blinking idiot" and a rhyme that mocks him as a fool and instructs him to leave Belmont. Embarrassed and disappointed, Aragon departs, remarking that he will keep his oath and patiently bear the fate that he has earned. He exits with his entourage.

While the scene has much the same effect as Morocco's disappointment in 2.7, there is an important difference: now Portia—and the audience—know which casket is the correct one: the lead.

As Portia and Nerissa draw a curtain in front of the caskets, a messenger enters with the news that a young Venetian has arrived at the gate to announce the arrival of a lord who has come bearing "gifts of rich value" and is a "likely ambassador of love." Portia is very excited. Nerissa sighs that she hopes the Venetian is Bassanio.

Having echoed the frustration and sense of powerlessness that she expressed in 1.2, Portia shows her first real glimpse of excitement with Bassanio's arrival.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

Solanio and Salerio discuss the unlucky events that have befallen Antonio. It is rumored that another of Antonio's ships has been wrecked. Solanio and Salerio worry that Antonio will be ruined because of the "cruel bond" (contract) that Antonio has made with Shylock. Just then, Shylock himself appears.

Though Shylock and Antonio have made a perfectly legal contract, the Christians see Shylock's actions as "cruel." The scene also suggests that weeks or months have passed since the end of Act 2.

Shylock accuses Solanio and Salerio of having helped Jessica elope from his house. They boast that, indeed, they did help. Shylock damns them. When Solanio says that Jessica was old enough to choose her own husband and leave home, Shylock responds that, no, she is his "flesh and blood" (3.1.33) and should have stayed. Salerio taunts him that there is "more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet (a deep black stone) and ivory" (3.1.34–5).

In 2.3:, Jessica pondered whether you are related to someone because you share blood or because you share similar "manners." Shylock here argues that "flesh and blood" are the true measure of relatedness. But Solanio and Salerio's response that the beautiful "white" Jessica is completely unlike the "black" Shylock indicates that they believe one's manners, or even one's willingness to be Christian, define relatedness.

Solanio then asks whether Shylock has heard any more news of Antonio's losses at sea. Shylock says he has, and ominously adds that Antonio can look forward to the "extraction" of his bond. Solanio can't believe that Shylock would really want a pound of Antonio's flesh, but Shylock affirms that he wants it to "feed" his "revenge" (3.1.54) on Antonio for mocking him, causing him to lose money, and insulting the Jewish "nation" (3.1.50).

In 1.3, Shylock argued that charging interest is just like breeding sheep. Now Shylock explicitly states that his desire for revenge will involve manipulating a legal obligation (the "bond," or contract) in order to treat Antonio like a piece of meat, an animal carcass, that is used as food.

Shylock goes on to say that a Jew has "hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions" and is "fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is" (53–7). If you prick a Jew, he'll bleed, if you tickle him he'll laugh, if you poison him, he'll die. It follows, just as logically, Shylock argues, that if you wrong a Jew, he will seek revenge, just as a Christian would. Shylock promises to use the same "villainy" that the Venetian Christians "teach," and to beat them at their own game.

Shylock argues that what he's doing—using the legal system to persecute the Christian Antonio—is exactly what the Christians have done to him and to all Jews, which is true. And in arguing for the justice of his revenge, Shylock denies any distinction between Christians and Jews. They're all humans, he argues, based on their identical animal functions: bleeding, dying, etc. Shylock treats the need for revenge as another animal need.

One of Antonio's servants enters and announces that Antonio would like to see Solanio and Salerio. As they leave, Tubal, a Jewish friend of Shylock's enters. Tubal has been searching for Jessica in Genoa, and has heard rumors of her, but has been unable to find her. Shylock rants against his daughter, and bemoans his financial losses. He is especially bitter when Tubal reports that Jessica has taken a ring—given to Shylock by a woman named Leah, presumably Jessica's mother—and has traded that ring for a monkey.

The Jews Shylock and Tubal share a camaraderie that is similar to that share by the Venetian Christians. Jessica's sale of her mother's ring marks her as unfaithful to her family's past, and suggests that Jessica is willing to sell her virginity (rings often symbolized female genitalia) for animal lust (the monkey). It also foreshadows what will happen when Portia and Nerissa give rings to their husbands later in the play.

