



# The Merchant of Venice

Study Guide by Course Hero



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## 👁 Book Basics

### AUTHOR

William Shakespeare

### YEARS WRITTEN

c. 1596–97

### GENRE

Comedy

### ABOUT THE TITLE

*The Merchant of Venice* may refer to the character Antonio, a wealthy Venetian merchant whose trade and relationships intersect in ways that place him in mortal danger when he

makes a deal with a moneylender. However, an alternate title that appears in early records, *The Jew of Venice*, calls this reading into question. The original double title raises questions regarding the identities of the play's hero and villain and the play's stance on anti-Semitism.

## 🕒 In Context

### Early Publications of *The Merchant of Venice*

*The Merchant of Venice* was first printed in a quarto edition in 1600. A quarto was a small book-sized edition of a single play, similar to any individual edition of William Shakespeare's play available today. Some early quarto editions were of questionable quality and accuracy—the result of an audience member copying down the lines during a performance, but the quarto for *The Merchant of Venice* is of higher quality. It seems to have been produced from one of Shakespeare's own scripts. *The Merchant of Venice* appeared in a definitive version in the *First Folio*, a large-format collection printed in 1623 of all Shakespeare's plays.

### Jews in Renaissance Europe

*The Merchant of Venice* reflects prevailing European Christian attitudes toward Judaism rooted in conflicts dating back almost to the origins of Christianity itself. Christianity began as a sect within Judaism, the ancient monotheistic religion of Jewish people which became divided around the 8th century BCE. Issues contributing to the division were related to continued dominance from other cultures—most notably those of Greece and Rome—and related questions as to whether

spiritual salvation should be regarded as something available to all or to only to a select group chosen by God. Early Christianity evolved from this rift as much as from the events surrounding the life of Jesus of Nazareth, whom Christians regard as the Messiah or savior for all humankind. The Christian church grew rapidly during its first thousand years, with the Catholic church achieving cultural and political dominance in western Europe after its break with the Orthodox churches of eastern Europe in 1054.

## Beginnings of Anti-Semitism

Pope Innocent III was the most prominent of the medieval popes. Innocent III was elected pope in 1198 and led the church until his death in 1216. He authored many decrees that would define the structure of the church and its influence over European politics for centuries. He instigated the Fourth Crusade to re-assert the control of the European Christian church over Orthodox Christians and the Middle East. He endorsed the persecution of "heretics"—essentially non-Christians, including Jews and Muslims. These decrees consolidated the church's power and made anti-Semitism a matter of doctrine. In 1205 Innocent III stated in a letter, "the Jews, by their own guilt, are consigned to perpetual servitude because they crucified the Lord." In 1208 he followed with a letter stating Jews should "as wanderers ... remain upon the earth ... forced into the servitude of which they made themselves deserving." Other early Christian leaders had expressed similar sentiments, but as one of the most influential leaders in Europe at the time, Innocent III's position that the Jews were responsible for Jesus's death and should be punished for it became the basis for centuries of oppression directed at Jewish populations across Europe.

## Exile

While Jewish populations found tolerance and acceptance in some areas, as these populations became prosperous in trade and banking, they inspired jealousy among other citizens, and the prejudices reinforced by Christian doctrine allowed an easy means to eliminate the economic competition. Jews were exiled from England in 1290, from France in the 1300s, from Germany in the 1350s, from Portugal in 1496, and from Spain in 1492. Jews who remained in Spain after 1492 were subject to the Inquisition, a series of brutal tortures perpetrated by Christian church officials to root out and destroy those

considered heretics. In other areas Jews were prohibited from owning land and tended to gravitate toward trade, moneylending, or medicine as means for making livings. Moneylending was prohibited by Christian doctrine as sinful; similarly, many medical practices were discouraged because they sought to thwart the will of God. Persecution and violence were not uncommon. These incidents were often based on unfounded accusations of human sacrifice or desecration of Christian churches, but Jews were often scapegoated for more mundane crimes as well. For example, in 1594—shortly before *The Merchant of Venice* was performed for the first time—Roderigo Lopez, a Jew and the chief physician to Queen Elizabeth I of England, was falsely accused of treason and executed. The Lopez incident likely influenced *The Merchant of Venice*, though the extent of that influence is unclear.

## Jews in Venice

The history of Venice, where the play is set, has a clear influence in *The Merchant of Venice*. During the 1300s and 1400s Jews from all over Europe, often driven out of their home countries, settled in Venice. Modern Venice is a city in Italy, but during the medieval and Renaissance periods Venice operated as an independent city-state ruled by a doge, or duke. Venice's autonomy and relatively progressive population, along with its position as a center of trade, made it an appealing settlement for displaced Jews. However, in 1516 Venice relegated its entire Jewish population to a small area of the city called the *geto nuovo*, or ghetto, and this is where *The Merchant of Venice* unfolds. Residents of the ghetto were required to abide by a curfew, as the gates were locked at night, and until 1703 they were prohibited from using wells outside the ghetto because of fears Jews might poison the city's public water supply. Venetian Jews were also required to distinguish themselves by wearing a yellow circle on their clothing or a yellow or red hat. The ghetto was officially dismantled in 1797, but the area remains a central part of Jewish life in Venice and a popular tourist attraction.

## Continuing into Modern Times

The Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, when Christian groups across Europe split from the Catholic church, did little to affect anti-Semitism. Exile from various countries ended—for example, England allowed Jews to return in 1656—but by this time, Europe's largest Jewish populations

had settled in eastern Europe, where the political and religious climate tended to be more hospitable. Still, expressions of prejudice and incidents of violence continued through the 20th century, culminating in the rise of Nazism in Germany and the Holocaust of the 1930s and 1940s. Only after these events did both the Catholic Church and Protestant denominations officially renounce longstanding anti-Jewish positions.

## Characterization of Shylock

Shakespeare's Shylock is written as a much more complex character than some of his predecessors. Barabbas in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* is presented as a purer villain than Shylock, filled with murderous rage and few redeeming features. While Shylock is bent on revenge, he also presents evidence of the ways society has wronged and wounded him deeply. His anguish is palpable in his words, and depending on the presentation in performance, Shylock is written as a figure with high potential to elicit sympathy.

Because the source material is open to interpretation, the play's reception has been closely tied to its presentation. Given the anti-Semitic sentiment present in English culture at the time of its first production and Shakespeare's monetary success as a playwright, it's possible early portrayals of Shylock as the play's villain were less sympathetic to the character than modern productions. King James I was a patron of Shakespeare's company and a staunch Roman Catholic best known for his zealous persecution of suspected witchcraft and as the originator of the King James translation of the Bible. He saw the play at court in 1605 and requested a repeat performance two days later. What James I found intriguing or likeable about *The Merchant of Venice* is not documented, but given his religious devotion, it is safe to assume these early performances provided a positive portrayal of Christianity. Doubtless he was gratified to see that the two main Jewish characters—Shylock and his daughter, Jessica—both convert to Christianity by the end of the play.

Continuing up to the 1800s performances likely portrayed Shylock as a cartoonish stereotype, and the stereotypes inherent in the role gave the play a reputation as anti-Semitic. Underscoring this reputation, Shylock's very name has become a derogatory slang term to describe an unscrupulous loan shark. However, starting with Edmund Kean's performance at the Drury Lane Theatre in 1814, later actors began bringing more nuance and sympathy to the role. Such portrayals were

not unusual, but they were also not sufficient to dispel the play's anti-Semitic overtones, especially when productions of *The Merchant of Venice* became popular in Germany in the early 1930s, coinciding with the rise of Nazism. Still, even the Nazis were put off by Shylock's humanity in his speeches and his daughter's marriage to a Christian, resulting in its confiscation from some libraries in 1938.

While *The Merchant of Venice* remains controversial for audience members, scholars, and critics, the play has become a rallying point for tolerance in recent productions. In a notable example, a 2004 film adaptation, directed by Michael Radford and starring Al Pacino as Shylock, received praise for presenting a balanced version embracing the contradictions in the text and placing all the characters' various flaws, prejudices, and virtues on full display. Further evidence of the play's rehabilitated reputation emerges with its part in Venice's commemoration of the ghetto's 500th anniversary in 2016, which included a performance of the play on the ghetto's square as well as a mock trial in which Shylock appealed his verdict to United States Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and a jury of dignitaries and Shakespeare scholars.

## Author Biography

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in England in 1564. Although his exact birthdate was not recorded, it would have been sometime in the week preceding his baptism on April 26 and is therefore celebrated on April 23. As a performer with the Lord Chamberlain's Men and the primary writer of the theater company, Shakespeare was a prominent and popular fixture in the London theater scene and in London society. His company changed its name to the King's Men when James I ascended the throne in 1603, and the company attended James's coronation.

In all Shakespeare wrote 37 plays. The 14th of these was *The Merchant of Venice*, which was written and performed between 1596 and 1597. The play's content draws from several sources, including a few Italian poems and stories as well as a play by Shakespeare's contemporary and rival Christopher Marlowe called *The Jew of Malta*, first performed around 1589. *The Jew of Malta*, like *The Merchant of Venice*, centers around a Jewish character bent on revenge for wrongs done to him. Scholars and critics have struggled to determine whether these works represent a criticism or endorsement of the anti-Semitism

prevalent in England at the time of their performances. Jews were exiled from England in 1290 and not allowed to return until 1653; this was part of a larger pattern of ongoing expulsions of Jews from countries throughout Europe during the medieval period.

Critics and scholars often regard *The Merchant of Venice* as one of Shakespeare's "problem plays." In this context *The Merchant of Venice* is relegated to a grouping of Shakespeare's non-historical works that defy easy categorization as comedy or tragedy. Comedies tend to end with a marriage or similar affirmation of life. Tragedies end with the death of the main character, at least, and Shakespearean tragedies tend to end with the deaths of many characters. In strict terms *The Merchant of Venice* appears to be a comedy, as four of the central characters—Bassanio and Portia and Gratiano and Nerissa—get married. While the other two main characters, Shylock and Antonio, are alive at the end of the play, both men are greatly diminished by their ordeal. Shylock loses his family and his fortune. Antonio maintains his unstable wealth but loses his best friend to marriage and has no partner of his own.

Much of Shakespeare's personal life remains a point of speculation for scholars because little verifiable information is available beyond official records. His father was a prosperous and respected figure, and young William studied Greek and Latin language and literature at King's New School in Stratford. Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway in Stratford in 1582, and they had two daughters and a son, the latter of whom died in childhood. Shakespeare moved to London in the late 1580s while his wife and children remained in Stratford, but his theater career and investments made his family financially comfortable. At some point between 1613 and 1616, after the production of his final play, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Shakespeare returned to Stratford and died there in April 1616, possibly on his 52nd birthday. He was buried in Holy Trinity Church on April 25, 1616.

## Characters

### Shylock

Shylock is confined by the laws limiting Jews' participation in Venetian society and subject to prejudice and scorn. He bears

a special grudge against Antonio because Antonio has mistreated him and interfered with his business in the past. When Antonio comes to borrow money from Shylock, Antonio offers a pound of his own flesh as collateral. Shylock accepts the bond and lends the money. When Antonio's ships are lost, Shylock demands the letter of his bond be honored, and the case goes to court because taking a pound of Antonio's flesh is tantamount to murder. Shylock loses his case, and as punishment for seeking to kill Antonio he must forfeit his fortune and convert to Christianity.

### Antonio

Antonio is a Venetian merchant, the title character of the play, who borrows 3,000 ducats from his rival, the Jewish moneylender Shylock, on behalf of his friend Bassanio. Antonio's own money is tied up in his ships at sea, so he offers Shylock a pound of his own flesh as collateral for the loan, reflecting his confidence that he will be able to repay Shylock. When Antonio's ships are temporarily lost, he can't repay the 3,000 ducats, and Shylock demands the pound of flesh. When the dispute goes to court, Antonio ultimately prevails. His life is spared, and his fortune is restored when the lost ships return to port.

