

Antonio, a leading merchant of Venice, is a wealthy, respected, and popular man. Among his many friends is a young man named Bassanio, who owes Antonio a good deal of money. Bassanio would like to repay his friend, but so far he has been unable to do so. However, he now feels that he may have found a way — but he will again need a loan from Antonio. In Belmont, Bassanio tells Antonio, there lives a beautiful and young and wealthy heiress. Bassanio feels sure that he can win her hand in marriage, but he cannot go courting "hands-hanging." If he is to make a good impression, he has to appear at least as well off as her other wealthy suitors. Antonio tells his young friend that he would gladly lend him whatever amount of money he needs, but at the present time he himself is short of cash. All of his money is tied up in his merchant ships, which are still at sea. However, Antonio will not disappoint Bassanio. He knows of a moneylender who will probably lend him the necessary amount, and Bassanio can use Antonio's good name as security for the loan.

At Belmont, Portia speaks to Nerissa, her confidante, telling her how tired she is of the constant stream of suitors, and how she wishes to be free of the perverse obligation of her father's will: Portia cannot choose her own husband; she can marry only the man who chooses the correct one of three caskets — one gold, one silver, and one lead; one contains her portrait and that one is the lucky casket. So far, none of her suitors has decided to risk choosing one of the caskets, which is all for the good, because Portia has no liking for any of them. However, when Nerissa mentions the name of Bassanio, a possible suitor, Portia's mood brightens. He was once a visitor at Belmont, and Portia was impressed with him.

Meanwhile in Venice, Shylock, a rich Jewish moneylender who harbors a secret hatred for Antonio, has agreed to lend Bassanio three thousand ducats for three months, on Antonio's bond. Foregoing his usual high interest rate, Shylock demands instead that if the day for payment falls due and the money is not returned, he may cut off one pound of flesh from Antonio's body. Antonio agrees because all of his ships are due back in Venice a full month before the bond falls due.

A romantic subplot develops when Lorenzo, a close friend of Antonio and Bassanio, falls in love with Shylock's daughter, Jessica. He manages to elope with her by disguising her as a boy, and she manages to take with her a goodly amount of her father's ducats. Of course, this infuriates Shylock, and he vows revenge. Shortly thereafter, Bassanio and Gratiano leave for Belmont, where the "fair Portia" has just sent away the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Arragon, two more disappointed, unsuccessful suitors. When Bassanio asks to choose one of the caskets, Portia falls immediately in love with him, and she begs him to wait a few days before choosing one of the caskets. He has fallen in love with Portia and insists on taking his chances. He rejects the gold one, then the silver one; he chooses, finally, the lead casket, and on opening it, he finds a portrait of Portia. Both he and Portia are overjoyed, and they make plans to be married at once, along with Nerissa and Gratiano, who have also fallen in love. Happiness reigns in Belmont until Bassanio is brought a letter from Antonio bidding him farewell since his ships have been lost at sea and since it is impossible that he will live after Shylock collects his pound of flesh. Horrified, Bassanio leaves instantly for Venice with money which Portia gives him to pay the bond.

In Venice, Shylock is no longer interested in the mere payment of the money due him. He wants revenge. A Christian stole his daughter (and she took his money), and nothing will satisfy Shylock except the legal fulfillment of the bond. In the court of justice, presided over by the Duke of

Venice, Shylock faces his enemy, Antonio. Antonio is surrounded by his friends and is quietly resigned to death. On all sides, Shylock is surrounded by enemies. Bassanio pleads with Shylock to accept double the money due him, but Shylock refuses.

At this point, Portia, disguised as a lawyer, and Nerissa, dressed as her law clerk, enter the court and tell the Duke that they have been sent from Padua by a learned attorney, Doctor Bellario, to plead the defendant's case. Portia entreats Shylock to be merciful, but he will not listen. She offers the moneylender *triple* the amount owed him, but again Shylock will have none of it. She then solemnly informs the court that Shylock is entirely within his lawful rights. She then informs Shylock that he must be very careful. He must cutoff *exactly* one pound of flesh, and he must not spill one *drop* of Antonio's blood. If he fails, all of Shylock's lands and goods will be confiscated. Shylock hastily decides that he will accept the triple payment of the bond, but Portia says *no*; Shylock then offers to take only the original three thousand ducats, but again Portia refuses, reminding him that it was he himself who demanded the strict interpretation of the law. Furthermore, she says, the law has another hold on him. Since he is an alien in Venice and since he tried to "seek the life" of a Venetian citizen, all his wealth can be divided between the citizen whom he attempted to destroy and the public treasury; in addition, Shylock's own life is in peril because of what he attempted to do.

The Duke decides to spare Shylock's life, but he does give half of Shylock's money to Antonio, and he gives the rest of it to the state. Antonio says that he will not accept the money if Shylock will agree to become a Christian and if, in his will, he will agree to leave his money to his daughter, Jessica, and her new husband, Lorenzo. Shylock, broken and defeated, agrees to all these conditions and leaves the court. Overjoyed, Antonio and his friends offer to pay the young lawyer whatever they can, but, oddly enough, the lawyer wishes only a certain ring which Bassanio is wearing. Bassanio is embarrassed because his wife gave this ring to him and asked him to wear it always. But the lawyer insists and, finally, Bassanio reluctantly gives away Portia's ring. Nerissa likewise cleverly manages to get from Gratiano a ring she gave him. The two ladies then hasten back to Belmont to tease their husbands about the rings.

When Bassanio and Gratiano, along with Antonio, return to Belmont, their wives inquire about the missing rings. Portia and Nerissa insist that the men no doubt gave the rings away to two other women. The husbands swear that it is not true, and it is not until Portia and Nerissa have put their husbands through some long, comically agonizing moments of discomfort that they confess that they themselves were the "learned doctor" and the "clerk" to whom the rings were given. Thus all ends happily, as Portia gives Antonio a letter informing him that three of his ships have arrived safely in port.

*The Merchant of Venice* is essentially a play about property: in telling the story of a merchant who treats his own flesh as property to secure a loan, and the moneylender who calls in the debt, the play asks questions about the value of life itself. Throughout the play, tangible objects such as rings and caskets stand in for intangible ideas about love and fidelity. A test where three suitors

must choose between silver, lead, and gold caskets functions to remind audiences that “all that glitters isn’t gold,” and the true value of life has no financial equivalent. However, money plays a significant role for most of the characters, for whom financial security equals independence. Language about penalties, bonds, and forfeitures add to the sense of life reduced to commercial transactions. The fact that the most avaricious, greedy character in the play ends up having lost both his physical wealth as well as his daughter and his religion warn against the dangers of excessive greed. While the play culminates in a trial scene, Portia’s soliloquy suggests that mercy, or forgiveness, is ultimately more important than legal justice.