Shylock is somewhat consoled, though, when Tubal reminds him that Antonio has lost another of his ships at Tripolis, and "is certainly undone" (3.1.124). Shylock announces that he will take his pound of flesh from Antonio's heart if Antonio forfeits on his loan. He then tells Tubal to go and meet him later at the synagogue.

Shylock again insists that he will have his revenge on Antonio by enforcing the legal contract they have signed. The Jews' agreement to meet at the synagogue, implies that the Jews and Christians of Venice occupy separate social spaces.

ACT 3, SCENE 2

In Belmont, Portia begs Bassanio to delay before making his choice among the caskets. If he chooses incorrectly, she will lose the pleasure of his company. Though she refuses to break the terms of her father's riddle of the caskets, she confesses that if it were up to her she would give herself to him entirely. Bassanio, though, is tortured by the uncertainty of waiting, and convinces her to let him try the riddle.

Portia is so strictly bound by the legal rules in her father's will, that she must abide by whatever happens even if it means that she loses the man she loves.

Portia instructs that music should be played so that, if Bassanio chooses incorrectly, he will at least make a "swan like end." The song commences: "Tell me where is Fancy bred, / or in the heart, or in the head..." Bassanio stands before the caskets debating his choice for some time. First he rejects gold: "hard food for Midas, I will none of thee" (3.2.102); then silver, "pale and common drudge 'tween man and man" (3.2.103–4). Finally, Bassanio chooses lead.

The last word of every line in the song rhymes with "lead." Portia has found a way to clue Bassanio in to the right answer without breaking the rules of the riddle of the caskets. Whether Bassanio picks up on the clue is unclear, but this is not the last time that Portia displays a keen legal mind.

Bassanio opens the lead casket. Inside, he finds a painting of Portia and a poem praising the wisdom of his choice. Bassanio turns to Portia, insisting that he must also have her consent, if they are to marry. Portia reassures him: "Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours / Is now converted" (3.2.166–7). As a symbol confirming her love, she gives him a ring, with which he must promise never to part. Bassanio is almost too happy to speak: "Only my blood," he tells her, "speaks to you in my veins" (3.2.176).

Just as Jessica converted to Christianity for Lorenzo, Portia describes her entire self, and all her wealth and belongings, as converted to Bassanio. Love is connected both to transformation and economic ownership. With his metaphor of speaking to Portia with the blood in his veins, Bassanio connects love to the description of humans as animals that Shylock used to define human beings in 3.1.

Nerissa and Gratiano, who have been watching, express their joy. Gratiano, seizing the moment, asks Bassanio for permission to marry, confessing that he has already fallen in love with Nerissa. Nerissa confirms that she loves Gratiano as well. Bassanio declares that the four of them will share a wedding.

Along with Jessica and Lorenzo, Gratiano and Nerissa provide a second parallel to the love between Bassanio and Portia. In this case, love comes off looking rather superficial—or, at the very least, abrupt.

Lorenzo and Jessica enter with Salerio. Bassanio and Portia welcome them. Salerio explains that he is carrying a letter from Antonio for Bassanio. Gratiano and Nerissa continue to flirt and joke cluelessly as Bassanio begins reading.

The ugly reality of Shylock's revenge plot—and Bassanio's debt to Antonio—disrupt the idyllic love scene.

Bassanio gets increasingly upset as he reads the letter. He tells Portia about the money he allowed Antonio to borrow from Shylock and of Antonio's lost ships. Salerio curses Shylock's brutality: "Never did I know a creature that did bear the shape of man so keen and greedy to confound a man" (3.2.274–5)," and comments that Shylock has been begging the Duke to give him justice. Jessica pipes in that when she was with her father she heard him say that "he would rather have Antonio's flesh / than twenty times the value of the sum / that he did owe him." All agree that unless "law, authority, and power" (3.2.288) can find a way to deny Shylock his vengeful desire, Antonio is in trouble.

For the first time, everyone, including Bassanio, seems to process the horrible reality of the revenge plot. Salerio, speaking for the other Venetians, condemns Shylock for his bestial quality: because he wants to do something so cruel, they think he's not even human, but only a "creature." The abuse that Christians typically hurl at the Jews, however, does not occur to them as bestial at all. Jessica's comment implies that Shylock is consumed by the desire for revenge.