### Bassanio

Bassanio is Antonio's friend who needs money so he can court the wealthy heiress Portia, a woman famed for her wealth, wisdom, and beauty. Bassanio has squandered his own fortune and is in debt to Antonio and others, but Antonio cares deeply for Bassanio and does not refuse the request. Bassanio is successful in his courtship and marries Portia, but he returns to Venice shortly after they are wed to support Antonio in his time of need.

### Portia

Portia is a wealthy heiress who lives at Belmont, an estate near Venice. Her father has died, and he devises a riddle involving three boxes of gold, silver, and lead to help her choose a worthy husband. The suitors must choose between the three boxes to find a portrait of Portia. The man who chooses correctly wins her hand. Portia is lucky enough to have the man

she loves, Bassanio, win this challenge, and they get married. When she learns of Antonio's troubles in Venice, she disguises herself as a young man named Balthazar and presents herself at court as a legal scholar. Her reading of the contract and her cleverness allow her to help Antonio go free.

## Gratiano

Gratiano is Bassanio's close friend who accompanies him to Portia's estate, Belmont, to offer moral support as Bassanio attempts to woo Portia. Gratiano shows great humor and fierce loyalty to Bassanio, a loyalty he also shows for Antonio during Antonio's trial. At Belmont Gratiano notices Portia's lady-in-waiting, Nerissa, and marries her.

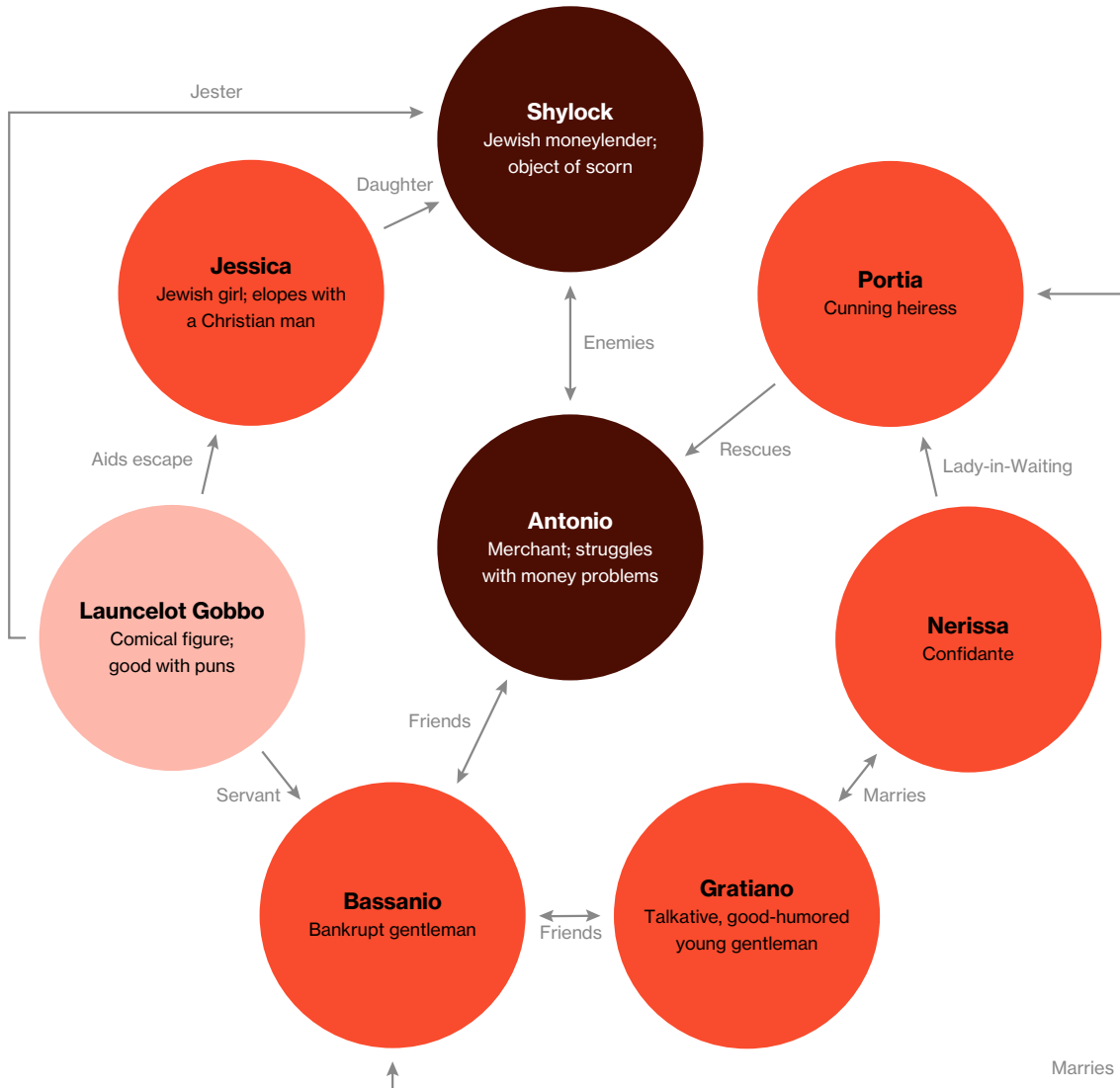
## Nerissa

As Portia's "waiting-gentlewoman," Nerissa is part servant, part adviser, part best friend. She advises and encourages Portia when Portia is frustrated by the suitors who swarm her home seeking her hand in marriage. She also disguises herself as a man and accompanies Portia to Venice when Portia goes there to defend Antonio. Nerissa is distinguished by her strong common sense and good judgment.

## Jessica

Jessica's father, Shylock, has protected and sheltered his only child throughout her life. He limits her contact with the outside world, and Jessica feels stifled and suffocated by his overprotection. Despite Shylock's efforts, Jessica meets and falls in love with Lorenzo, a Christian. Her father would forbid the match and punish her for even talking with Lorenzo, so she disguises herself, takes as much of her father's wealth as she can carry, and elopes with Lorenzo in the middle of the night. At the end of the play, the couple end up at Belmont with Portia, Bassanio, Nerissa, and Gratiano.

# Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

## Full Character List

Character	Description
Shylock	Shylock is a moneylender in Venice who seeks revenge for a lifetime of persecution and insults for being a Jew.
Antonio	Antonio is a merchant who confidently borrows money on his friend Bassanio's behalf only to find his life in danger when he is unable to repay the loan.
Bassanio	Bassanio is a Venetian gentleman who has racked up a lifetime of debt in his leisurely pursuits but hopes to marry the wealthy and beautiful Portia.
Portia	Portia is a gentlewoman who lives near Venice; her father has devised a complex riddle challenge for her suitors, which makes courtship difficult for her.
Gratiano	Gratiano is Bassanio's friend who supports him and accompanies him to Portia's estate, where he finds a wife of his own.
Nerissa	Nerissa is Portia's waiting woman, friend, and confidante. She encourages Portia as Portia copes with the woes of courtship and marriage.
Jessica	Jessica is Shylock's daughter, his only child, who breaks her father's heart by eloping with the Christian Lorenzo.
Balthazar	Balthazar is Portia's servant who helps her obtain the disguise she uses to pose as a man and defend Antonio in court. She uses his name while in disguise.
Doctor Bellario	Doctor Bellario is Portia's cousin, a law scholar from Padua, who supplies Portia with letters of introduction and clothing to gain admission to court in Venice.
Duke of Venice	When Antonio defaults on his loan, Shylock demands payment of a pound of flesh, and the Duke of Venice must preside over the trial that ensues.

Launcelot Gobbo	Launcelot Gobbo is Shylock's jester; he tires of his employer's abuse and goes to work for Bassanio as a servant.
Old Gobbo	Old Gobbo is Launcelot's elderly father, who convinces his son to leave Shylock's employ and work for Bassanio.
Leah	Leah is the name of Shylock's deceased wife and Jessica's mother.
Leonardo	Leonardo is one of Bassanio's servants.
Lorenzo	Lorenzo is a friend of Bassanio and Gratiano; he falls in love with Jessica and elopes with her.
Prince of Arragon	The Prince of Arragon is the second of Portia's suitors to accept her father's riddle challenge; he fails.
Prince of Morocco	The Prince of Morocco is the first of Portia's suitors to accept her father's riddle challenge; he fails.
Salerio	Salerio is a Venetian messenger who comes to Belmont to tell Bassanio Antonio has forfeited on the loan.
Salarino	Salarino is one of Antonio's fellow merchants in Venice who offers less-than-encouraging comments on Antonio's life events.
Solanio	Solanio is another of Antonio's fellow merchants in Venice who, like his counterpart Salarino, tends to offer unhelpful advice.
Stephano	Stephano is one of Portia's servants; he's an adept musician.
Tubal	Tubal is Shylock's fellow moneylender and friend.

## Plot Summary

*The Merchant of Venice* is set largely in the wealthy city-state of Venice, a hub of Renaissance trade. Some scenes take place at the nearby estate of Belmont, where Portia lives.

Antonio is a prosperous merchant in Venice, but he has overextended his fortunes in his most recent venture, sending ships to several different ports. Thus, he is unable to lend his close friend Bassanio money when Bassanio asks him for a loan. Bassanio needs money to help him appear impressive when he goes to Belmont to court the beautiful heiress Portia. Bassanio has no credit of his own, but Antonio does not want to refuse his friend, so Antonio sends Bassanio to borrow the money from Shylock on Antonio's credit.

Shylock is a Jewish moneylender whose relationship with Antonio has been overwhelmingly negative. Antonio has insulted him in the streets and interfered with his business. He also knows Antonio's own fortunes are stretched thin, so Shylock is reluctant to lend him money. He finally agrees when Antonio offers a pound of his own flesh to secure the loan. With the money secured, Bassanio begins preparations to travel to Belmont, Portia's estate near Venice.

In Belmont Portia has her own problems. She is coping with an abundance of suitors she finds completely unacceptable. Her wealth and beauty have attracted dignitaries from all over the world, but they all seem deeply flawed. She fears she will be forced to marry one of them because her father, before he died, created a challenge to choose a suitor for her. He set up three caskets, or boxes: one gold, one silver, one lead. The man who chooses the casket with Portia's portrait inside gets her hand; Portia is understandably nervous about leaving her choice of husband up to what she considers a game of chance. Two suitors, one from Morocco and one from Arragon (part of Spain), try and fail in the challenge before Bassanio arrives. Portia knows and loves Bassanio, so she is relieved when he chooses correctly. They exchange rings, and Bassanio's companion Gratiano reveals he plans to marry Portia's waiting woman, Nerissa.

Meanwhile, in Venice, Shylock's daughter, Jessica, makes plans to escape from her overprotective father and marry Lorenzo, a Christian friend of Bassanio, Gratiano, and Antonio. After her only friend in her father's house, Launcelot Gobbo, leaves to work for Bassanio, Jessica disguises herself as a boy,

takes her father's jewels, and sneaks out in the night to run away and marry Lorenzo. Shylock is anguished by the loss of his daughter and his jewels, especially the ring he gave Jessica's mother when they married. He is cheered when he learns Antonio's ships have been lost at sea and he may be able to exact revenge for Antonio's wrongs—and the wrongs he has suffered from all Christians, including the one who took Jessica—by collecting the pound of flesh promised in their contract.