The major conflict driving the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* takes place between Bassanio, who wants to marry Portia to gain the financial means to pay back his debt to Antonio, and Shylock, who wants revenge on Antonio for lending money without interest and for his anti-Semitic insults. Shylock’s desire for revenge on Antonio implies a deeper desire to defend his humanity and his way of life. During the play’s inciting incident, Bassanio uses Antonio’s credit to secure a loan from Shylock, binding Antonio to Shylock and making their final confrontation inevitable. Though the men separate after this incident, the stakes of their conflict are raised during the rising action of the play. First, Lancelot and then Jessica rob and abandon Shylock in quick succession, fueling his fury. Next, Bassanio wins the chance to marry Portia in the casket game, fulfilling his superficial desires for money and marriage and bringing him close to proving his character by repaying Antonio in money, love, and loyalty. Finally, Antonio’s ships fail to return, giving Shylock has the opportunity to get his revenge and Bassanio the opportunity to prove his character by coming to Antonio’s rescue.

The conflict between Bassanio’s desire to redeem his character by proving himself a loyal friend and Shylock’s desire to defend his humanity by enacting revenge on Antonio comes to a head in the play’s climactic trial scene. Shylock makes the case for his right to collect his bond by arguing that he has the same rights as any other hateful character in Venice. But Portia, disguised as Balthazar, argues that in trying to collect on his loan, Shylock has threatened Antonio’s life, and therefore broken the law. Not only can Shylock not collect the money he loaned, he is stripped of his livelihood and religion, signaling that the world of the play will not accept Shylock’s humanity

or his way of life. Bassanio, Portia, Gratiano, Nerissa, Lorenzo, and Jessica all finish the play happily married and financially secure in Belmont. While the couples in the play end up happy, Shylock's punishment seems neither merciful nor just. Not only is he unable to collect the money he is rightfully owed by Bassanio, he loses the rest of his wealth, his daughter, and his Jewish faith. While Shakespeare's contemporaries would have seen Shylock's conversion to Christianity as a victory for his immortal soul, Shylock's forced conversion is shockingly anti-Semitic and unjust to modern readers.

### **Act I, Scene One**

Antonio, a merchant, is in a melancholic state of mind and unable to find a reason for his depression. His friends Salerio and Solanio attempt to cheer him up by telling him that he is only worried about his ships returning safely to port. Antonio, however, denies that he is worried about his ships and remains depressed. His two friends leave after Bassanio, Graziano and Lorenzo arrive. Graziano and Lorenzo remark that Antonio does not look well before exiting, leaving Bassanio alone with Antonio.

Bassanio informs Antonio that he has been prodigal with his money and that he currently has accumulated substantial debts. Bassanio reveals that he has come up with a plan to pay off his obligations by marrying Portia, a wealthy heiress in Belmont. However, in order to woo Portia, Bassanio needs to borrow enough money so that he can act like a true nobleman. Antonio tells him that all his money is invested in ships at sea, but offers to borrow money for him.

### **Act I, Scene Two**

Portia, the wealthy heiress, discusses her many suitors with her noblewoman Nerissa. She points out the faults that each of them has, often stereotyping each suitor according to the country from which he has arrived. Nerissa, a gentlewoman who works for Portia, asks her if she remembers a soldier who stayed at Belmont several years before. Portia recalls the man, and says, "Yes, yes, it was Bassanio" (1.2.97). Portia's servingman then arrives with news that four of her suitors are leaving, but another, the Prince of Morocco, has arrived.

### **Act I, Scene Three**

Bassanio is engaged in conversation with Shylock, a Jew who makes his living as a moneylender. Bassanio has asked him for a loan of three thousand ducats, a very large sum at the time, for a period of three months. He further tells Shylock that Antonio is to "be bound," meaning that Antonio will be responsible for repaying the loan.

Shylock knows Antonio's reputation well, and agrees to consider the contract. He asks Bassanio if he may speak with Antonio first, and Bassanio invites Shylock to dinner. Shylock responds that he will never eat with a Christian.

Antonio arrives at that moment and Bassanio takes him aside. Shylock addresses the audience and informs them that he despises Antonio. He bears an old grudge against Antonio which is not explained, but Shylock is further upset that Antonio lends out money without charging interest, thereby lowering the amount he is able to charge for lending out his own money. Shylock turns to Antonio and tells him why interest is allowed in the Hebrew faith by quoting a biblical passage in which Jacob receives all the striped lambs from his father-in-law. Antonio asks him if the passage was inserted into the bible to defend interest charges. He states, "Was this inserted to make interest good, / Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?" (1.3.90-91). Shylock replies that, "I cannot tell. I make it breed as fast" (1.3.92).

Antonio is upset that Shylock is considering charging him interest on the loan, and asks Shylock to loan the money without any interest. Shylock tells him that, "I would be friends with you, and have your love" (1.3.133). He offers to seal the bond, "in a merry sport" (1.3.141) without charging interest, but as collateral for the loan demands a pound of Antonio's flesh. Antonio thinks Shylock is only joking about the pound of flesh, and is happy to seal the contract. He remarks that, "The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind" (1.3.174).

## Analysis

The Merchant of Venice, like so many of Shakespeare's plays, opens with a depressed and melancholy character. The depression of Antonio at the beginning, for which he can give no explanation, is much like Antipholus of Syracuse in The Comedy of Errors. Portia, the wealthy Belmont heiress, is likewise a depressed and unhappy character in the opening scenes. The reasons for their melancholy, although never directly expressed, are due to their self-absorption. And as with Antipholus in The Comedy of Errors, it is only by taking a huge risk (or both) that they will be able to overcome their depression. For Portia, this risk taking can be seen in her love for Bassanio, which will require her to risk her entire inheritance in order for her to win him. For Antonio, the risk is even greater; namely a pound of flesh, representing his very life.

Bassanio represents the gambler who cannot lose. He is the sort of character that will risk everything, and having lost everything, will risk what he does not have. Thus Bassanio tells us, "In my schooldays, when I had lost one shaft, / I shot his fellow in the selfsame flight / The selfsame way, with more advised watch, / To find the other forth; and by adventuring both, / I oft found both" (1.1.140-144). He has often been compared to Jason in the Quest for the Golden Fleece, namely a risk-taker.