Portia asks Bassanio whether Antonio is a dear friend. When Bassanio affirms that he is, Portia offers to pay the three thousand ducats that he owes 20 times over. She then asks to see the letter.

Like Antonio before her, Portia shows generosity toward Bassanio, out of love. However, like Shylock, she also gives Bassanio a price, as if he were an animal.

Bassanio reads the text aloud. In it, Antonio confesses to that there is no chance that he will survive Shylock's extracting of the pound of flesh. However, Antonio insists tells that all debts between himself and Bassanio are cleared. He has only one request: to see Bassanio before he dies. Bassanio hastily prepares to depart.

Antonio's letter confirms the depth and intensity of his feelings for Bassanio. His last request—to see Bassanio before he dies—sounds like that of a lover, rather than that of a friend.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

Back in Venice, Shylock escorts Antonio to prison, accompanied by a jailer and Solanio. Shylock tauntingly tells the jailer not to have any mercy on Antonio, who is a fool who "lent out money gratis." Antonio begs Shylock for mercy, but Shylock cuts him off: "thou call'dst me dog before thou hadst a cause, / but since I am a dog beware my fangs" (3.3.6–7).

Shylock here admits that he is acting like an animal. But he insists that he is doing so because he has been forced into it by the Christian's own harsh and unfair treatment of him. They force him to act like a dog, then complain when he bites.

Antonio gives up on asking for mercy. He knows that Shylock wants revenge on him because he has paid off the debts of so many people who owed Shylock.

By paying off the debts of others, Antonio stopped Shylock from collecting interest. He thinks Shylock's anger stems only from monetary loss.

Solanio assures Antonio that the Duke won't allow Shylock's demand to be carried out. Antonio disagrees: "The Duke cannot deny the course of law," (3.3.26) or else he will discredit the justice of the state of Venice. Such an action, in turn would offend the many diverse "strangers" (3.3.27) upon whom the commerce of the city depends.

Antonio recognizes that Shylock has the law on his side. Notice that while Venetian Christians look down on foreigners, their city's wealth also relies on the trade of those "strangers," so the law must take precedence over the Venetian's prejudices.

Antonio jokes that he has grown so thin in his stress and grief that it will hardly be possible to cut a pound of flesh from him. Then, he urges the jailer on. If Bassanio comes to see him pay his debt, Antonio says, he does not care whether he dies or not.

Antonio's resignation to his fate, and even his thinness, makes him a Christ figure. Christ also went willingly, gently, to his death on the cross.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

Back at Belmont, after Bassanio's hasty departure, Lorenzo and Portia are chatting. Lorenzo reassures Portia that if she knew what a "true gentleman" (3.4.6) Antonio is, she would only be more proud of her good deed. Portia replies that she never regrets doing good. She adds that if Bassanio loves Antonio so much, they must be alike. If so, 3000 ducats is a small sum for the purchase of his life.

Out of love, Portia sets a price of 3000 ducats on Antonio's life, much as Shylock did earlier, out of hate. Lorenzo recalls the strong character of friendship that many Venetians seem to feel toward Antonio.

Portia then asks Lorenzo whether he and Jessica will manage her estate, as she has vowed to live in prayer and contemplation in a monastery outside Belmont for as long as Bassanio is gone. Lorenzo agrees. He and Jessica exit. Portia then asks her servant, Balthazar, to take a letter to her cousin, Doctor Bellario, in Padua. She tells Balthazar that Bellario will give him some documents and clothing, and that Balthazar should bring these with all possible speed to Venice. Balthazar exits. Next, Portia tells Nerissa that they will dress up as young men and see their future husbands while they are in disguise. Nerissa is confused. Portia promises to reveal the entirety of her plan in the coach that is already waiting outside to take them to Venice.

In 2.6, Lorenzo and his friends dressed up in order to help Jessica escape Shylock's house so that she could marry Lorenzo. Now, out of love for Bassanio and Bassanio's friends, Portia and Nerissa will also dress up in an effort to outwit Shylock.