Shylock and Antonio appear before the Duke of Venice for their case to be heard. Bassanio and Gratiano return to Venice, leaving their wives in Belmont, to support Antonio in his time of need. At the hearing Shylock first appears to have the upper hand because both men entered into the contract freely. Then a young lawyer named Balthazar comes to read the contract and save Antonio's life. Balthazar is actually Portia, disguised as a man, who has come to the court to help her new husband's friend. She makes an impassioned plea to Shylock to show mercy to Antonio, to be the better man. Shylock refuses, so Portia reads the contract carefully and declares Shylock is entitled to his pound of flesh, but the contract does not allow Shylock to spill any of Antonio's blood. Should Shylock take Antonio's blood, which is not part of the contract, his own life will be forfeit. Since it is impossible to take a pound of flesh without spilling blood, Shylock's claim is void. Because Shylock's intention to take a pound of his flesh would have killed Antonio, the duke finds Shylock guilty of plotting to murder the merchant. He spares Shylock's life but takes his fortune, giving half to the state and half to Antonio. Antonio places his share in trust for Jessica and further demands that Shylock convert to Christianity.

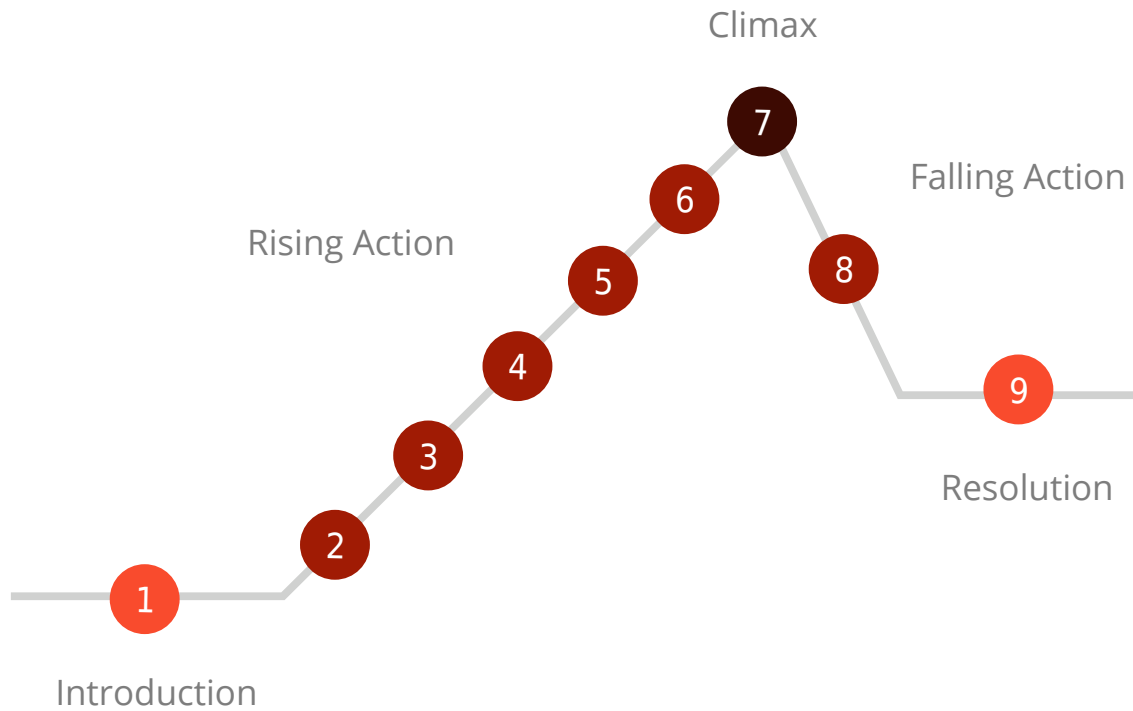
After the trial, Bassanio and Antonio express their gratitude to Portia, still thinking she is Balthazar. As a test of Bassanio's loyalty, Portia asks for the ring she gave him as a reward for her service. Bassanio refuses at first, but Antonio convinces him to change his mind, so Portia now knows her husband will part with his wedding ring when Antonio asks him. Nerissa plays a similar trick and gets her ring from Gratiano.

Bassanio, Gratiano, and Antonio return to Belmont, where Jessica and Lorenzo have come to visit. Portia and Nerissa return as well, now appearing as themselves again. Portia tells Bassanio she got his ring from Balthazar after sleeping with him, and Nerissa tells Gratiano a similar story. Bassanio and Gratiano are outraged until Portia gives them a letter that reveals the truth. The happy couples retire to bed as the sun



rises.

## Plot Diagram



### Introduction

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1. Bassanio borrows money so Antonio can court Portia.

### Rising Action

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2. Antonio offers Shylock a pound of flesh as collateral.
3. Suitors try to solve Portia's father's riddle to marry her.
4. Bassanio solves the riddle and marries Portia.
5. Antonio can't repay Shylock, who demands his pound of flesh.
6. Disguised as a man, Portia goes to Venice to help Antonio.

### Climax

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7. Portia saves Antonio at trial; Shylock loses his fortune.

### Falling Action

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8. Portia tricks Bassanio into giving her his wedding ring.

### Resolution

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9. Portia reveals her disguise and returns Bassanio's ring.

## Timeline of Events

### At the same time

Portia entertains suitors who try to win her hand in marriage by solving her father's riddle.

### Afterward

Bassanio prepares to leave for Belmont, hires Launcelot Gobbo, and agrees to take Gratiano with him.

### At the same time

Bassanio and Gratiano depart for Belmont.

### The next day

Shylock is seen in the city lamenting the loss of his daughter and his money.

### Later

Bassanio solves Portia's father's riddle; Gratiano

### One day

Bassanio asks Antonio for 3,000 ducats so he will look rich when he courts Portia.

### Later that day

To get a loan for Bassanio from Shylock, Antonio stakes a pound of his own flesh as collateral.

### That night

Jessica and Lorenzo elope; Jessica takes with her as much of her father's fortune as she can carry.

### Meanwhile

The Prince of Morocco attempts to solve Portia's father's riddle and fails.

### A few days later

The Prince of Arragon fails to solve Portia's father's riddle; Portia welcomes Bassanio.

declares his intention to marry Nerissa.

### Some days later

The Duke of Venice hears Shylock's case against Antonio.

### Afterward

Shylock loses his fortune and is forced to convert to Christianity for trying to kill Antonio.

### Some days later

At Belmont Portia shows Bassanio the ring and pretends to have cheated on him with Balthazar.

### The same day

Antonio defaults and Shylock wants his pound of flesh; Bassanio and Gratiano return to Venice.

### Same day

Disguised as Balthazar, Portia finds a loophole in the loan contract that saves Antonio's life.

### Same day

As Balthazar, Portia asks Bassanio for his wedding ring as payment, which he gives her.

### Same time

The couples reconcile when Portia reveals her disguise; Antonio learns his ships have returned.

## 🔍 Scene Summaries

### Act 1, Scene 1

#### Summary

Salarino and Solanio, two Venetian merchants, notice their friend Antonio has been out of sorts lately. Antonio has sent several ships abroad to trade goods in many ports, so his friends speculate that he has overextended his fortunes in shaky investments. They describe how anxious they would be if they were similarly invested in the fates of so many ships, watching every blip of change in the winds and weather until their fortunes returned to port. Antonio denies such concerns and tells Salarino and Solanio that his investments are diverse enough to protect him from loss. The two men then speculate that Antonio is out of humor because he is in love, which Antonio immediately denies. Salarino and Solanio briefly attempt to raise Antonio's spirits, but they are soon interrupted by the arrival of three other friends—Bassanio, Gratiano, and Lorenzo. Salarino and Solanio take leave to attend to their own business.

Gratiano also observes Antonio's sad disposition and takes it upon himself to "play the fool" and cheer him up, and he cautions Antonio not to wallow in his melancholy. Then Gratiano and Lorenzo also depart, promising to return at dinner time. Once he and Bassanio are alone, Antonio asks about Bassanio's recent visit to an unnamed woman, which prompts Bassanio to first describe the extent of his personal debt before telling Antonio about the woman, who lives at Belmont and whom he wishes to court. Bassanio asks Antonio to lend him money so he can appear wealthy and compete with the woman's other suitors. Antonio tells Bassanio that his money is occupied in his ships at sea but gives Bassanio permission to borrow the sum elsewhere on his credit.

#### Analysis

Act 1, Scene 1 sets up the elements of Antonio's reality—or his perception of reality—that will become the source of all his problems in the play. The first source of Antonio's troubles is his confidence in his investments. Salarino and Solanio, as

fellow merchants, have close knowledge of the dangers and risks of trade at sea, and they worry on Antonio's behalf. Shylock will echo these concerns that Antonio has overextended his resources in Act 1, Scene 3, so the risky nature of Antonio's business choices are common knowledge. Antonio maintains that he has nothing to worry about, that he has not staked all his hopes on a single venture, so even if one of the ventures fails, he will still remain solvent. Despite his diverse investments, it also becomes apparent that Antonio has no contingency plan if *all* his ships should meet with disaster. In the unlikely event that all his ventures fail, Antonio has no nest egg set aside. If he did have a reserve in place, it stands to reason that he could loan the money to Bassanio himself instead of sending Bassanio out to borrow the money on his credit. It is possible that Antonio does have a reserve of money that he is keeping from Bassanio, but it makes poor business sense for Antonio to allow Bassanio to take out a loan in Antonio's name—for which Antonio will owe interest—while sitting on a reserve of cash.

The permission to borrow reveals the second cause of Antonio's problems: his unflinching devotion to Bassanio. By his own admission, Bassanio owes tremendous debts all over Venice, including to Antonio. In his explanation of his decision to marry, Bassanio mentions his debts and Portia's wealth repeatedly. Bassanio may genuinely love Portia, but it is undeniable that his marriage to "a lady richly left" will improve his financial situation considerably. Antonio knows Bassanio is unreliable with money, that his success with Portia is not assured, yet he offers Bassanio everything he has, "my purse, my person, my extremest means." Whether this devotion stems from a sense of paternal or romantic affection is not clear—and has been subject to different interpretations in performances—but it is clear that Antonio's love for Bassanio has no discernible limits.

### Act 1, Scene 2

#### Summary

Portia tells her servant and friend Nerissa of her frustration and weariness at the suitors who have swarmed her home seeking to marry her. She also expresses frustration at her recently deceased father's plan to choose his daughter a husband. Even though her father is dead, Portia feels bound to

follow his wishes even though it means she will not be able to choose a husband for herself. Nerissa expresses faith in Portia's father's goodness and reasoning and encourages her friend to trust that her father's plan will work out for the best. Then Nerissa asks what Portia thinks of the suitors she has met so far. Portia describes a prince from Naples who only talks about his horse, a count whose disposition is constantly sour, a French lord whose mood changes drastically minute to minute, an English baron who does not speak Portia's language (nor she his), a quarrelsome Scottish lord, and a drunken German nobleman. None of these options appeals to Portia, but she affirms her oath to follow her father's wishes and hopes the Venetian "scholar and soldier," Bassanio, will return to woo her. Then Portia and Nerissa are called away to greet a new arrival, the Prince of Morocco.

## Analysis

Portia is essentially at the mercy of a man's wishes in this section, bound to follow her father's plan, as absurd as it seems to her. Her position reflects a general lack of power in a world run by men, and despite Nerissa's reassurances, she fears her father's scheme—which leaves so much to chance—may land her with a husband who speaks a different language, who is a drunkard, who is abusive, or worse. Portia's objections to her suitors also fall in line with the play's theme of prejudice and distaste for those who are different. The Neapolitan prince is Italian, but his worst flaw is that he is boring. The English baron speaks only his own language; the French lord is unreliable; the Scot picks fights; the German drinks. While Portia's objections to each of these men as a life partner are understandable, their flaws are rooted in the worst stereotypes associated with their nationalities. Portia's objections to these men are delivered entirely through her description, which means they come to the audience through her perception. Audience members do not see these characters or their behavior firsthand. It is possible she's exaggerating their faults because she wants a suitor like herself in race and nationality, which is borne out by her preference for Bassanio, despite having met him only once.