Portia as a character is an odd mixture of various traits. She is first presented as the ruler of Belmont, clearly in charge of both herself and those around her. However, we soon discover that she is not in charge, indeed it is "the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father" (1.2.21). Portia's reliance on the wishes of her dead father therefore contradicts the image of her as Belmont's ruler. Indeed, like many of the women in Shakespeare's plays, she will be unable to alter the plot around her as long as she is a woman. It is only later in the play, by dressing as Balthasar, a man, that she will finally be able to really command events and manipulate the play. It is necessary to focus on the conflict between the Christians and the Jews throughout this play. Although the twentieth century has altered the way western civilization portrays the Jew in The Merchant of Venice, the compelling character of Shylock still disturbs and entices his audience. Shylock has historically been portrayed as a comic character, and in Shakespeare's day would have dressed quite differently from the other characters in order to distinguish himself from the

Christians. The image of Shylock changed rapidly over the years, first making him a villain in the 1700s, a man to be pitied in 1814, and finally a tragic character in 1879.

Although Shylock is accused of representing much of what the Christians hate, it is through his conflict with Antonio in particular that Shakespeare pokes holes in the accusations of the Christian men. The most common error is to assume that the merchant referred to in the title is in fact Shylock himself. This is not the case, since Shylock is only a moneylender. Indeed, the merchant indicated is Antonio. This confusion surrounding Antonio and Shylock is purposeful, for it shows the audience how the Christians are in many ways as awful as the Jews they mock. It also sets the stage for misinterpretation. For example, Shylock states, "Antonio is a good man" (1.3.11), referring to the fact that Antonio is "good" for the money which Bassanio wishes to borrow. Bassanio takes this statement at face value, and agrees that Antonio is a nice man.

The seriousness of the Christian misunderstanding can be seen when Shylock makes the bond with Antonio:

"This kindness will I show.

Go with me to a notary, seal me there

Your single bond, and, in a merry sport,

If you repay me not on such a day,

In such place, such sum or sums as are

Expressed in the condition, let the forfeit

Be nominated for an equal pound

Of your fair flesh to be cut off and taken

In what part of your body pleaseth me.

Now Antonio repeats the same mistake made by Bassanio, thinking that Shylock is being "kind" when he agrees to loan the money without interest. Antonio states "The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind" (1.3.174). Antonio is so convinced that he will be able to repay his debts that Shylock's request for a pound of his flesh as collateral strikes him as a joke, and therefore is not taken at all seriously.

Shylock's willingness to waive the interest payment brings to light an entirely new set of conflicts within the play. Shakespeare draws on Francis Bacon's statement, "It is against nature, for money to beget money," when he portrays the Christians as unselfish givers of all they have. Shylock defends his taking of interest by quoting the passage where Jacob is given the striped lambs. Antonio immediately rejects this as nonsense, asking, "Was this inserted to make interest good, / Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?" (1.3.90-91). Shylock replies that, "I cannot tell. I make it breed as fast" (1.3.92).

This scene further focuses our attention on the use of sheep imagery in connection to money and breeding. Here Shakespeare plays on the words "use", "usury", and "ewes", all of which will be punned throughout the play. All the sheep imagery is on Shylock's side throughout, for he is fleecing the Christians, breeding the ewes. He therefore mentions Jacob as his defense for taking interest, and we can note later that Shylock's wife is named Leah, the same name that Jacob's first wife had. Shylock is also able to make his money breed like sheep through the charging of interest. On the other hand, the Christians have Jason and the Golden Fleece. This image is used in connection with Bassanio, the risk-taker, who risks everything to gain everything. The same image will figure later with Antonio, who is represented as a wether, a castrated sheep. Thus the concept is reinforced that Antonio does not make his money breed because he refuses to charge interest.

## **Act II, Scene One**

The Prince of Morocco meets with Portia and tells her that he is often considered very handsome on account of his black skin. She tells him that unfortunately she does not have the right to choose the man who will marry her. Instead, her father created three caskets from among which each suitor must choose. Portia warns the Prince that if he chooses the wrong casket, he must swear to never propose marriage to a woman afterwards. The Prince of Morocco agrees to this condition and joins Portia for dinner before attempting to choose.

## **Act II, Scene Two**

Lancelot, referred to as a clown, is the servant to Shylock. He tells the audience that he is thinking about running away from his master, whom he describes as a devil. However, he cannot make up his mind about whether to run away or not because his conscience makes him guilty when he thinks about leaving Shylock.

Lancelot's father, an old man named Gobbo, arrives with a basket. He is nearly completely blind and cannot see Lancelot clearly. Gobbo asks his son which way leads to the Jew's house, meaning Shylock's house. He mentions that he is searching for his son Lancelot. Lancelot decides to have some fun with his father, and so he pretends to know a "Master Lancelot" (a term for a gentleman's son, not a servant). He informs Gobbo that "Master Lancelot" is deceased.

Gobbo is clearly upset by this, and Lancelot kneels down in front of him and asks his father for his blessing. Gobbo at first does not believe that Lancelot is really his son, but then he feels his head and recognizes him.

Lancelot tells his father that he is wasting away serving Shylock and that he will turn into a Jew himself if he stays there much longer. Gobbo has brought a present for Shylock, but Lancelot instead convinces his father to give it to Bassanio, whom Lancelot hopes to have as his new master. Bassanio, coming onto stage at that moment, accepts the gift of doves and tells Lancelot that he may leave Shylock and join his service. He then orders one of the men to get Lancelot a new uniform to wear, and sends Lancelot away.

Graziano arrives and tells Bassanio that he wants to join him on the trip to Belmont, where Bassanio plans to go and woo Portia. Bassanio feels that Graziano is too loud and rude and asks him if he will be able to act more appropriately. Graziano says that he can, and that he will "put on a sober habit" (2.2.171). Bassanio then agrees to take him to Belmont.

### **Act II, Scene Three**

Jessica, the daughter of Shylock, meets with Lancelot and tells him that she will miss him after he leaves to go work for Bassanio. She hands him a letter to take to Lorenzo, who is supposed to be a guest of Bassanio's that night. After Lancelot leaves, Jessica remarks,  
"Alack, what heinous sin is it in me

To be ashamed to be my father's child!

But though I am a daughter to his blood,

I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo,

If thou keep promise I shall end this strife,

Become a Christian and thy loving wife.

Jessica thus informs the audience that she is in love with Lorenzo, a Christian. She intends to meet him soon and run away from her father's house in order to marry Lorenzo.

### **Act II, Scene Four**

Lorenzo, Graziano, Salerio and Solanio are preparing for a masque that night. Lancelot arrives with the letter from Jessica and hands it to Lorenzo. Lorenzo reads it and tells Lancelot to inform Jessica that he will not fail her. Lancelot leaves to bring the news to Jessica, and also to invite Shylock to Bassanio's house for dinner.