ACT 3, SCENE 5

At Belmont, Launcelot quotes the old saying that the sins of fathers are visited on their children, and teases that he is worried that Jessica is damned unless it turns out that Shylock is not actually her father. Jessica retorts that her marriage to Lorenzo will save her. Lorenzo enters, and scolds Launcelot for having gotten a Moorish servant pregnant. Launcelot responds with a series of puns, then exits to prepare dinner.

Launcelot again brings up the question of Jewishness, and implies that being a Jew is a matter of "blood," and can't be escaped. Jessica counters that Jewishness is a matter of "manners," and says she can be "saved" from Jewishness by marriage and conversion.

Lorenzo asks Jessica what she thinks of Portia. Jessica replies that she finds Portia more perfect than she can express, and compares her to a god or angel. In reply, Lorenzo jokes that he is just as good a husband as Portia is a wife. Then they head to dinner.

The Venetian Christians compare Jews to animals and the devil. Jessica, a former Jew, compares the Christian Portia to an angel or god. Given this exchange, it seems hard to defend the play from the charge that it displays some anti-Semitism of its own.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

In Venice, the Duke opens Antonio's trial by saying that he pities Antonio because Shylock is an "inhuman wretch uncapable of pity" (4.1.3–4). The Duke has attempted to persuade Shylock to spare Antonio, but Shylock will not. Antonio replies that he is prepared to suffer Shylock's rage with quiet dignity.

The Duke's "inhuman wretch" remark is the first of many instances in this court scene in which Shylock will be described as a non-human. Antonio's gentleness is contrasted with Shylock's refusal to be swayed from enacting his revenge.

The Duke summons Shylock into court, and tells him that everyone believes that he means only to terrify Antonio with this performance, and that, at the last minute, Shylock will show mercy, spare Antonio, and forgive his debt. "We all expect a gentle answer Jew!" (4.1.34) the Duke says.

A "gentile" is a non-Jew. The Duke's pun on "gentle Jew'" is an insistence by the Christian court that Shylock show what is believed to be the non-Jewish trait of Christian mercy.

Shylock insists that he wants his "bond," and that if the Duke refuses him it will make a mockery of Venice and its entire justice system. Shylock refuses to explain why he wants a pound of flesh rather than money. He says that some men do not like pigs, some do not like cats, and that he does not have to explain himself any further than by saying that he hates Antonio.

Accused of being inhuman himself, Shylock now compares Antonio to various animals.

Bassanio, who is in the gathered crowd, tries to argue with Shylock. But Antonio interrupts, telling Bassanio it's no use: you might as well try to argue with a wolf as try to soften Shylock's hard "Jewish heart" (4.1.80). Bassanio offers Shylock twice the 3000 ducats that is owed to him. Shylock retorts that he wouldn't accept six times that amount.

Again, the Christians insult the Jews as animals. In the case of Shylock, it is true that his heart can't be softened. He wants revenge! But the Christians don't recognize that their own abuse and institutional prejudice fuel Shylock's rage.

The Duke asks how Shylock can expect mercy if he himself doesn't show it. Shylock replies that he needs no mercy because he's done no wrong. He comments that the Venetians assembled have purchased slaves, asses, dogs, and mules; and just as those creatures belong to their owners, Antonio's pound of flesh belongs to Shylock, who has purchased it.

The Duke introduces "mercy" as an alternative to either "justice" or "revenge." Shylock, however, sticks by his claim that he has the law on his side: he has bought Antonio for money, just like other Venetians buy the flesh of animals and slaves.

The Duke announces that he has asked a wise lawyer, Doctor Bellario, to come and help judge the case. Salerio reports that a messenger has come bearing letters from Bellario, and goes to get him. Privately, Bassanio urges Antonio to try to keep his spirits up, but Antonio responds that he is like the "tainted wether" (castrated ram) in a flock of sheep and that Bassanio should aspire not to die for Antonio, but to live and write Antonio's epitaph.

When Bassanio finally offers a self-sacrificing gesture, Antonio immediately overrides it. By referring to himself as a castrated ram, he casts doubt upon his sexual potency and his potential ability to marry or father children, further supporting the claim that he may be in love with Bassanio.

Nerissa enters, disguised as a lawyer's clerk. She presents a letter to the Duke from Bellario. Meanwhile, Shylock wets his knife in anticipation of a verdict in his favor and Gratiano curses Shylock as an "inexecrable dog," whose "desires are "wolvish, bloody, starved and ravenous" (138). Shylock calmly replies that he has the law on his side.