## Act 1, Scene 3

## Summary

Bassanio negotiates with Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, to borrow 3,000 ducats for three months in Antonio's name. Shylock acknowledges Antonio has sufficient fortune but worries because he has heard much of Antonio's fortune is currently at sea in ships bound for Tripoli and Libya as well as for the Indies, Mexico, and England. He speculates on the hazards of weather and pirates and wonders if Antonio will be able to repay him. Bassanio invites Shylock to join him and Antonio for dinner so Shylock can speak with Antonio directly, but Shylock refuses the invitation because he follows different customs. Just then Antonio arrives, and Shylock speaks in an aside of his hatred for Antonio and how he would like to get revenge on him. However, Shylock treats Antonio with businesslike politeness until he enumerates the wrongs Antonio has done to him in the past: spitting on his clothing, calling him a dog, and criticizing his business practices in public. Antonio becomes defensive and says he is likely to do so again, but Shylock claims he wants to forgive and forget the past. He agrees to lend Antonio the money free of interest, asking Antonio to promise a pound of his own flesh to secure the bond as "a merry sport." Antonio agrees to these terms even though Bassanio protests.

## Analysis

Shylock's doubts about Antonio's fortunes and his hesitation to extend Antonio credit show his reluctance to help Antonio and Bassanio from the start of their negotiation. The aside in which he speaks of his hatred of Antonio and his desire for revenge on him, in contrast with his outward proclamations of friendship, or forgiving and forgetting, make Shylock appear scheming and untrustworthy. However, Shylock's description of his past interactions with Antonio, which Antonio affirms as true with his threat of continued mistreatment toward Shylock, also paint Antonio as untrustworthy where Shylock is concerned. Until Antonio actually appears in the scene, Shylock focuses only on the business at hand. He worries about Antonio's ability to repay him and expresses legitimate concerns about Antonio's business decisions. He refuses Bassanio's dinner invitation out of fidelity to his religious customs and a desire to keep the transaction professional. In Act 1, Scene 1 the audience experienced Antonio as a caring, generous friend. It is not until Antonio and Shylock meet that hostility emerges in both characters; these two men clearly

bring out the worst in one another. Shylock's scheming against Antonio becomes obvious with his suggestion of the "pound of flesh" as collateral for the loan, because he presents this request as if it were a joke, calling it "a merry sport." Only Bassanio picks up on the threat this bond actually poses, as Antonio either accepts Shylock's suggestion as a joke or does not doubt at all he will be able to repay the loan. While Bassanio verbally protests Antonio's agreement to this arrangement, it is notable that he does not walk away from the proceedings and accepts the money once it has been borrowed.

This is the end of Act 1, which has set up the central conflict of the plot—the deadly agreement between Shylock and Antonio, which is motivated by Bassanio's determination to win Portia and Antonio's devotion to Bassanio. This conflict can also be seen as allegorical. An allegory is a story in which the characters stand for abstract concepts and which often imparts a moral. Here Shylock and Antonio may be seen as representing Judaism and Christianity. Thus, theirs is the conflict between the Old Testament and the New Testament approach to life. Shylock brings up this contrast in his aside to the audience when Antonio arrives in this scene. He says Antonio looks like a "fawning publican" and refers to the Jews as "our sacred nation." The allusion to a publican, or tax collector, is actually a jab at Shylock, since it likens him to the Pharisee in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:10), in which the prideful Pharisee glories in his superiority to a humble publican. (Of course, aside from Shylock's sense of moral superiority, it's not a completely appropriate likeness since Antonio is far from humble where Jews—especially Shylock—are concerned.) While Shylock embraces Old Testament laws regarding such things as diet, women's social roles, and crime and punishment, Antonio—at least superficially—epitomizes New Testament values such as charity, turning the other cheek, and loving others as oneself. For example, his love of Bassanio as well as his interest-free loans to Bassanio and others can be viewed as the selfless love a true Christian has for his fellow man. This also explains his easy willingness to offer his own flesh and blood as collateral to secure Bassanio's happiness.

## Act 2, Scene 1

## Summary

The Prince of Morocco greets Portia upon his arrival at Belmont, saying "Mislike me not for my complexion" and telling her his blood is the same as the most fair-skinned man. He goes on to tell her how much the women of his own land desire him, but Portia assures him that she is not driven to choose a suitor by his appearance. She is not driven to choose her own husband at all because of her father's "lottery," so the Prince of Morocco has as much chance as any other man who seeks her hand. The prince agrees to the terms of the challenge, even though he must swear "never to speak to lady afterward in way of marriage" if he loses. They agree he will undertake the challenge after dinner.

## Analysis

The Prince of Morocco's choice of introductory words hints at a fear of rejection based on his obvious difference from Portia and his separation from European society. He talks of his people living close to the sun, so his skin is dark. Hailing from Morocco, a Muslim country, he is probably not a Christian, so he has been subject to prejudice in his interactions with European society just as Shylock has. His boasts about his desirability in his home country make him appear confident on the surface, but it is the kind of confidence that seeks to compensate for insecurity. When the audience sees Portia in Act 1, she laments her father's arrangement, but she now uses the same arrangement to create distance between herself and the Prince of Morocco, which indicates she does in fact "mislike" his complexion—a sentiment she will confirm when he loses the challenge in Act 2, Scene 7.

## Act 2, Scene 2

## Summary

Launcelot Gobbo works for Shylock as a servant, but he is debating whether or not to leave his job and seek a new master. His conscience tells him to remain with Shylock because it is the honest and responsible thing to do, even though Launcelot hates Shylock. The "fiend," as Launcelot calls his opposite impulse, tells him to run away. Launcelot

talks with his father, Old Gobbo, and reveals his desire to leave Shylock's employ. At that moment Bassanio appears, and Old Gobbo engages him in a conversation telling him Launcelot is unhappy in his current position and wishes to serve another employer. Bassanio becomes impatient with their wordiness, but Launcelot steps in and asks Bassanio for a job—a wish Bassanio immediately grants. Launcelot is overjoyed and reads a positive, if unlikely, fortune in his own palm before leaving to give Shylock notice.

Gratiano finds Bassanio and asks to accompany him to Belmont. Bassanio is afraid Gratiano is "too wild, too rude and bold of voice" and his behavior might ruin Bassanio's chances with Portia. Gratiano promises to "put on a sober habit" and behave himself as a man might "to please his grandam." Bassanio agrees to let Gratiano come along, but he allows Gratiano this night to indulge his "merriment" without judgment.

## Analysis

Launcelot's name is spelled "Lancelet" in the first published versions of the play. A lancelet is a small sword or "man-at-arms," which is descriptive of his lower position as a house servant. Some modern versions of the play use the spelling "Lancelot," which alludes to the heroic knight Sir Lancelot of the legends of King Arthur, which creates an ironic contrast with the indecisive and comical figure of Shakespeare's Launcelot Gobbo.

Launcelot describes his objection to Shylock by saying "My master's a very Jew," and saying he is "famished" in Shylock's service. These lines imply that Shylock does not feed Launcelot sufficiently or that he does not pay Launcelot enough to feed himself. Either way, the description plays into the negative stereotype of Jewish people as greedy and stingy. As in other scenes that illustrate such prejudices, the audience hears Launcelot speak of this behavior, but Shylock and Launcelot directly interact very little onstage. It is impossible to be sure Launcelot's complaints are entirely objective and are not colored by his prejudice. Launcelot and his father's silliness, including the comical palm reading near the end of the scene, are an example of the play's inherent ambiguity. It may be interpreted that these foolish and uneducated men are meant to be superior to Shylock, underlining his inferiority in this society. Certainly, these men enjoy greater freedom in Venice than Shylock does. At the same time, their foolishness and lack of education could also indicate their inadequacy as

judges of Shylock's character.

## Act 2, Scene 3

### Summary

Jessica bids Launcelot Gobbo goodbye as he prepares to leave her father's service. She tells him he has been a source of fun in their serious house and sends Launcelot to Bassanio's dinner with a letter for Lorenzo. Launcelot predicts she will marry a Christian, and they both cry at parting. Once Launcelot is gone, Jessica hopes Lorenzo will get her message and come to take her away and marry her.

### Analysis

It is possible to question Launcelot Gobbo's reliability as a judge of Shylock's character in Act 2, Scene 2, because Launcelot is a silly character whose primary purpose is to serve as comic relief in the play. But Jessica's judgment of her father is more reliable. She describes her house as "hell" and credits Launcelot with bringing some merriment into it. If the only other person who lives in her house is Shylock, he must be the source of her unhappiness. Unlike the Christian characters in the play, Jessica has no prejudice against her father. Quite the opposite, she should be predisposed to love her father, so whatever she feels for him is based entirely on his actions toward her throughout her life. Her desire to escape from her father's house is the clearest evidence against Shylock's character presented thus far in the play.

## Act 2, Scene 4

### Summary

Lorenzo makes plans with Gratiano, Salarino, and Solanio to "slink away in supper time" and disguise themselves to prepare for a masquerade at Bassanio's dinner. Launcelot delivers Jessica's letter to Lorenzo, and Lorenzo sends him back to her with word that "[he] will not fail her." After Salarino and Solanio leave for the party, Lorenzo tells Gratiano that Jessica has told him how to get her away from her father's house and that she



will be waiting, disguised as a page and carrying "what gold and jewels she is furnished with."

## Analysis

Lorenzo's friends support his pursuit of Jessica and are happy to see he has received a letter from her. They will later assist him as he escapes with her from Shylock's house. The decision to hold a masquerade as part of dinner mirrors the deception and disguise that will be necessary to carry out the elopement and also adds a touch of authenticity as such masquerades were part of Venetian culture. Even today masked celebrations remain a traditional part of the celebration of Carnival in Venice. Carnival is a Christian tradition that marks the week before Lent, the 40 days before the observance of Easter, which commemorates the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. During Lent strict Christians are supposed to give up eating meat, so Carnival—which draws its name from the Latin word for meat, *carnem*—is the last period during which Christians can eat meat for 40 days (in the United States these traditions of masked revelry are part of the celebration of Mardi Gras). While *this* masquerade is not definitively affiliated with Carnival, it does imply a connection to this Christian tradition and a contrast with Shylock's strict austerity seen in Act 1, Scene 3 and in Act 2, Scene 5.

## Act 2, Scene 5

### Summary

Launcelot brings Shylock an invitation to Bassanio's dinner, and Shylock tells Launcelot he will be able to judge the difference between his new master and his old one. Before Shylock leaves for dinner, he warns Jessica to close and lock all the doors and windows, not to look outside, not to even allow the sounds of merriment in the streets outside into his home. Launcelot takes her aside to tell her to keep an eye out at the window for Lorenzo. Shylock asks about the exchange, but Jessica tells him Launcelot was only telling her goodbye. After Shylock leaves, she offers an unheard farewell to her father.

## Analysis

Act 2, Scene 5 provides some evidence to support Jessica's hostility toward her father. He forbids her to leave the house, look outside, or even open the windows. He keeps Jessica isolated from the outside world, which shows why she is eager to leave home quickly, especially without the comical Launcelot around the house. Her isolation also raises the question of how she and Lorenzo ever saw one another enough to begin a courtship even as it explains why the courtship has been conducted entirely through letters. Launcelot's role as messenger shows how his participation has probably been essential. His departure, hence the loss of their messenger, provides another reason why their elopement must happen as soon as possible.

Although Jessica perceives her father's strict rules as "hell," Shylock's reasons for those rules are most likely founded in his religion and his paternal love for her. As her father, he wants to protect her from the sinful behavior of the rowdy young men on the street. Jessica's perception of Judaism is probably equally tainted by her resentment of the limitations placed on her. In this way she is a typical teenager, and her desire to elope with Lorenzo and convert is just as much due to her desire to free herself of Shylock's constraints as it is to be with Lorenzo.