After the other two men leave, Lorenzo shows Graziano the letter from Jessica. He tells his friend that he and Jessica plan to steal away from her father's house that night, along with a great deal of her father's gold and jewels.

### **Act II, Scene Five**

Shylock informs Lancelot that he will have to judge for himself whether Bassanio is a better master. He then calls Jessica, hands her the keys to the house, and tells her that he must leave for dinner that evening. Lancelot tells Shylock that there will likely be a masque that night. At this news, Shylock orders Jessica to lock up the house and not look out the windows. He says, "Let not the sound of shallow fopp'ry enter / My sober house" (2.5.34-35).

As Shylock gets ready to depart, Lancelot privately tells Jessica that Lorenzo will come for her that night. She is grateful for the message, and after Shylock leaves she comments that, "I have a father, you a daughter lost" (2.5.55).

### **Act II, Scene Six**

Salerio and Graziano are part of the masquers partying through the street of Venice. They stop and wait for Lorenzo, who has asked them to meet him at a certain spot. Lorenzo arrives and thanks them for their patience. He then calls out to Jessica, who appears in the window of Shylock's house dressed as a man. She throws out a casket to Lorenzo filled with much of her father's gold and



jewels. Jessica then goes back inside and steals even more ducats (golden coins) before joining the men on the street.

Everyone departs except for Bassanio, who unexpectedly meets Antonio. Antonio tells him to get to the ship heading for Belmont, because the wind has started blowing the right way and the ship is ready to depart.

## **Act II, Scene Seven**

The Prince of Morocco is brought into a room containing three caskets, gold, silver and lead. Portia tells him to make his choice. The Prince reads the inscriptions on all the caskets. Gold reads: "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire" (2.7.5). The silver casket has, "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves" (2.7.7). Finally, the dull lead casket bears the inscription, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath" (2.7.9).

Portia tells the Prince that the correct casket, or the one that will allow him to marry her, contains a miniature picture of her likeness. The Prince looks over all the inscriptions a second time, and decides that lead is too threatening and not worth risking anything for. He also spurns the silver, which he feels is too base a metal to hold such a beautiful woman as Portia. The Prince therefore chooses gold.

Portia hands him the key, and he opens the casket to reveal a golden skull. The skull holds a written scroll that poetically indicates that he chose superficially. The Prince departs after a hasty farewell. Portia watches him go, and remarks, "A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go. / Let all of his complexion choose me so" (2.7.78-79).

## **Act II, Scene Eight**

Salerio and Solanio meet in the street and discuss the hasty departure of Bassanio and Graziano for Belmont. They further tell the audience that Shylock returned home and discovered his daughter had run away with Lorenzo. Shylock then woke up the Duke of Venice and tried to stop Bassanio's ship, which had already set sail. Antonio assured Shylock that Jessica was not on board the ship, but rather had been seen in a gondola with Lorenzo. However, Shylock continues to blame Antonio for the loss of his daughter and his money.

Solanio informs Salerio that Shylock was later seen in the streets crying,

BLOCKQUOTE"My daughter! O, my ducats! O, my daughter!

Fled with a Christian! O, my Christian ducats!

Justice! The law! My ducats and my daughter!

A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,"]

Solanio is worried about Antonio, whom he says had better repay his bond with Shylock on time, because Shylock is furious about losing his daughter and his money and blames Antonio for it. Salerio indicates that a Frenchman mentioned a Venetian vessel had sunk in the English Channel the day before. Both men hope that it is not Antonio's ship.

## Act II, Scene Nine

The Prince of Aragon arrives in Belmont and decides to choose from among the three caskets. Portia takes him into the room and makes him recite the oath never to reveal which casket he chooses, and further to promise never to marry should he choose the incorrect casket. The Prince of Aragon agrees and starts to read the inscriptions.

He rejects lead because of the ominous warning, and thinks that gold refers to the foolish populace. Instead he chooses silver which indicates he will receive what he deserves. The Prince takes the key and opens the casket to reveal a "blinking idiot" (2.9.53). The scroll indicates that those who are self-loving deserve to be called idiots, and would not make good husbands for Portia. The Prince is upset by his choice, but is forced to leave.

Portia is happy that the Prince has chosen the wrong casket. Her messenger comes into the room at that moment and informs her that a young Venetian has just arrived. Portia goes to see who it is, while Nerissa secretly wishes that it might be Bassanio.

## Analysis

The virtue of marriage is very important for Shakespeare, who often ends his comedies with multiple marriages to signify a happy solution to many of the problems the characters have faced. Marriage is thus a way of achieving inclusion for Shakespeare, and it is notable that the characters which remain unmarried are often isolated and removed from the society, specifically Antonio and Shylock within this play. Marriage also represents a way to overcome difficulties; for Bassanio it will remove his debt, for Portia it will free her from her father's will and for Jessica it will allow her to escape her father.

Given this view of marriage, the choice of the caskets presents a horrifying risk for many of the participants, namely the threat that if they choose wrong casket they must swear to never propose marriage to a woman afterwards. In a sense, the failure to marry is as good as being castrated. In fact, Shakespeare creates this very analogy throughout The Merchant of Venice and ties it to the ability to make money breed. Thus in the first act Shylock mentions that he makes his money breed as fast as ewes and lambs. Antonio will further this metaphor in the final act, when he remarks that he is like a wether, or a castrated lamb, and thus unable to breed. For the suitors to Portia, then, swearing to never wed puts them on the same level as Antonio. By agreeing to not marry, they themselves become castrated.

Lancelot the clown is one of the more interesting characters. His treatment of his father is awful, considering that his father is mostly blind and has brought a present to his son. The entire scene mimics the biblical story of Jacob and Esau, though. The bible tells how Jacob tricked his father into giving him the inheritance by wearing wool so his father would think he was Esau. Lancelot does the same thing, by bending down and making his father "know" him by feeling his head.

Shylock's character starts to emerge very strongly within this act. We see him now not only as a moneylender demanding interest, but also as a villain. He shows a marked aversion to fun, demanding that Jessica lock the door and close the windows when he finds out there will be a masque that night. However, contrary to his statement in the first act, Shylock leaves his house to enjoy a dinner with Bassanio. Much of this act therefore develops the negative aspects of Shylock character.