After once again being insulted as an animal, Shylock insists that the law be carried out. As he sees it, he is doing no worse than the Christians do. Their laws restrict his life in countless ways, now his contract with Antonio restricts Antonio's life.

The Duke reports that Bellario has recommended that the court hear the opinion of a young and learned lawyer, named Balthazar, who has studied the case with Bellario and knows his opinion. Portia enters, disguised as Balthazar. The Duke greets her and asks whether she is familiar with the facts of the case. Portia replies that she is. "Which here is the merchant? And which the Jew?" (170), she asks. Antonio and Shylock come forth together.

When the play was first staged, the actor playing Shylock would have been costumed in a red wig with a prosthetic nose, looking nothing like the Venetian characters. In this context, Portia's question about who is the merchant and who is the Jew would probably be played as a joke. But in modern times, it reads as evidence of Antonio and Shylock's shared humanity.

Portia tells Shylock that Venetian law is indeed on his side. Therefore, she begs him to show mercy, "an attribute to God himself" (4.1.191) that "seasons justice" (4.1.192). She repeats: rather than insisting upon justice, she says, Shylock should show mercy. Shylock rejects her request: "I crave the law" (4.1.202), he says, and insists upon having the pound of flesh.

Portia makes a stronger case for mercy as an alternative to either justice or revenge than the Duke did. But Shylock rejects what Portia has described as an attribute of the Christian god, insisting instead on a strict legal interpretation of his contract in order to get vengeance.

Portia asks if Antonio has the money to repay Shylock. Bassanio responds that he has offered up to ten times the sum of money owed, but Shylock refuses to accept it. Bassanio begs that in this case the law be bent to save Antonio's life. Portia responds that the law may not be bent: if she set the precedent that judges could create exceptions for particular cases, then chaos would ensue. Shylock praises Portia, comparing her to Daniel, the famous judge in the Hebrew Bible. Portia asks to see the contract. Shylock shows her. Portia again advises Shylock to take the money—three times the amount Shylock is owed—that Bassanio has offered him. Shylock refuses.

In running through the conditions and possibilities of the case, Portia echoes the suitors trying to figure out the riddle of the caskets. She is treating the law much like a riddle, as something to be interpreted. By citing Daniel as a Jewish forefather (who, incidentally was renamed Balthazar upon moving to Babylon), Shylock is basing his actions in a specifically Jewish set of beliefs and interpretations.

Portia states that Shylock is entitled to take a pound of flesh nearest Antonio's heart. She begs him, once more, to be merciful. Shylock again refuses. Portia instructs Antonio to bear his chest for Shylock's knife and asks whether a scale is ready to weigh the pound of flesh. Shylock has brought scales. Portia recommends that they bring a surgeon on hand to try to save Antonio from bleeding to death after the cut has been made. Shylock refuses on the grounds that there is no such provision in their contract.

Portia, repeatedly calling for Shylock to show mercy, finds that each time he wants to insist on the most literal interpretation of the law. Antonio, meanwhile, instructed to bare himself to be cut open, begins to resemble a Christ-like figure or sacrificial lamb even more fully.

Portia asks Antonio for any last words. Antonio tells Bassanio not to grieve, to send his best wishes to Portia, and to speak well of Antonio after his death. Bassanio and Gratiano respond that to save Antonio's life, they would willingly sacrifice their own lives and the lives of their wives. In their disguises as Balthazar and his clerk, Portia and Nerissa quip that it's a good thing Bassanio and Gratiano's wives aren't present as it's unlikely they would be pleased by such sentiments. Privately, in an aside, Shylock comments in surprise at the nature of Christian husbands, who would so willingly allow their own wives to be killed. He wishes his daughter had taken a husband from "any of the stock of Barrabas (a Jewish bandit) ...rather than a Christian" (292–3). Then, aloud, Shylock demands the court stop wasting time. Portia agrees.

Antonio, Bassanio, and Gratiano, take their friendship and generosity to extraordinary, and, as Portia's quip points out, even ridiculous levels. Shylock's surprise at hearing these Christian men say that they are willing to sacrifice their wives increases the sense that, in some respects, he may deserve more sympathy than the Christian Venetians do. For instance, think of Shylock's tender sadness when he learned that Jessica had first stolen and then sold Leah's ring.