## Act 2, Scene 6

### Summary

Gratiano and Salarino meet Lorenzo outside Shylock's house, speaking about the wonders of love to pass the time because Lorenzo is late. When Lorenzo arrives, he asks them to keep watch, and Jessica appears above disguised as a boy. They exchange greetings, then Jessica throws down a chest filled with gold and jewels. She is embarrassed by her appearance as a boy but she believes it is safer for her to travel in disguise. Lorenzo reassures her she is lovely anyway. When she goes back into the house to collect a little more money, Gratiano says she is "a gentle and no Jew!" Lorenzo describes how he loves her for her wisdom, fairness, and loyalty. Jessica returns, and she, Lorenzo, and Salarino leave while Gratiano remains behind. Antonio arrives, looking for Gratiano. Bassanio's masquerade has been cancelled because the winds have

changed and Bassanio is ready to depart, so Gratiano is off to join the voyage.

## Analysis

The Christians are much more readily accepting of Jessica than they are of Shylock, as Gratiano's declaration of Jessica's status as a gentle, or Gentile—a Biblical word commonly used to describe non-Jews—indicates. He has just met her, observed her in a window for a few minutes, and reached this conclusion. As a woman, especially a woman who intends to convert and marry a Christian man, Jessica may be subject to different standards than her father faces. Gratiano's assessment of her may also be a comment on her other positive characteristics. She is clearly brave, as she is willing to take a tremendous risk, leave her family, her society, and her culture to be with the man she loves. She generously brings as much gold as she can carry to their union, which indicates a sense of equality; she does not expect Lorenzo to provide their sole means of financial support. These traits are reflected in her choice of disguise for the escape. She dresses as a page or servant boy. She might have dressed as an old woman or something else more feminine, but she has chosen a costume that outwardly reflects a rejection of traditional femininity—obeying her father, marrying a man who will take care of her, following her culture's rules—in addition to being practical for her escape.

## Act 2, Scene 7

### Summary

The Prince of Morocco undertakes the challenge left by Portia's father. He is to choose between three "caskets" or chests. One made of gold, one of silver, one of lead. One of the chests contains a portrait of Portia, and if the suitor chooses that chest, he can marry Portia. If he chooses the wrong chest, he goes home in shame. Each chest is inscribed with a hint. The gold one reads "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire." The silver one reads "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves." The lead one reads "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he has."

The Prince of Morocco deliberates over the chests and their

inscriptions. He finds the lead casket threatening and eliminates it right away. Then he thinks of what he may deserve, but he questions whether that extends to Portia, even though he believes he deserves much. He settles on the golden casket because he believes Portia is the thing many men desire. He also thinks the golden casket is the only one worthy to contain her image, so he chooses gold. When he unlocks the casket he finds a skull and a message cautioning against being seduced by outward appearances—"All that glitters is not gold." He leaves quickly, and Portia expresses relief at his failure.

## Analysis

With the inscriptions on the caskets, it becomes apparent that Portia's father has not entrusted his daughter's fate to a game of pure chance. The inscriptions provide clues to the location of her portrait, and the man who can figure out the clues correctly will be the one worthy of Portia's hand. The Prince of Morocco is not that man. He is seduced by the outward appearance of the gold casket, which is an ironic turn of events for a man whose first words in the play are "Mislike me not for my complexion." Even though he met Portia with an entreaty that she not judge him by his outward appearance, the statement also indicates his own preoccupation with outward appearances as evidenced by his choice of casket.

Portia has judged the Prince of Morocco by his appearance as well. When he departs, she says, "Let all his complexion choose me so." Unlike the other suitors she dislikes, the Prince of Morocco is not actually as repellent as the drunken, fighting, inconstant lot that occupies her house. He has no evident character flaws beyond his ego, which is a sufficient reason for Portia to dislike him, but she never notices this. She has been unable to look beyond his complexion from the moment she met him, which is evident from the way her last line mirrors his first. Her prejudice has made her blind to any good points or flaws the prince may actually possess.

## Act 2, Scene 8

## Summary

Salarino and Solanio meet in the city square to review recent events. They have seen Bassanio set sail with Gratiano, but they say Lorenzo and Jessica did not depart with them. Shylock wanted to search Bassanio's ship and got the duke's approval to do so, but the ship was already gone. Antonio has assured Shylock and the duke that Jessica and Lorenzo did not set sail with Bassanio, so Shylock has been seen in the streets wailing for his lost daughter and lost money. Children mock him. There has also been some discouraging news about a ship from Venice lost near England, and Antonio hopes it is not his. Salarino and Solanio both express their liking for Antonio, saying "A kinder gentleman treads not the earth." They talk about Antonio's sadness at Bassanio's departure and speculate that Antonio "only loves the world for [Bassanio]." They decide to go try to raise Antonio's spirits.

## Analysis

It is a typical conceit in Shakespeare's plays to use conversation between characters to explain what has happened or is happening offstage. Since Salarino and Solanio are gossips, they are perfect for taking on this important role of providing plot exposition. From a practical standpoint, their conversation in Act 2, Scene 8 spares the time (as well as the expense of sets and props) of staging scenes showing Shylock attempting to search Bassanio's boat, the loss of the ship near England, and Antonio's farewell to Bassanio.

As much as Salarino and Solanio seem to like Antonio and want good things for him, their dialogue also carries a tone that indicates they enjoy the drama unfolding around them. Solanio delights in speculating about Antonio's grief when he hears of the wrecked ship. Salarino relishes the details when he describes Bassanio's departure from Venice. Yet in these cases their enjoyment is subtle. When Solanio recounts Shylock's anguish at the loss of his daughter, he emphasizes how Shylock cries out for his lost money and calls Shylock a dog with a confused passion, as if Shylock does not know which loss upsets him more. The Christian merchants take Shylock's confusion as evidence of his greed instead of evidence of simple confusion over his family having been turned upside down. After all, his daughter has not only left and betrayed him, but has abandoned the principles of their religion.

## Act 2, Scene 9

### Summary

The Prince of Arragon attempts the challenge of choosing between the three caskets to find Portia's portrait and win her hand. He reiterates the conditions of accepting the challenge: If he loses he can never reveal which casket he chose, and he may never seek to marry another woman. He considers the inscription on the lead casket, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath," and dismisses the lead casket right away because it is not beautiful. He looks at the gold casket, "what many men desire" and decides it is foolish to follow the "multitude that choose by show." He does not want to be associated with the common man. He looks at the silver casket that promises "as much as he deserves" and decides he deserves the wealth and privilege he has, so he chooses the casket he deserves as well. Inside is a portrait of a fool and a message telling him his judgment is foolish. The Prince of Arragon departs unhappily as a messenger arrives to announce the approach of "a young Venetian." Portia is excited, hoping it is Bassanio, and Nerissa prays for the same thing.

### Analysis

The Prince of Arragon does not deliberate over the caskets as long as the Prince of Morocco does in Act 2, Scene 7. Like the Prince of Morocco he dismisses the lead casket almost immediately, and at the end of the scene the audience knows by the process of elimination that the lead casket is the correct one. Also like the Prince of Morocco, the Prince of Arragon is driven by a sense of ego and entitlement. He chooses the casket that appeals most directly to his ego, the one that promises what he deserves. Even though he avoids the Prince of Morocco's mistake by acknowledging the folly of "choosing by show," this wisdom comes from a haughty desire to separate himself from other men because he feels superior to them.

Bassanio's approach at the end of the scene foreshadows his success at the challenge and creates dramatic irony. Now Portia knows the answer to her father's riddle if she did not before, and the audience knows the answer as well. It makes sense that Bassanio will choose the casket not yet chosen.

Even though the characters do not know the outcome of Bassanio's suit yet, the audience has a good idea.

## Act 3, Scene 1

### Summary

Salarino and Solanio reflect on the news that another of Antonio's ships has been reported lost in "the Goodwins." They hope the news is only hearsay but call their source "an honest woman of her word." Just as they are hoping this will be the end of bad news for Antonio, Shylock approaches them. The three men discuss Jessica's departure as well as Antonio's lost ship and what it means for his bond. Salarino and Solanio ask Shylock what he wants with a pound of Antonio's flesh, and Shylock tells them it doesn't matter what he does with the flesh: he just wants revenge. Even though he's Jewish, he says, he has the same feelings and the same weaknesses and desires that any Christian has. He concludes by saying a Christian would seek revenge on a Jew if wronged, so he is also entitled to revenge. Salarino and Solanio do not have an opportunity to respond because they are summoned to Antonio's for dinner.

Shylock talks to his friend and fellow moneylender Tubal, who brings news from Genoa about Jessica. No one has been able to find her, but Tubal shares stories he has heard about her. Shylock laments the loss of his daughter, the money she took, and the money he is spending on the fruitless search for her. He wishes Jessica were "dead at [his] foot and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hearsed at my foot and the ducats in her coffin!" Tubal offers news that a third ship of Antonio's has been lost near Tripoli. The conversation shifts back and forth between Jessica and Antonio. Shylock is upset to hear Jessica traded his turquoise ring for a monkey—a ring her mother had once given Shylock. But he's happy to hear more about Antonio's losses and asks Tubal to "fee [him] an officer" to arrest Antonio before meeting him at the synagogue.

### Analysis

Salarino and Solanio continue to participate in gossip about Antonio's fortunes, although they do not consider themselves gossips; this is a title they only reserve for the source they

consider trustworthy. The ship she has told him about is allegedly lost in an area called the Goodwins, which is likely a reference to the Goodwin sands, an area of the English Channel known for treacherous currents. Their conversation with Shylock establishes a connection between Shylock's anger at losing his daughter and his anger at Antonio. Even though Antonio did not take Jessica—and there is no evidence he is involved with her elopement with Lorenzo in any way—Shylock knows Antonio and Lorenzo are associated with one another, at the very least through their mutual friendship with Bassanio. Furthermore, they are both Christians, and this is sufficient reason for Shylock to associate the two in his mind and add Jessica's disappearance to his other grievances against Antonio. In a sense Shylock expects Antonio to suffer for all his kind, just as he believes Antonio has made him suffer because of his "nation."

The connection between Antonio and Jessica in Shylock's mind becomes more apparent during Shylock's conversation with Tubal, which literally shifts focus between Antonio and Jessica from one line to the next. The juxtaposition of Shylock's disappointment at being unable to find Jessica with his eagerness to punish Antonio creates a visual clue to the indirect connection between these two topics in Shylock's mind. He sees Antonio's misfortune as a consolation for his disappointment about Jessica. Shylock is therefore able to channel his rage about Jessica into his rage at Antonio; he can't punish his daughter for her disobedience, but he *can* punish Antonio. His glee at the prospect makes Shylock appear sinister and undoes much of the goodwill he earns through his speech to Salarino and Solanio in which he enumerates all the ways in which he is just like them.

## Act 3, Scene 2

### Summary

Portia wants Bassanio to wait a few days before he undertakes her father's challenge, fearing he might choose wrong and be forced to leave her. She believes if she has more time with Bassanio, she can "teach [him] to choose right." Bassanio cannot take the suspense of not knowing his future and insists on accepting the challenge right away. He professes his love for Portia, and Portia hopes his love will guide him to the correct choice among the caskets. Bassanio reasons his way

through the challenge, rejecting the gold and silver caskets because "the world is deceived with ornament." He chooses the lead casket and finds Portia's image inside. Both Portia and Bassanio rejoice at this outcome and agree to marry. Portia gives Bassanio a ring. Gratiano reveals his plan to marry Nerissa.

Lorenzo and Jessica arrive with Salerio, who brings Bassanio a message from Venice: Antonio has lost his ships and is now unable to pay Shylock. Bassanio is forced to tell Portia the true state of his finances, but she is not bothered by his confession. She is more concerned with Antonio's welfare. Portia offers any sum necessary to save Antonio's life, even though Salerio tells her Shylock claims he will refuse repayment if offered. Jessica confirms her father's stubbornness, saying he has told her he would "rather have Antonio's flesh/Than twenty times the value of the sum." Portia sends Bassanio back to Venice to help his friend.