However, the Christian faults are also exposed within this act. The faithlessness of Jessica has been an issue of discussion for many centuries, with the debate raging over whether she is justified in leaving her father. The crucial difficulty is that she does not merely run away, but she insists on stealing large amounts of her father's jewels and gold. Thus when Graziano remarks, "Now, by my hood, a gentile, and no Jew" (2.6.51), we can only see it as ironic. Ironic because she is stealing her father's money, so he is essentially implying Christians are thieves.

Jessica's actions also leave unanswered the question of why she is locked up in her father's home. The answer to this comes from an understanding of the relationship between money and breeding. Whereas in the beginning Antonio is impotent in the sense that his money does not breed, Shylock is not. Shylock further has the advantage of having a daughter. Since the Jewish lineage is passed down via the maternal line, Jessica represents a way for Shylock's family line to continue. Thus, hoarding Jessica and his gold is Shylock's way of guaranteeing his successful breeding. In fact, Solanio makes this connection between daughter and money abundantly clear when he tells us that Shylock ran through the street of Venice crying:

"My daughter! O, my ducats! O, my daughter!

Fled with a Christian! O, my Christian ducats!

Justice! The law! My ducats and my daughter!

A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,"

Thus for Shylock the simultaneous loss of his daughter and his money is in a sense the loss of his fertility.

Not only does her conversion to Christianity destroy Shylock's family line, it also makes him impotent in a metaphorical sense. Jessica takes two stones with her, which represent the "testicles" of Shylock, since stone was often used to mean testicle. Thus after her theft, Shylock joins Antonio in impotence, having lost his ability to breed. Indeed, the escape of Jessica marks the turning point of Shylock's fortunes, which will lead to his eventual destruction.

It is important that Jessica escapes not dressed as herself, but as a man. In fact, there is never a scene on the Venetian streets in which a woman is present. The only way a woman can walk through the street of Venice is to dress as a man, a fact that will be reinforced when Portia pretends to be Balthasar and dresses as a man before entering Venice. This is one of the primary differences between the worlds of Venice and Belmont.

The three caskets each bear inscriptions that tell us about the personalities of the characters who pick them. Gold reads: "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire" (2.7.5). The silver casket has, "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves" (2.7.7). Finally, the dull lead casket bears the inscription, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath" (2.7.9). The Prince of Morocco first chooses gold and gets a death skull. The Prince of Aragon receives the picture of an idiot. This is symbolic, for he is an old man and hence is an idiot for thinking himself deserving of a young woman.

One of the most debated lines is when Portia sends the Prince of Morocco away by saying, "A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go. / Let all of his complexion choose me so" (2.7.78-79). This

provincial comment stands in contrast with her upbringing and nobility. However, what soon becomes clear is that Portia is a very narrow character in her sense of friends. She chooses Bassanio over the more cosmopolitan suitors because he represents her Christian and Venetian world. Bassanio wins her because of the same thing, namely he alone of the suitors possesses the local characteristics necessary to interpret which casket to choose.

Unlike Portia and Bassanio, Jessica never has to be chosen by a casket. Instead, she tosses her casket out of the window for Lorenzo to catch. Thus her relationship, unlike that of Portia and Bassanio, has no test to make sure it is a good relationship. This lack of a test will create problems later, foreshadowed by Shakespeare when Lorenzo and Jessica compare themselves to many famous failed romances.

The Merchant of Venice is largely a play about interpretation. The suitors to Portia are condemned to sterility because they misread the caskets. Shylock's interpretation of the contract in 1.3 takes the "pound of flesh" seriously and literally, whereas Antonio thinks Shylock is being "kind." Later in the final scene, the outcome of the play - whether it becomes a comedic ending or a tragic one, will rest on Portia's interpretation of the law. Thus the play creates its drama and its plot through the constant interpretation of events and words. This crucial aspect is frequently used by Shakespeare in his remaining comedies, and it forms a crucial part of the plot in Much Ado About Nothing.

### **Act III, Scene One**

Solanio and Salerio discuss the rumor that Antonio has lost yet a second ship. Shylock enters and complains that both Solanio and Salerio had something to do with his daughter's flight. They do not deny it, but instead ask Shylock if he has heard about Antonio's losses.

Shylock tells them that Antonio should "look to his bond" and make sure he repays the money, or else Shylock is planning on taking his pound of flesh. Shylock is furious with Antonio, whom he blames for the loss of Jessica, and also bears an older grudge against the man. He then delivers his famous soliloquy, "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions..." (3.1.49-50). The speech concludes with Shylock saying that he will be revenged for all the times he has been treated badly by Christians.

One of Antonio's servants arrives and bids Solanio and Salerio to go to Antonio's house. They leave, and Tubal, another Jew, arrives to speak with Shylock. Tubal has been in Genoa, where he tried to locate Jessica. He tells Shylock that Jessica had been in the city, and had spent over eighty ducats while there. She had also traded a turquoise ring for a monkey, a ring which Shylock regrets losing because he had received it from his wife Leah. However, Tubal also brings Shylock news that Antonio has lost yet a third ship, and is almost certain to go bankrupt in the near future. Shylock is excited by this news, since he has decided that he would rather exact revenge on Antonio than receive his three thousand ducats back.

### **Act III, Scene Two**

Portia tells Bassanio that she wants him to wait a month or two before choosing from the caskets so that she may be guaranteed his company for a while longer. Bassanio tells her that he is desperate to choose, and feels like he is being tortured the longer he waits. Portia finally agrees to take him into the room with the caskets.

Portia orders music to be played for Bassanio, and one of her servants starts to sing a song in which the rhymes all rhyme with lead. Bassanio speaks directly to the audience and tells them that too many things are gilded and coated with ornaments. He therefore decides to do away with gold, comparing it to Midas' greed. The silver casket he also ignores, saying it resembles money and is therefore too common. He thus chooses the lead casket and finds Portia's picture inside.

Bassanio is overjoyed by the picture and remarks that it is a beautiful "counterfeit". He then takes the scroll and reads it: "You that choose not by the view / Chance as fair and choose as true" (3.2.131-132). Bassanio goes over to Portia with the note, and she offers him everything she owns, including herself. Portia then hands Bassanio a ring as a token of her love and commitment and tells him never to lose it. He promises, telling her that if he ever stops wearing the ring it will be because he is dead.

Graziano then informs them that he would like to be married as well. He tells Bassanio and Portia that he and Nerissa (the chambermaid to Portia) are in love. Bassanio is thrilled for his friend and agrees to let them get married as well.

Jessica, Lorenzo and Salerio arrive at Belmont. Bassanio is happy to see all of them, but Salerio then hands him a letter from Antonio. Bassanio turns pale at the news that Antonio has lost his fortune and his ships, and he asks Salerio if it is true that all of Antonio's ventures have failed. Salerio tells him it is true, and that Shylock is so excited about getting his pound of flesh that even if Antonio could repay him he would likely refuse it.