But just as Shylock is about to cut into Antonio, Portia reminds Shylock that the contract doesn't grant him any drop of blood from Antonio's body: "the words expressly are 'a pound of flesh'" (303). She adds that if, in taking his pound of flesh, Shylock sheds "one drop of Christian blood" (4.1.306), then, following the law of Venice, all his lands and goods will be confiscated and given to the city.

Portia beats Shylock at his own game: she interprets the law even more literally than Shylock ever did, and in doing so she finds a loophole she can use to rescue Antonio.

Shylock, stunned, quickly backtracks, and decides to take Bassanio's prior offer of 9000 ducats. Bassanio is ready to accept, but Portia stops him. She says: Shylock wanted justice and he will have it. Shylock must take exactly a pound of flesh but without shedding any blood: if he takes any more or less, he will be put to death and all his property confiscated. Shylock asks if he really won't get back even his initial 3000 ducats. Portia replies that he will get nothing but exactly what the contract specified.

Shylock insisted that he wants the law, and Portia makes sure that he sticks exactly to the contract.

Shylock says that he will give up his suit. But, Portia tells him that another Venetian law holds that if an "alien" (4.1.344) is proven to have sought the life of any "citizen" (4.1.346), that citizen has the right to take one half of the alien's property. The other half is confiscated and given to the state, while the alien's life lies at the mercy of the Duke. Therefore, she advises Shylock to beg for mercy from the Duke.

Now the tables have been turned on Shylock. He was advised to practice mercy but insisted on the law. Now he must beg for mercy rather than a strict interpretation of the law.

Stepping in, the Duke declares that he will show Shylock the "difference of our spirit" (4.1.364). He will spare Shylock's life, but Shylock must give half of his wealth to Antonio and half to the state of Venice. Portia then asks Antonio to weigh in. Antonio says that the state should renounce its claim to its half of Shylock's property; Antonio will use his half during his life and grant it to Lorenzo and Jessica after his death. Shylock, for his part, must convert to Christianity and leave all his wealth to Lorenzo and Jessica.

Both the Duke and Antonio, lessen the force of Portia's law and show Shylock relative generosity. However, in forcing him to convert, they are stripping him of his identity as a Jew and forcing him to give up his occupation, because Christians may not practice usury. In other words, they reduce him to nothing more than the bare animal self he described in 1.3.

When the Duke accepts these conditions, Portia mockingly demands: "Are you contended, Jew?" Shylock concedes that he is. Portia tells the clerk to draw up a deed. Shylock says he feels unwell—they should send the deed after him and he will sign it. As he leaves, Gratiano snarls that he's lucky: if it were up to Gratiano, he would have been sent to the gallows, not to a baptism.

Having shown gracefulness throughout most of the scene, here Portia becomes a bit nastier, as she was when discussing her suitors with Nerissa. Gratiano, too, shows his typical bile. The gracious Christians suddenly seem less gracious.

The Duke asks Portia, still disguised as Balthazar, to dinner. She declines on the grounds that she must get back to Padua. Antonio and Bassanio also thank Portia. Bassanio tries give Portia the 3000 ducats he'd brought to pay off Shylock, but Portia refuses. Bassanio insists that Portia take *some* gift as a token of thanks. Finally, Portia says she'll take Antonio's gloves and Bassanio's ring. Bassanio hesitates. He says the ring is worthless and he'll buy a more expensive one. Portia persists, and Bassanio admits that the ring is a gift from his wife that he has sworn not to give up. Portia responds that this is a convenient excuse and that as long as Bassanio's wife isn't crazy, she'll understand.

Here, the hospitality and friendly generosity that Act 1 suggested was typical among Venetian Christians, emerges again. Bassanio has already promised that he would sacrifice Portia to save Antonio. Now Portia puts Bassanio in a similar position, pitting his generosity against his love for her, by asking Bassanio to give up the ring he promised to keep in order to thank the person who saved Antonio's life.

After Portia and Nerissa exit, Antonio tells Bassanio that he should value Balthazar's efforts to save Antonio's life more than his wife's orders, and should give up the ring. Bassanio gives in. He sends Gratiano ahead with the ring and tells him to take it to Balthazar. Bassanio and Antonio head off to Antonio's house to rest for the night before returning to Belmont.