## Analysis

While an argument can be made, based on Bassanio's focus on Portia's fortunes in Act 1, Scene 1, that his primary interest in Portia is financial, Act 3, Scene 2 helps dispel this possibility. For the first time Bassanio confesses his love for Portia, and he does so in a manner that appears shy and subdued. He describes the delay before he undertakes the challenge as torture, and then "confesses" his love when pressed to do so. Portia's declaration that he will win the challenge if he truly loves her speaks to her confidence in his ability to choose as well as her confidence in her father's judgment, the recent focus of her complaints. Indeed, when Bassanio wins the challenge, he sees almost precisely what Portia's father wanted his future son-in-law to see in the caskets. Bassanio looks at the gold casket and knows not to be deceived by appearances—he even refers to skulls and graves concealed by ornaments. This observation recalls the Prince of Morocco's challenge in Act 2, Scene 7 which revealed the gold casket's contents to be a skull and a letter containing almost the same words Bassanio uses here.

Interestingly, Bassanio's choice of casket is based on the process of elimination. He is well aware of the two caskets he should not choose, but he makes no reference to the inscription on the lead casket that requires him to "give and hazard all he hath." Bassanio does not yet understand the truth of this phrase, so he seems not to notice it. He has sacrificed

some to be here, but most of the sacrifices for his love of Portia have actually been made by Antonio who, it seems, has even sacrificed his own life for Bassanio's potential happiness. This reality comes roaring into the happy scene that sees Portia and Bassanio and Nerissa and Gratiano agreeing to marry. Antonio cannot be expected to make the ultimate sacrifice for Portia and Bassanio, which Portia recognizes when she sends her new husband back to Venice.

Of course, it is also possible that Bassanio is only deliberating for show. It may be he noticed Portia's hints about which casket to choose. After all, he has proven himself perceptive where conversational nuance is concerned, as in his recognition of Shylock's threat to Antonio in Act 1, Scene 3. In Portia's first sentence to him in Act 3, Scene 2 she says, "pause a day or two/Before you hazard"—and, although a legitimate synonym for *risk*, *hazard* is part of the inscription on the lead casket: "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath." Her words contain another clue as well; Portia tells Bassanio she has given all of herself to him, implying that he must now give all he has to her.

## Act 3, Scene 3

### Summary

Shylock and Salarino accompany Antonio to jail. Shylock mocks Antonio for lending money without interest. Antonio wants to talk to Shylock, but Shylock refuses to listen to anything Antonio says. Shylock is confident the Duke of Venice will uphold his claim and leaves Antonio alone with Salarino.

Salarino tells Antonio Shylock is "an impenetrable cur," a stubborn dog. Antonio acknowledges why Shylock hates him for interfering with his business in the past. He also says, "These griefs and losses have so bated me,/That I shall hardly spare a pound of flesh." Antonio is certain the Duke of Venice is powerless to stop Shylock. His only wish is that "Bassanio come/To see [Antonio] pay his debt."

### Analysis

Shylock's stubbornness prevents him from acknowledging anything Antonio might say to him. As a result, the audience does not know what kind of plea Antonio might make to

Shylock. His comments to Salarino demonstrate that he knows why Shylock hates him, but they stop short of revealing any remorse for his past actions toward Shylock. Antonio offers no apology or repentance to Shylock, so it is difficult to know if Shylock might be swayed by an act or word of atonement from his enemy. Instead, Salarino calls Shylock a dog again, and Antonio doesn't correct him. Antonio's inability to express full remorse or regret for his wrongs toward Shylock or even to make clear whether he believes his past behavior was wrong shows that Shylock may not be the only "impenetrable" figure in this situation.

## Act 3, Scene 4

### Summary

With Bassanio and Gratiano on their way to Venice, Portia makes her own preparations to depart Belmont. Lorenzo thanks her for offering such generous assistance to Antonio and praises her goodness, but Portia says she is only doing what is right. She asks Lorenzo and Jessica to watch over her estate while she and Nerissa go to a monastery while their husbands are away. She then sends her servant Balthazar to her cousin, a Doctor Bellario in Padua. She tells him to return quickly with the papers and clothing he provides.

After Balthazar leaves, Portia tells Nerissa of her plan: The two women will disguise themselves as men and follow their husbands to Venice. But she will not reveal more about her reasons until they are on the way.

### Analysis

Portia shows modesty in response to Lorenzo's praise of her generosity toward Antonio. She expresses her sympathy for Antonio's predicament and her happiness at being able to assist, but she stops short in the middle of her speech, saying, "This comes too near the praising of myself." In this respect she reflects the modesty expected of a woman in her station.

In Act 4, Scene 1 her plan to assist in Antonio's defense will become clear, which makes her modesty here a practical matter as well. She is compelled to conceal her intended involvement in Antonio's defense. Showmanship also becomes a key component in this scene. For performance purposes her

reluctance to reveal the full plan to Nerissa here sets up the surprise of the big reveal when she appears in court. The reference to Doctor Bellario—whose name will come up in the court scene—sets up the audience to recognize the young legal scholar as Portia when she appears before the duke in the next scene. For now Portia's vague request for "clothing" sets up suspense for the tense scenes to come.

## Act 3, Scene 5

### Summary

Launcelot and Jessica talk in the gardens at Belmont, and Launcelot tells Jessica she should hope Shylock isn't really her father, lest she someday suffer for his sins. Jessica counters by saying if her mother cheated on Shylock she would have to suffer for her mother's sins. Launcelot agrees Jessica is doomed either way, and Jessica declares "I shall be saved by my husband; he hath made me a Christian." Lorenzo appears and teases Launcelot for trying to steal his wife, and Jessica tells him why Launcelot has declared them both unfit for heaven: Jessica was born a Jew, and Lorenzo has raised the price of pork by converting Jessica. Lorenzo then tells Launcelot he has impregnated a Moor, and Launcelot jokes "if she be less than an honest woman, she is indeed more than I took her for." Lorenzo sends Launcelot to ask the household to prepare for dinner. Then he and Jessica share a quiet moment in which they speak of Bassanio's good fortune at finding a wife as good as Portia. Lorenzo talks of his own good fortune.

### Analysis

Even though Launcelot is joking with Jessica, his prejudice against Jews is on full display. His jokes about Jessica still being unworthy of heaven because of her father and her birth as a Jew raise questions about how fully she will be accepted into Christian society. Lorenzo clearly loves his wife unreservedly, and Portia's household has made her welcome. However, Launcelot's joke gives voice to the possibility of small elements of prejudice lingering in Jessica's future interactions. Despite the hospitality she has been shown, she will never really be one of *them* in the same way as if she had been born into their society.

Jessica's rejection of her father is understandable given his treatment of her in Act 2, Scene 5 and her subsequent isolation. This exchange provides hints of Jessica's relationship with her mother. Shylock's lament in Act 3, Scene 1 when he hears Jessica traded for a monkey the ring his wife gave him before they married indicates Jessica's mother is dead. The absence of a monkey in Belmont indicates Jessica did not take part in such an exchange, but her attitude about her dead mother is disturbingly lighthearted. It is possible she does not understand the sentimental value of the ring she took, and she may have traded it for *something*. She jokes with Launcelot about her mother's loyalty to her father, which implies Jessica's mother is an abstract concept to her. It is possible, based on this scene, that Jessica never knew her mother, which also explains why Shylock has been so overprotective of his daughter. She has lacked a second parent to reign in her father's strict influence and to make her feel comfortable in her own home.

## Act 4, Scene 1

### Summary

Shylock and Antonio appear before the Duke of Venice. Shylock demands fulfillment of the letter of their contract, and Antonio believes it is pointless to argue or try to reason with Shylock. The duke hopes Shylock will relent and show Antonio mercy at the last minute, but Shylock makes it clear he has no such plan. He says he wants the pound of flesh because it is "[his] humor," and he refuses when Bassanio offers him twice the sum of the original loan. Shylock compares his entitlement to Antonio's body to the way other Venetians feel entitled to do as they will with the bodies of their slaves and animals.

The duke calls Doctor Bellario from Padua and Balthazar, Doctor Bellario's colleague from Rome, who is actually Portia in disguise. She first appeals to Shylock to show Antonio mercy because mercy is its own reward. She goes on to respond to Shylock's calls for justice by saying, "That in the course of justice none of us/Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy." Shylock remains unmoved, just as he remains unmoved by Bassanio's repeated offers to pay twice or 10 times the sum of the loan. Portia looks at the bond and urges Shylock to accept three times the amount of the loan. When he refuses again, Portia bids Antonio to prepare for Shylock's knife. She waits

until Shylock approaches Antonio with the knife before stopping him and informing him that the bond allows him a pound of Antonio's flesh, but it does not allow him any drop of Antonio's blood. It is impossible for Shylock to take his pound of flesh without spilling blood, so Shylock is found guilty of conspiring to commit murder against a citizen of Venice. He could receive the death penalty for this crime, but the duke spares his life. The duke takes half Shylock's fortune for the state and gives the other half to Antonio. Antonio asks the court to drop the fine of half his goods to the state and says he will give his own half of Shylock's fortune to Lorenzo and Jessica upon Shylock's death. He requires Shylock to leave any of his own possessions to Lorenzo and Jessica upon his death as well and that Shylock convert to Christianity. Shylock agrees to these terms and leaves the court.

After Shylock departs and Antonio is freed, he and Bassanio thank Portia—still believing her to be Balthazar—for her assistance. They insist on giving her some payment for her trouble, and she takes Bassanio's gloves. She then asks for his ring, the one she gave him when they were wed. Bassanio refuses to part with the ring, and she scolds him for not giving her the ring and takes her leave. Antonio then convinces Bassanio to send the ring to the legal scholar saying, "Let his deservings and my love withal/Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment." Bassanio sends Gratiano to catch up with Portia and give her the ring.

### Analysis

Antonio's trial represents a confrontation between ideas that define the two religions at the heart of *The Merchant of Venice*. As presented in the play, Judaism is a religion focused on rules, following law, obedience, and justice in the form of punishment and atonement for wrongdoing. This reflects the Old Testament idea expressed in Exodus, Chapter 21: 23–25: "But if any harm follow, thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." Shylock represents this point of view. On the other hand, Portia, the duke, and others represent the Christian ideal of mercy and salvation even for those who do not deserve it. Portia says this directly in her speech to Shylock. She admits no one deserves mercy but says we show mercy because it is a human good. At the same time, there are at least two Christians present in the court who have no desire to show Shylock any mercy at all. Gratiano tells Shylock if he were in charge, he would see Shylock hanged. A

different moneylender might have shown Antonio mercy when asked; a different moneylender might never have asked for a pound of flesh as collateral.

For all the Venetians' attacks on Shylock for his trickery in the matter of his contract with Antonio, it is Portia whose trickery is most effective—and potentially deadly. She practices deception beyond the disguise she wears in the courtroom. After Shylock refuses to show mercy to Antonio, she goads him into moving to collect his pound of flesh. She urges him to sharpen his knife and move toward Antonio, even though she has read the bond and knows the loophole about spilling blood that she will invoke at the last minute. She does this to provide no doubt that Shylock is operating through malice and does intend to kill Antonio. In doing so she sets him up to lose the case and possibly receive a death sentence. Perhaps she suspects the duke will make an example of the mercy Shylock has refused to show, but she can't know that for certain. If she wanted Shylock to receive mercy, she might have warned him of the loophole in his contract. She might have warned him he would be subject to the death penalty if he pursued his present course. Her decision to entrap Shylock with his own contract seems based on a desire to punish his unwillingness to show mercy.