Portia asks what amount of money Antonio owes to Shylock, and then orders Bassanio to return to Venice and offer Shylock six thousand ducats to destroy the contract. She informs Bassanio and Graziano that she and Nerissa will live like widows in their absence. They all agree to get married first and then go straight to Venice to rescue Antonio.

### **Act III, Scene Three**

Shylock has come to watch Antonio be taken away by a jailer. Antonio pleads with Shylock to listen to him, but Shylock says, "I have sworn an oath that I will have my bond," (3.3.4) and refuses to listen to any of the pleas for mercy. After Shylock departs, Antonio tells Solanio that Shylock hates him because he used to loan money to men who were in debt to Shylock, thus preventing Shylock from collecting the forfeiture. Antonio is prepared to pay his "bloody creditor" the next day in court, but prays that Bassanio will arrive in time to watch him die.

### **Act III, Scene Four**

Portia and Nerissa, worried about their new husbands, tell Lorenzo that they are going to stay at a local monastery for a few days in order to pray. After Lorenzo and Jessica leave, Portia sends her servant Balthasar to her cousin Doctor Bellario with instructions that Balthasar should bring anything Bellario gives him to Venice. Portia then informs Nerissa that they are going to dress up as men and go to Venice in order to help their husbands.

### **Act III, Scene Five**

Lancelot and Jessica are in an argument over whether she can be saved by God since she was born a Jew. Lancelot tells her that since both her parents are Jews, she is damned. She protests that she can be saved once she becomes a Christian because her husband Lorenzo is a Christian. Lancelot

then makes a joke, and says that Lorenzo is a bad man because by converting all the Jews he is raising the price of pork (since Jews do not eat pork, but Christians do). Lorenzo then arrives and orders Lancelot to go inside and prepare the table for dinner. He and Jessica praise Portia for being such a wonderful hostess before entering the house to get their dinner.

## Analysis

By far the most interpreted and critiqued section of this act is Shylock's famous speech:

"Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooked by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction."

This passage has been interpreted in many ways, from comedic to villainous to tragic. In the twentieth century, it has almost always taken on a tragic character as a result of WWII. Shylock speaks the lines to defend his resolution to take a pound of Antonio's flesh. However, the passage is difficult to interpret because of Shylock's position in the society. As a Jew, he could not have been on the street screaming for revenge, since this would only lead to more persecution. Thus, one interpretation has taken the lines to be comic, in the sense of using comedy as a mask to hide fear. Like a child who makes jokes out of insecurity, Shylock tries to defend his right to exact the pound of flesh.

Bassanio's choosing from the caskets has also generated controversy. Portia first begs Bassanio to wait at least a month, hoping to spend time with him before he chooses among the caskets. When he refuses to wait, she plays music for him. Some scholars have noted that each of the rhymes of the song rhyme with lead, thus providing a subconscious hint. What is interesting is that Bassanio differs from the other suitors in not reading the inscriptions. Thus he is forced to choose with his eyes alone, saying, "Therefore, thou gaudy gold, / hard food for Midas, I will none of thee. / Nor none of thee, thou pale and common drudge / Tween man and man" (3.2.100-103). He refers to the fact that gold denotes greed, and thus is worthless as it was for Midas who could not even eat his food because it turned to gold on him. Silver represents money, or coins, passing between men and therefore Bassanio rejects it as well. The lead casket symbolizes his penchant for risk-taking, and indeed the scroll reads as much, "must hazard all he has." Bassanio is an insider, a risk-taker who likes the threat that lead poses, and a man who espouses the Christian ideal of "the last shall be first."

The fact that Bassanio is able to choose the casket without reading the inscription is in some sense born out by the scroll. The scroll says, "You that choose not by the view / Chance as fair and choose as true" (3.2.131-132). However, there is a converse to Bassanio's risk-taking, namely Portia. Portia takes her own risk each time suitor chooses, and is forced to give Bassanio all that she has. "Myself and what is mine is now to you and what is yours converted" (3.2.166). She does not have a choice in this matter, since it is ordained by her dead father's will.

Portia further gives Bassanio a ring, making him promise to wear it forever. This is an inversion of the marriage ceremony, and is her way of testing Bassanio's fidelity and love. In Shakespeare's time it was more often the women who were accused of infidelity, tricking their husbands. Portia cleverly reverses this by making Bassanio swear to keep the faith with her.

The imagery of sheep emerges again in this act, this time in a Christian setting rather than a Jewish one. Graziano says, "We are the Jasons; we have won the fleece" (3.2.240). This Christian take on the sheep imagery is interesting because it is so different from Shylock's interpretation. Rather than make money breed, the Christians prefer to risk everything in search of gaining everything.

Bassanio requires this interpretation, he is after all a gentleman, and therefore considers monetary issues to be beneath him. This is in opposition even to Antonio, who still regards money as a necessity. Bassanio prefers instead to rely on his breeding for success. He tells Portia, "I freely told you all the wealth I had / Ran in my veins: I was a gentleman;" (3.2.253-254).

There has been a great deal of scholarly interest in the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio. Antonio's comments and undeniable willingness to support Bassanio have led many to conclude that there is a homoerotic undercurrent to their relationship. Indeed, Antonio's desire at the end is not to keep his life but rather that, "Pray God Bassanio come / To see me pay his debt, and then I care not" (3.3.35-36). Although it may stretch the plot to argue for a homosexual relationship between the two men, what cannot be disregarded is the way in which Portia carefully removes Antonio from the plot at the end. This will be seen later in the play, where she is the one to free him from the contract, and is later the person to inform him about his ships. Thus any relationship between Antonio and Bassanio is trumped by the marriage with Portia, who will further draw Bassanio to her by playing a ring trick on him (see acts four and five).

The fact that women never explicitly appear in Venice is reinforced in this act as well. Portia and Nerissa must first pretend to go to a monastery in order to escape from Belmont, where Lorenzo and Jessica are staying. Portia also contrives to dress them as men in order to go to Venice. She further uses her kinship with Doctor Bellario to give her credibility and allow her to control the actions in the upcoming scenes. However, what can never be denied is the fact that Portia still relies on a man for her credibility, and requires a man's dress in order to alter events in the play.

#### **Act IV, Scene One**

Antonio is brought before the Duke and the magnificoes of Venice to stand trial for failing to pay off his obligation to Shylock. The Duke is upset about the penalty, a pound of Antonio's flesh, but cannot find any lawful way of freeing Antonio from his bond. Shylock enters the court and the Duke tells him that all of the men gathered there expect him to pardon Antonio and forgive the debt.