By giving away the ring—a symbol of Bassanio's fidelity to Portia and of female genitalia—and heading home with Antonio, for one final night together before his return to his bride and new home, Bassanio hints that he might share some of Antonio's apparent homoerotic desire.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

Portia, still dressed as "Balthazar," instructs Nerissa, still dressed as the pageboy, to go to Shylock's house and bring the deed for him to sign, giving half of his property to Antonio. Then they will have to speed to get back to Belmont before their husbands. Portia comments that the deed spells good news for Lorenzo, who is now going to inherit all of Shylock's wealth, not just what he and Jessica managed to steal.

Portia's remark on Lorenzo's luck in inheriting Shylock's wealth once again mixes money and financial incentives with love.

Gratiano enters, carrying the ring from Bassanio. He tells Portia that Bassanio has sent the ring and asks him to join them at Antonio's house for dinner. Initially startled, Portia recovers her composure. She takes the ring and tells Gratiano to thank Bassanio for it, but declines the invitation to dinner. Then she asks him to show Nerissa to Shylock's house.

Portia's gift of the ring came out of love. Now Bassanio has given the ring out of friendship. Generosity and gift giving introduce economics into the realms of love and friendship.

In an aside, Nerissa tells Portia that she will try to trick her husband into giving her his ring. Amused, Portia looks forward to hearing their husband's excuses when they return to Belmont without their rings. Nerissa leaves with Gratiano.

Nerissa also joins in the ring subplot: this will be the main thread of the play after the climax of the trial. In looking forward to the men's excuses for giving away their rings, Portia implicitly contrasts Bassanio's flighty behavior with her obedience of her father's will.

ACT 5, SCENE 1

Lorenzo and Jessica lounge in moonlit Belmont. Trying to outdo each other, they flirt, comparing themselves to famous lovers of classical legend: Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, Dido and Aeneas, and Medea and Jason.

While the setting seems idyllic and full of love, if you read between the lines the references actually suggest the perils of love: things end badly for each of the couples named.

A messenger enters with news that Portia will be back before daybreak from the monastery. He asks to know whether Bassanio has returned yet. Lorenzo says that they have received no word for him. Launcelot enters, with news that Bassanio will be back before morning. Lorenzo tells the servants to prepare for Portia's arrival, and to bring out music for Jessica and him to enjoy in the meantime. While they listen, and Lorenzo rhapsodizes about the beauty of the night and the music of the spheres (music generated by the movement of the stars), which, he says, can tame even wild beasts.

The rush of messengers begins the reconciliation and conclusion scene that will end with the marriages of the major characters. Lorenzo's commentary on the stars and the music of the spheres indicates that be believes that the universe is beautiful and ordered by a divine law, and suggests that the dark forces of anger and brutality, which Shylock represents, have been tamed.

Portia and Nerissa approach Belmont, and Portia admires the candlelit beauty of the estate, saying: "How far that little candle throws his beams! / So shines a good deed in a naughty world" (5.1.89–90) As the music dies down, Lorenzo recognizes Portia's voice and welcomes her home. She asks whether Bassanio and Gratiano have yet returned. Lorenzo replies that they have not, but that a messenger has come to announce that they are coming soon. Portia sends Nerissa into the house to instruct the servants not to give any sign of their having been absent. She tells Lorenzo and Jessica that they, too, must keep this secret to themselves for the time being.

Portia's comment about the beauty of her estate in the moonlight seems to be the exact opposite of Lorenzo's. While Lorenzo sees the world as naturally good, Portia sees it as naturally "naughty." Once she reaches the castle, Portia begins to coordinate the last stages of her dramatic trick involving the rings, reminiscent of how she coordinated the casket-picking scene and the scene in the courtroom.

At that moment, Bassanio, Antonio, and Gratiano enter. Portia welcomes Bassanio home; Bassanio introduces Antonio and asks her to "give welcome" to the friend to whom he is "so infinitely bound" (5.1.133–5). Welcoming Antonio, Portia jokes that she hopes Bassanio is only metaphorically bound to him because, last she has heard, Antonio was bound to his friend by a very dangerous contract indeed.