The themes of prejudice and mercy are most obvious in this scene. Shylock will not show mercy; he probably does not feel Christians have ever shown him any. But when Portia turns the tables, it first appears Antonio is willing to show mercy. Perhaps he has learned something from his experience. But, although he is happy for Shylock not to be condemned to death and asks that the state's half of Shylock's fortune be returned to Shylock for the duration of his life, he makes a demand that shows how deep his prejudice goes. Shylock must convert to Christianity, giving up the faith and customs that have formed the center of his life. Shylock agrees, but it is likely his agreement is only superficial. The audience cannot know what Shylock thinks of all this since he does not appear again in the play.

Portia's attempt to trick Bassanio into giving the ring she gave him to "Balthazar" appears designed to set him up for a later punishment for parting with his ring. It may be a punishment for Bassanio telling Antonio he would be willing to sacrifice his own wife to save Antonio's life. Portia is both clever and kind. Her ability to save Antonio when all the men around her have given up on doing so shows her wisdom is superior to that of all the other characters in *The Merchant of Venice*. Yet even

Portia is not immune to the human desire for justice when she feels wronged by Bassanio.

## Act 4, Scene 2

### Summary

Portia instructs Nerissa to go to Shylock's home and have him sign the deed that gives his property to Jessica and Lorenzo. Before she leaves, Gratiano arrives to deliver Bassanio's ring and invite her to dinner. She turns down the dinner invitation but accepts the ring and asks Gratiano to show Nerissa the way to Shylock's house. Nerissa tells Portia she will try to get her own ring from Gratiano. Portia believes she will get the ring easily and assures Nerissa they will have the last word on their husbands.

### Analysis

Portia plans to return to Belmont with Nerissa immediately after Shylock has signed the deeds associated with his trial, which provides a practical reason for her to reject Bassanio's invitation to dinner. To preserve their ruse, the women need to return to Belmont before their husbands. However, Gratiano's delivery of the ring provides an additional reason for Portia to avoid Bassanio. She now knows his loyalty to Antonio has persuaded him to part with the ring she warned him never to lose or give away. The doubts this exchange raises about her marriage prompt Nerissa to subject Gratiano to a similar test of his affection for her. Portia believes Gratiano will also give up his ring, reflecting a cynical state of mind in response to Bassanio's blunder.

This brief scene offers a bit of comic relief after the high drama of the previous scene. The two women will have tricked their husbands in two ways: first, by convincing their own husbands they are men and complete strangers and second, by persuading them to give up the rings. When they meet again in Belmont, this will be revealed to have been a joke, albeit a pointed one. But it will also give the women ammunition to use against their husbands throughout their marriages.



## Act 5, Scene 1

### Summary

Jessica and Lorenzo enjoy the moonlight in Belmont and compare the night—and themselves—with doomed lovers from classical myths. A messenger arrives to tell them Portia and Nerissa will return before daybreak. Shortly thereafter, Launcelot arrives to say Bassanio and Gratiano will arrive before morning as well. Jessica and Lorenzo move to prepare for their arrival.

Portia and Nerissa hesitate outside the house, enjoying the music Stephano is playing within. Portia sends Nerissa inside with instructions to the servants not to mention their absence. Lorenzo hears them talking and welcomes them home. Bassanio and Gratiano arrive shortly afterward with Antonio. Portia greets Antonio warmly as Nerissa and Gratiano argue about the lost ring. Portia scolds Gratiano for parting with Nerissa's ring, and Bassanio considers telling Portia he lost the ring defending it. Before Bassanio can tell his story, Gratiano announces Bassanio gave his ring away to the legal scholar, and Portia promises not to sleep with Bassanio again until the ring is returned. Bassanio tries to plead his case, but Portia claims to suspect "some woman had the ring." Antonio intercedes, saying he is the cause of these troubles, and apologizes. Portia gives Antonio a ring to give to Bassanio, and Bassanio sees it is the same ring as before. Portia claims she got it from the legal scholar when she slept with him. Nerissa claims to have gotten Gratiano's ring by sleeping with the scholar's clerk. Gratiano and Bassanio are dumbfounded. But Portia knows how they disguised themselves and her role in Antonio's trial. She also gives Antonio a message containing the news that three of his ships were not lost and have "richly" returned to Venice. They all enjoy the joke and make amends. Portia also gives Lorenzo Shylock's deed, which leaves Lorenzo his property after his death. The household happily retires to bed before the sun rises.

### Analysis

Jessica and Lorenzo quietly enjoying one another's company, making jokes about the features their love story shares with the doomed couples of legend, provides a sharp contrast with the drama that unfolds between the other newlyweds in

Belmont. Jessica and Lorenzo have overcome tremendous obstacles to be together; they have—to paraphrase the lead casket's inscription from Act 2, Scene 7—given all and hazarded everything for their love. Neither of them questions the others' loyalty, nor do they rely on symbols or objects as proof of their bond. The bond between them just *is*, and they value one another above all else.

Portia's marriage to Bassanio and Nerissa's to Gratiano lack the simple affection visible between Jessica and Lorenzo. Bassanio and Gratiano *do* have divided devotion. If their rings are meant to symbolize the bond they have with their wives, they were wrong to give those rings away to men they believed to be strangers. Bassanio gives away his ring in Act 4, Scene 1 because on some level he does value Antonio's opinion and love over Portia's. In fairness to Antonio, Bassanio knows Antonio has sacrificed more for him than Portia has, and their relationship has a much longer history. But in fact, Portia has made similar sacrifices for Bassanio and Antonio. She offered Bassanio her whole fortune to save his friend's life. She then took the risk of disguising herself as a man and lying about her identity to the Duke of Venice to ensure Antonio's safety because she did not want her husband to lose his friend. If she had been caught in this deception, she would surely have faced punishment herself. Bassanio does not understand these truths until Portia reveals her identity as the young doctor of law who saved Antonio.

Antonio also makes a final sacrifice on Bassanio's behalf. Seeing that his involvement in Bassanio's life has divided Bassanio's loyalty and created strife in his marriage, Antonio tells Portia that the lost ring is his fault. She still holds Bassanio solely responsible, as she should, but Antonio swears his soul to helping preserve the integrity of Bassanio's marriage. To him this oath is more significant than the sacrifice of his body, and it represents a profound change in the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. They may remain friends, but Antonio will no longer be first in Bassanio's loyalty. Antonio knows the love he bears Bassanio—whether that love is romantic or not—must evolve now that his friend is married.

### “” Quotes

*"And if it stand, as you yourself still do, / Within the eye of honor, be*

*assured/My purse, my person, my  
extremest means/Lie all unlocked  
to your occasions."*

— Antonio, Act 1, Scene 1

Antonio declares himself and all his property at Bassanio's disposal when Bassanio describes his state of debt. These lines reflect Antonio's deep devotion to Bassanio, indicating the possibility that he loves Antonio at a level beyond friendship because these lines mirror the content of traditional wedding vows.

*"You would be [weary], sweet  
madam if your miseries were in the  
same abundance as your good  
fortunes are. And yet, for aught I  
see, they are as sick that surfeit  
with too much as they that starve  
with nothing."*

— Nerissa, Act 1, Scene 2

When Portia claims she is weary with the world, Nerissa reminds her how many good fortunes she has in her life—not the least of which is her wealth. Nerissa does not scold Portia for being ungrateful, but she observes that those who have too much are often as unhappy as those who have too little. This introduction to these two women illustrates how Nerissa, with her common sense and good cheer, is a grounding force for Portia.

*"If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will  
die as chaste as Diana unless I be  
obtained by the manner of my  
father's will."*

— Portia, Act 1, Scene 2

Portia does not like the riddle her dead father has left to choose her husband because she feels it leaves open the chance she may have to marry one of the horrible men who are pursuing her. Still she vows to honor her father's wishes even if it means she must live a long life with no physical contact. She compares herself with the mythological Sibyl of Cumae, a prophet granted exceptionally long life, and the Roman goddess Diana, the patron of virginity.

*"If I can catch him once upon the  
hip,/I will feed fat the ancient  
grudge I bear him."*

— Shylock, Act 1, Scene 3

In an aside during the negotiation for the loan to Antonio and Bassanio, Shylock reveals his intention to avenge himself on Antonio if he can get an opportunity. Later, he confronts Antonio about his many wrongs to Shylock—the insults, the spitting, and the damage to his business. This line reveals why Shylock agrees to the loan despite those wrongs: he hopes to gain an advantage over Antonio and exploit it.

*"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."*

— Shylock, Act 1, Scene 3

Shylock rejects an invitation to dine with Antonio during the negotiation for the loan, which reveals the depth of his devotion to the laws of his own faith. His religion binds him to different dietary requirements and prayer customs. He reminds Antonio of these differences and explains they can do business but never be friends.

*"I am sorry thou wilt leave my father so./Our house is hell and thou, a merry devil,/Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness."*

— Jessica, Act 2, Scene 3

Jessica bids farewell to Launcelot Gobbo when he tells her he is leaving to work for Bassanio. Her words indicate the loneliness of her life under her father's strict rules. Launcelot has been her constant friend and a bright source of amusement in an otherwise bleak home.

*"All that glisters is not gold—/Often have you heard that told./Many a man his life hath sold/But my outside to behold./Gilded tombs do worms infold."*

— Prince of Morocco, Act 2, Scene 7

The Prince of Morocco chooses the golden casket when he takes part in the challenge left by Portia's father. He is taken in by the richness of the gold and overly confident of his own worthiness to have such riches. He reads this line in the letter he finds inside the casket, which cautions him that gold is not the most precious thing in life and can often be used to conceal death and decay.

*"As the dog Jew did utter in the streets./'My daughter, O my ducats, O my daughter!/Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!/Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter,/... Find*

*the girl!/She hath the stones upon her; and the ducats.'"*

— Solanio, Act 2, Scene 8

Solanio mocks Shylock's public reaction to finding Jessica has left him, quoting Shylock's cries in the public square lamenting the loss of his daughter and the money she took with her. Solanio's version of events emphasizes Shylock's concern about the money, but Solanio is a known gossip and the Christians' prejudice against Shylock is well established. Solanio's presentation emphasizes stereotypical greed, implying Shylock is more concerned about the ducats than his daughter.

*"To bait fish withal; if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies—and what's his reason? I am a Jew."*

— Shylock, Act 3, Scene 1

When Solanio and Salarino ask Shylock why he even wants a pound of Antonio's flesh, Shylock outlines the reasons he wants revenge on Antonio. In listing his grievances, Shylock demonstrates he is motivated not by blind prejudice but by the specific abuses he has suffered at the hands of another man, a man whose scorn for Shylock's nation reveals he is motivated by prejudice.

*"Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions,*

*senses, affections, passions? ... 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?"*

— Shylock, Act 3, Scene 1

As Shylock defends his desire for revenge on Antonio, he emphasizes his own humanity. The speech is an appeal to the commonalities of all human beings, highlighting the basic truth that we all eat, feel pain, feel joy, get sick, recover, and bleed the same blood. Revenge also is part of basic human nature, and Shylock recognizes that if the situation were reversed, a Christian would not hesitate to seek revenge against him. In this respect his words are prophetic since he is vulnerable to extreme revenge in Act 4 when his claim against Antonio is defeated in court. For now, however, Shylock stands by the assertion that he is no worse than his Christian counterparts, that all men are equal in their capacity and desire for villainy.

*"This house, these servants, and this same myself/Are yours, my lord's. I give them with this ring,/Which, when you part from, lose, or give away,/Let it presage the ruin of your love,/And be my vantage to exclaim on you."*

— Portia, Act 3, Scene 2

Portia's description of her life after her father's death but before Bassanio's arrival and their betrothal is one of independence and power. She even describes herself in masculine terms, as lord and master of her estate. She only reasserts her femininity in reference to her dominion over her own body. She willingly parts with this control and cedes it to

Bassanio, but she emphasizes the importance of their bond through the symbol of the ring, which gives her power over him as well.