Shylock replies that he has already sworn by his Sabbath that he will take his pound of flesh from Antonio. He is unable to provide a good reason for wanting to punish Antonio in this manner, other than to say, "So can I give no reason, nor I will not, / More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing / I bear Antonio" (4.1.58-60).

Bassanio then comes forward and offers Shylock the six thousand ducats as repayment for the loan. Shylock tells him that even if there were six times as much money offered to him, he would not take it. The Duke asks Shylock, "How shalt thou hope for mercy, rend'ring none?" (4.1.87).

Shylock responds that he is doing nothing wrong, and compares his contract with Antonio to the Christian slave trade. He tells the Duke that he does not demand that the Christians should free their slaves, and therefore the Christians should not demand that he free Antonio.

The Duke threatens to dismiss the court without settling the suit brought by Shylock if Doctor Bellario fails to arrive. Salerio tells him that a messenger has just come from Bellario, and Nerissa enters dressed as a man and informs the Duke that Bellario has sent a letter to him. Shylock whets his knife on his shoe, confident that he will receive his pound of flesh.

The letter from Bellario recommends a young and educated doctor to arbitrate the case. The Duke asks where the young doctor is, and Nerissa tells him that he is waiting outside to be admitted into the court. The Duke orders him to be brought in, and Portia enters dressed as a man, pretending to be a doctor named Balthasar.

Portia tells the Duke that she has thoroughly studied the case and then asks, "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" (4.1.169). Antonio and Shylock both step forward, and Portia asks Antonio if he confesses to signing the contract. He does, and Portia then says that Shylock therefore must be merciful. She delivers a short speech on mercy, but Shylock ignores it and demands the contract be fulfilled. Portia then asks if no one has been able to repay the amount, but since Shylock has refused the money there is nothing she can do to make him take it. She comments that she must therefore side with Shylock.

Shylock, impressed that Portia is supporting his case, says, "A Daniel come to judgment, yea, a Daniel!" (4.1.218). Portia rules that Shylock has the right to claim a pound of flesh from next to Antonio's heart according to the bond. Antonio's bosom is laid bare and Shylock gets ready to cut. Portia asks him if he has a surgeon ready to stop the bleeding once he has taken his pound of flesh. Shylock says, "I cannot find it. 'Tis not in the bond" (4.1.257).

Just as Shylock is about to start cutting again, Portia says that the bond does not give him permission to shed Antonio's blood. The laws of Venice are such that if any Venetian's blood is shed, all the goods and lands of the perpetrator may be confiscated by the state. Shylock realizes that he cannot cut the flesh without drawing blood, and instead agrees to take the money instead. However, Portia is not willing to back down and instead only gives him the pound of flesh, further saying that if he takes a tiny bit more or less he will be put to death himself. Shylock, unable to comply with this stipulation, decides to withdraw his case.

Portia tells Shylock to remain in the court. She says that Venice has a further law which says that if any foreigner tries to kill a Venetian, the foreigner will have half of his property go to the Venetian against whom he plotted, and the state will receive the other half. In addition, the life of the foreigner will be in the hands of the Duke, who may decide to do whatever he wants to. Shylock is forced to kneel on the ground before the court, but the Duke pardons his life before he can beg for mercy.

Shylock instead asks the Duke to kill him, saying, "Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that. / You take my house when you do take the prop / That doth sustain my house; you take my life / When you do take the means whereby I live" (4.1.369-373). Antonio intervenes on Shylock's behalf, and asks the Duke to allow Shylock to keep half of his wealth. He further offers to take care of the half he was awarded as a form of inheritance for Jessica and Lorenzo. The only requirements Antonio puts on his offer are that Shylock must convert and become a Christian, and further that he must give everything he owns to Lorenzo upon his death.



Shylock, wretched and having lost everything he owns, tells the court that he is content to accept these conditions. The Duke leaves and tells Antonio to thank the young doctor who has saved his life. Bassanio and Graziano go to Portia and thank her profusely, and Bassanio offers the young doctor anything he wants. Portia decides to test her husband's trustworthiness, and asks him for the engagement ring, the ring which she made him vow never to part with. He refuses, and Portia and Nerissa leave. However, at Antonio's urging, Bassanio takes off the ring and gives it to Graziano, telling him to take it to Portia and invite her to dinner that night at Antonio's.

## **Act IV, Scene Two**

Portia gives Nerissa the deed by which Shylock will pass his inheritance to Lorenzo. She tells Nerissa to take it to Shylock's house and make him sign it. At the moment Graziano catches up with the two women and gives the ring to Portia. She is surprised that Bassanio parted with it after all, and Nerissa decides to test Graziano in the same way. Nerissa takes the deed and asks Graziano to show her the way to Shylock's house.

## **Analysis**

Shylock's reasons for wanting to kill Antonio come across as very arbitrary and obscure. He compares his desire to kill Antonio with "Some men there are love not a gaping pig, / Some that are mad if they behold a cat" (4.1.46-47). He follows this with the statement, "So can I give no reason, nor I will not, / More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing / I bear Antonio" (4.1.58-60). This inability on Shylock's part to give a concrete answer as to why he wants to kill Antonio can only be explained by understanding the doubling between Shylock and Antonio.

This doubling of Shylock and Antonio takes place through the way they use money and family. Antonio starts the play unable to make his money breed because he takes no interest. He further has no wife or children and therefore emerges as an impotent character. Antonio reveals in Act Four what sort of person he represents: "I am a tainted wether of the flock" (4.1.113). The "wether" is a castrated male sheep, thus directly stating the fact that Antonio is unable to breed. Shylock starts the play on the opposite extreme, able to make his money breed with interest and his family breed through Jessica. However, it is Antonio who convinces him to not take interest on this particular bond, and it is later Antonio whom Shylock accuses of allowing Jessica to escape. Thus for Shylock, Antonio represents the man who made him impotent as well. His hatred towards Antonio can thereby be explained. It is further irony that in this act Antonio makes Shylock convert to Christianity, thus removing even that distinction between the two men. In essence, the destroyed Shylock at the end of the play is very similar to the melancholy Antonio in the beginning.

Portia adds to this sense of doubling when she arrives in the court. She asks, "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" (4.1.169). Indeed, given the confusion so many people have with the title, it is often this very question which is asked. Scholars have tried to attribute her question to blind justice, arguing that Portia does not want to show any favorites. However, on an Elizabethan stage she would be able to recognize Shylock immediately from his distinctive dress.