Now that Antonio's trial is over, Portia's hospitality renews the bonds of friendship between the Christian Venetians. Portia word play regarding the word "bound" references the theme of reading and interpretation that dominated the casket and courtroom scenes.

Nearby, Nerissa and Gratiano begin to argue over Gratiano's missing ring. Gratiano swears to Nerissa that he gave the ring to a judge's clerk. Portia asks what's wrong. Gratiano replies that his wife is overreacting. Nerissa insists that it is not the value of the ring but the fact that he broke his oath to keep it that upsets her. Portia joins in reprimanding Gratiano; she says, she gave her love such a ring as well, and made him swear never to part with it, and she is sure he never would. Gratiano blurts out in protest that Bassanio *did* give his ring away, to a judge who had earned it, and asked for it.

This final trick draws attention to the dimension of exchanging gifts, a kind of economy that lies beneath supposedly spontaneous love (of the kind that Jessica and Lorenzo were talking about at the beginning of this scene). As in other scenes of interpretation, Shakespeare draws the process of discovery out for dramatic effect.

Bassanio admits it is true. Portia pretends to be furious. She swears that she will never go to bed with Bassanio until she sees the ring. Despairing, Bassanio tries to defend himself and beg Portia's forgiveness, but Portia stays firm. She insists that she will give everything she has, including her body, to the man who has the ring. Nerissa vows to Gratiano that she will do the same. Bassanio continues to plead for forgiveness. He says, if Portia will only forgive him this once, he will never again break an oath with her. Antonio supports Bassanio, saying that he will be bound for his friend once more, and offer his soul as collateral because he is so certain that Bassanio will never again deliberately betray Portia.

The ring subplot really starts to take shape. The women's lie that they slept with the judge and law clerk to regain the rings makes the sexual connotations about rings (as symbols of female genitalia) more explicit. And once again, when Bassanio is in trouble, Antonio offers everything to help him. This time Antonio offers his soul in exchange for Bassanio's happiness, echoing his earlier deal with Shylock in which he offered his body in exchange for Bassanio's happiness.

Portia accepts the deal. She hands Antonio the ring, which she pretends is a different ring, and tells him to give it to Bassanio and to tell Bassanio not to lose it. When he sees the ring, Bassanio is stunned to see that it's the same one he gave to the lawyer! Portia explains that she got it from that very lawyer by sleeping with him, and asks for her husband's pardon. Nerissa does the same, explaining to Gratiano that she got her ring back by sleeping with the clerk the previous night. But before the shocked husbands can get too angry, Portia interrupts. She hands over a letter from Bellario in Padua, explaining that Portia was the lawyer who appeared in the Venice courtroom, and Nerissa the clerk. She calls upon Lorenzo to testify to the fact that she has only just returned. He does.

As in the casket scene, and the court scene, Portia once again coordinates and manages the other characters so that they end up interpreting things the way she wants them to. This time, she gets Bassanio and Gratiano to believe that their failure to keep their oaths resulted in their wives' infidelity. However, after having her fun, Portia starts to wrap things up, neatly reinstating the customary boundaries of legal marriage—faithfulness, fidelity, and so on.

Portia also has a letter for Antonio with even better news: three of his ships have suddenly come to harbor, full of riches. Then, Portia tells Lorenzo that her clerk—Nerissa—has good news for him as well. Nerissa reports: she has a deed from Shylock, leaving all of his property to Lorenzo and Jessica when he dies.

To modern audiences, the Christian characters' delight at just how fully they have plundered the ruined Shylock may seem a bit distasteful in this otherwise happy scene. It reflects how strongly their prejudices persist.

Finally Portia encourages everyone to go into the house to hear the full explanation of all these events. Gratiano jokes that he is not sure whether Nerissa wants to go to bed for two hours, or stay up and wait for the next night: he himself cannot wait to sleep with the doctor's clerk. For "while I live," he finishes, "I'll fear no other thing / So sore, as keeping safe Nerissa's ring" (5.1.306–7).

By ending on Gratiano's crude sexual joke (the ring as a symbol for the vagina), the play hits a comic final note but also calls into question how admirable the "good" characters in this play really are. How are their glee at destroying Shylock and their crude sexual jokes any better than Shylock's love of money and thirst for revenge?


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