*"Shylock, the world thinks, and I think so too,/That thou but lead'st this fashion of thy malice/To the last hour of act, and then, 'tis thought,/Thou 'lt show thy mercy and remorse more strange/Than is thy strange apparent cruelty."*

— Duke of Venice, Act 4, Scene 1

The Duke of Venice opens the trial between Shylock and Antonio by declaring his belief that Shylock's thirst for revenge is only for show, that Shylock will relent and show mercy at the last minute. His word choices scold Shylock's "malice" and "cruelty" but make no allowance for the malice and cruelty Antonio has shown Shylock over the years.

*"What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?/You have among you many a purchased slave,/Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,/You use in abject and in slavish parts/Because you bought them."*

— Shylock, Act 4, Scene 1

Shylock stands firm in his belief that he is entitled to a pound of Antonio's flesh because he has loaned Antonio money and Antonio agreed to the terms of the loan. He compares his ownership to the slaves many Venetian citizens own and use as they wish. It's an imperfect comparison because Shylock intends to kill Antonio, but it reveals hypocrisy on the part of

the Venetians, who have no problem owning other humans for unpaid labor or other purposes and who may mistreat those slaves with impunity.

*"The quality of mercy is not strained./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."*

— Portia, Act 4, Scene 1

Portia begs Shylock to show Antonio mercy in the court, saying mercy is its own reward and has inherent value to both the man who shows mercy and the one who receives it. Even though Antonio may deserve Shylock's wrath and resentment, the point of mercy is that it is given freely by one who has been wronged and is received by the undeserving.

*"I once did lend my body for his wealth,/Which but for him that had your husband's ring/Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again,/My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord/Will never more break faith advisedly."*

— Antonio, Act 5, Scene 1

Antonio acknowledges his role in convincing Bassanio to give up his wedding ring to the legal scholar who was Portia in disguise. He also stakes his soul on the successful union of Portia and Bassanio, just as he staked his body to obtain the money that facilitated their courtship. Again, Antonio reveals a deep and selfless love for Bassanio and a willingness to sacrifice greatly to ensure Bassanio's happiness.

## Symbols

### Gold

Gold represents wealth, status, and power. Bassanio needs gold to demonstrate he is a man of quality, worthy of marrying Portia. Shylock uses gold to exert power over Antonio and others because he has little power in other parts of his life. Jessica takes Shylock's gold as a show of power over her father when she leaves home. Yet the valuable parts of life have no relation to gold. Portia loves Bassanio even when she finds out he is penniless and in debt. Shylock discovers neither gold nor his attempt at revenge will improve his lot in life. Jessica has her father's wealth, but she values her relationship with Lorenzo more.

### Flesh

Flesh is a symbol of life, the actual substance all living things are made of. Shylock's religion indicates that some types of animal flesh are tainted and forbids their consumption. When Antonio offers a pound of his own flesh to secure the loan for Bassanio, he is actually placing his own life on the line as a potential sacrifice for Bassanio's happiness. When Shylock demands that pound of flesh as repayment for the loan, he demands Antonio's life as payment not for the bond but for the years of unhappiness Antonio—and Christian society in general—has caused him. The flesh itself is incidental, the real sacrifice at stake is the value of Antonio's life.

### Rings

In *The Merchant of Venice* rings represent love and commitment between partners. For example, when they agree to marry, Portia gives Bassanio a ring that she says represents their bond of love. She cautions him that if he loses the ring or gives it away, that will represent the destruction of their love.

Later she tricks him into giving her the ring, but he only gives his disguised wife the ring after Antonio urges him to do so, revealing how Bassanio's bond to Antonio remains stronger than his bond to Portia. Only after Portia reveals her trick does Bassanio see his error and shift his loyalty fully to his wife. A different ring has special significance to Shylock, who laments a rumor he hears of Jessica trading the ring her mother gave him for a pet monkey. He is undone by the way he believes his daughter has disrespected the bond her parents had by treating the ring in such a cavalier manner.

## Themes

### Prejudice

Shylock seeks revenge on Antonio as a representative of all the wrongs Christians have visited upon him and his people. Shylock's desire for revenge also reflects his prejudice against Christians, but that prejudice is a response to the prejudice he has faced as a Jew. Antonio has personally been responsible for many of the wrongs he has experienced, calling Shylock a dog and spitting on him. Antonio's friend Lorenzo also lures Shylock's only child away from home and marries her—making her a Christian at the same time. In a larger sense Shylock is limited to moneylending as a profession because other trades are essentially closed to him; he resides in Venice's crowded ghetto, not even allowed to own land or choose where he lives. These prejudices create the anger that causes him to lash out at Christians, Antonio in particular; this in turn leads the Christians to act on their own prejudices, stripping him of his wealth and forcing him to convert to Christianity. These actions reveal how prejudice creates a fruitless cycle of mutual hostility.

### Mercy

At court Portia (disguised as a legal scholar named Balthazar) pleads with Shylock to show Antonio mercy, to rise above the letter of his contract and be the better man despite the wrongs

Antonio has shown him. Shylock refuses, and in turn the Christians of Venice, whose very belief system hinges on the mercy of God, spare Shylock's life but punish him. He loses half his fortune, but Antonio takes away Shylock's community and identity when he demands Shylock convert to Christianity. Paradoxically, those who want Shylock to be merciful show him little mercy once he has been defeated by the letter of the law. Perhaps neither Shylock nor Antonio truly deserves mercy, but that is the point of mercy. It should be offered to those who do not deserve it.

### Appearance versus Reality

Whether the truth is locked in a casket, hidden under a suit of clothes, or written into a contract, in *The Merchant of Venice* appearances constantly deceive. Portia's suitors, the Prince of Arragon and the Prince of Morocco, lose their chances at her hand because they are drawn to the glittery appearance of gold and silver caskets and choose the wrong casket in the challenge set up by Portia's father. Bassanio, who recognizes that great things may be hidden in humble exteriors and glittering exteriors may conceal emptiness beneath, wins the challenge by choosing the lead casket. Bassanio himself appears to be a wealthy man when he arrives at Portia's home, only later revealing the extent of his debts and poverty. In keeping with this theme, Portia disguises herself as a man so the reality of her wisdom and cleverness may be of service at court. While Shylock appears to be the play's villain, his suffering elicits the audience's sympathy.

### Worth

Much of the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* hinges on wealth and who has it, but the real driver of the action is the emotional value placed on different objects. Bassanio and Antonio seek the loan from Shylock because Bassanio is in love with Portia, and Antonio values Bassanio enough to put his life on the line to help him win her. Even though he is offered two or three times the sum of his loan in repayment, Shylock persists in demanding the pound of flesh because revenge on Antonio is more important to Shylock than money. Portia offers this

money freely because she values Bassanio's happiness more than gold. She then tricks Bassanio into giving her alter ego his wedding ring—not because of the ring's inherent value but as a test of his loyalty. Gold, silver, and jewels are only valuable to these characters because of the feelings behind these items.

## Lack of Control

Few characters in *The Merchant of Venice* are in control of their own lives and destinies. Antonio's fortune and eventually his life is at the mercy of the waves and weather that carry his ships abroad and back to port. Portia has no control over who she marries because her father set up a riddle designed to choose her husband for her. Bassanio is controlled by the debts he owes. Jessica lives her life under the heavy hand of her father's protection. Shylock is subject to the control of the city's laws, which tell him where he can live and what kind of work he can do. Each of these characters attempts to overcome the forces that control them but with mixed results.

## Motifs

### Ships

Venice is a city built on a series of islands, connected by a network of waterways and canals. Ships are the primary means of transportation and show mobility and motion in this environment. Bassanio, for instance, travels by sea to Belmont to court Portia. When Jessica and Lorenzo flee the city, they likely do so by ship as well. These characters have the privilege of mobility; only Shylock, stationary in Venice, has no affiliation with ships or travel.

Ships are also the foundation of Venice's busy and lucrative trade with the rest of the world. Antonio's fortunes are entirely based on the ships that carry the goods he trades as a merchant, and it is the loss of those ships that almost costs him his life.

## Disguise

Disguise is a part of Venetian life, as the citizens of the city are described as "masquers" who go about the city wearing masks as part of their revelries and celebrations. When Jessica escapes from her father's house, she does so dressed as a boy. Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves as young men so they can be heard at court and, later, test their husbands' loyalties to them.

It is worth noting that, in William Shakespeare's time, it was illegal for women to act on the stage; female roles were portrayed by boys or young men. So disguise was a necessary part of the play. The audience knew it, and Shakespeare played on this awareness in his dialogue, as when Lorenzo and Jessica discuss her embarrassment over being dressed "in the lovely garnish of a boy," as Lorenzo puts it (Act 2, Scene 6). The audience, knowing Jessica was a boy anyway, found this sort of banter amusing. Also, since men had to perform their roles, Shakespeare often had the supposedly female characters masquerade as boys or men—which was naturally very convincing. As a result, it was believable that even their husbands would not recognize Balthazar and his clerk as their wives.

## Allusion

Allusion is a literary device in which the playwright makes a passing reference to something, someone, or someplace of cultural or artistic significance. The allusion is not explained, but the audience is expected to understand the reference and see how it relates to the events on the stage. Biblical and classical allusions abound in *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock, Antonio, and other characters often refer to the Bible when discussing the ethics of issues such as moneylending, revenge, and mercy. Throughout the play, characters draw on classical mythology to illustrate the points they are making. The first allusion to a classical topic comes in the very first scene, when Solanio says, "Now, by two-headed Janus/... Nature hath framed strange fellows in her time" and, a few lines later, "That they'll not show their teeth in way of smile/Though Nestor swear the jest be laughable." Janus was the Roman god of beginnings and endings, especially associated with doors and gates; he was always shown with two faces—one looking forward and one backward. Nestor was a wise old king who advised the Greeks at Troy. Another allusion is to the classical

tale of Jason and the Argonauts, who undertake a dangerous quest to acquire a golden fleece.

## Wordplay

Another literary device found throughout *The Merchant of Venice* is wordplay, especially punning. Puns explore multiple or similar meanings of words to add richness, depth, and often humor to Shakespeare's dialogue. A good example is Portia's pun on the word *will* in Act 1, Scene 2 when she says, "So is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father." Her own will is her desires or intention regarding the choice of a spouse, but her father's will carries the pun; it refers both to his intentions for her regarding her marriage and to his last will and testament, in which he set up the challenge for her suitors.

Another type of wordplay is the riddles inscribed on the three caskets used in Portia's father's challenge to her suitors. For instance, the gold casket reads, "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire." This can be read in several ways. Based on the fact that Portia is still single at the start of the play, her suitors probably often think along the lines of the Prince of Morocco—that, like gold, Portia is "what many men desire." But her father may well be thinking that many men when they are old, in pain, or very ill desire death since the gold casket contains a skull.

Yet another form of wordplay is using words that sound similar but have different meaning. In Act 2, Scene 2, for example, when Old Gobbo says of his son Launcelot that the boy "has a great infection to serve," he probably means "a great affection." Such linguistic near misses would have amused Shakespeare's contemporary audiences greatly. In the same scene Launcelot says to his blind father, "Nay, indeed, if you had your eyes, you might fail of the knowing me. It is a wise father that knows his own child." This is an insult veiled in what appears to be a compliment. But Launcelot does not mean his father is wise; since Old Gobbo doesn't "know" his son, a closer analysis shows that Launcelot is actually calling his father foolish. Shakespeare uses such wordplay to reinforce the idea that a surface reading is often the wrong one, that appearances can be deceptive.

## Suggested Reading

Dautch, Aviva. "A Jewish Reading of *The Merchant of Venice*." *British Library*. Web.

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