The essence of doubling is reinforced even more with the double exclusion of the two men at the end of the play. Antonio, having received half of Shylock's wealth, essentially takes over for Shylock by using Shylock's money. Scholars have debated about the nature of the "merry bond" between Shylock and Antonio. Some have suggested Shylock meant to circumcise Antonio, others

think he meant to make Antonio take over his place. The fact that Shylock accepts a Christian condition of taking no interest is supposedly offset by the fact that if Shylock wins, Antonio must act Jewish.

Another interesting interpretation deals with why Antonio must stand trial at all. In the Bible Paul said that Jewishness is an internal condition, not external. This implies that Shylock is Jewish not because he was born that way, but because he acts that way. Thus Antonio's mistreatment of Shylock violates this explanation of Jewishness by despising Shylock because of his external features. It is this sin for which Antonio is judged.

Throughout this play there is also the concept of the scapegoat. The scapegoat was used as a way of purging a town of its sins by heaping them onto the unfortunate animal instead. The town would drive one goat out of town and sacrifice another. Both men fit this description in The Merchant of Venice, with Shylock clearly driven out of society and Antonio representing the goat about to be sacrificed.

One of the great ironies of this play is where Shylock calls Portia, "A Daniel come to judgment, yea, a Daniel!" (4.1.218). Daniel was the biblical judge of Susanna, a woman accused of in chastity by the Elders. The story is famous because Daniel rules in Susanna's favor, thus rescuing her. In addition to freeing her, he then further convicts the Elders. Shylock's mistake is that he is premature in calling Portia a Daniel, because he is the one who represents the Elders, and Antonio signifies Susanna. This inversion comes only a few lines later, when Portia not only frees Antonio, but convicts Shylock of attempted murder.

The relationship between Antonio and Bassanio comes to the forefront in this section. Antonio can literally be seen as a lover of Bassanio, willing to die for him (4.1.260-274). This creates the conflict between Portia and Antonio, a conflict she is willing to test by demanding that Bassanio give her his ring. The fact that Bassanio parts with the ring for Antonio's sake, as does Graziano, implies that Bassanio chooses Antonio over Portia. This of course is unacceptable, as is seen in the next act where Portia severely chastises Bassanio for loving a man more than he loves her.

The rings have a further meaning though. They are given by Bassanio and Graziano as a token of respect and friendship to people they deem to be men. Thus the ultimate symbolism is that the rings are given to friends who are also their wives. This fusion of friendship and marriage is an unusual one, and serves to strengthen the relationship between the couples.

## **Act V, Scene One**

Lorenzo and Jessica, still at Belmont, sit outside and enjoy the night. They compare the night to the stories of Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, and Dido and Aeneas, and then extend the analogy to their own love affair. They are interrupted by Stefano, who tells them that Portia is returning home with Nerissa. Lancelot then arrives and informs Lorenzo that Bassanio will also be back by morning. Both Lorenzo and Jessica return to the house and listen to music.

Portia and Nerissa, dressed as themselves again, return home and enter the building. Lorenzo recognizes Portia's voice and comes to greet her. She orders the servants to pretend as if she had never left, and asks Lorenzo and Jessica to do the same. Soon thereafter Bassanio, Graziano and Antonio arrive.

Nerissa demands that Graziano show her the ring he gave away to Portia's "clerk" in Venice. They start to argue over it, with Graziano defending his action as a form of kindness for Antonio. Portia overhears them and pretends to "discover" what happened. She then demands that Bassanio show her his ring, which he of course cannot do. Portia and Nerissa then berate their husbands for giving away the rings, and even tell them that they would prefer to sleep with the doctor and his clerk rather than with their unfaithful husbands.

Antonio offers his assurance that neither Bassanio nor Graziano will ever give away their wives' gifts again. Portia thanks him and asks him to give Bassanio another ring to keep. Bassanio looks at the ring and recognizes it as being the same ring he gave away. Portia then tells him that the doctor came back to Belmont and slept with her. Bassanio is amazed and does not know how to respond.

Portia finally clears up the confusion by informing Bassanio that she and Nerissa were the doctor and the clerk. She further has good news for Antonio, namely a letter that indicates that three of his ships arrived in port safely. Nerissa then hands Lorenzo the deed from Shylock in which he inherits everything after Shylock dies. The play ends with Graziano promising to forever keep Nerissa's ring safe.

## **Analysis**

One of the most ridiculous moments in this act involves Lorenzo and Jessica, who compare their love with the three disastrous love stories. They invoke Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, and Dido and Aeneas as their models. This is ironic in the highest degree because all the invoked lovers are failures. For example, Pyramus and Thisbe commit suicide, and Dido kills herself when Aeneas leaves her. This harkens back to the ease with which Jessica handed over the casket in the previous acts. Their love never underwent any form of test, either with the casket, or with the rings, which Jessica apparently trades for a monkey (3.1). Thus they in a sense condemn their love to failure like those of the failed lovers.

Much of this scene involves Portia and Nerissa teaching their husbands the value of the marriage. The gifts of the rings serve to represent the sanctity and holy promise of the marriage. Thus, for Bassanio and Graziano to give away the rings is a violation of their marriage contract, a sign that they love Antonio more than their wives. Since this cannot be allowed, Portia uses her ring trick to force Bassanio to give up Antonio. The joke that Portia creates is when she says, "I'll have that doctor for my bedfellow" (5.1.232), thus implying that Bassanio needs to realize the ring is given to him alone, and that giving it away violates the relationship implicit in their marriage contract.

The twinning and oppositeness of Antonio and Shylock was remarked on earlier in the analysis. This same twinning and oppositeness exists between Belmont and Venice. Belmont represents music and leisure, Venice signifies money and laws. However, as Belmont is of course built upon the money from Venice, it depends on gold and inheritance. This is seen most clearly when the deed from Shylock is handed to Lorenzo, which is similar to the way Portia derives her wealth in Belmont from a dead father's will. However, the luxury of Belmont is not necessarily considered positive. Venice produces merchants such as Antonio, whereas Belmont produces Lorenzo, a lazy beggar.

The three pairs of lovers represent the comic ending. But what should be a happy ending is violated and broken by Antonio and Shylock. Both men remain outsiders at the end of the play, alone and removed from the happy luxury of Belmont. Both outsiders also have been emasculated by the end. Shylock via the loss of his money and his daughter, Antonio by losing Bassanio to Portia. The lowest level of Antonio's defeat is when Portia hands him his money and ships at the end, essentially telling him to return to Venice and forget about Bassanio.