

SUMMARY OF *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*



Act I

In the first lines of *The Merchant of Venice*, even before he binds himself to Shylock for Bassanio's sake, Antonio is already troubled. "In sooth," he complains,

I know not why I am so sad:
It wearies me; you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn;
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me,
That I have much ado to know myself.

(I, i, 1–7)

He is sad, weary, does not recognize himself, and does not know why. Salerio and Solanio, two of the young Venetian gallants who gather around him, attempting to cheer and comfort him, suggest that the cause of his melancholy is not obscure. His great wealth is in transport on the high sea: His ships are at risk from storm, piracy, and shipwreck. But Antonio rejects their explanation. His merchandise is not all on one ship but on many; the ships are not all traveling together; not all of his fortune is tied up in this year's commerce. He is not bothered by external circumstance, he says. His trouble's source is within.

Antonio may not know why he is melancholy, but his conversation with Bassanio makes the cause clear. When they meet, Bassanio does not introduce the subject of going to Belmont to seek Portia in marriage. Antonio, however, does:

Well, tell me now what lady is the same
To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage,
That you to-day promised to tell me of?

(I, i, 119–121)

Such a question, of course, is a setup, allowing Bassanio to narrate essential expository material. Bassanio has squandered money he has borrowed from Antonio through living lavishly. Unable to pay that money back, he wants to borrow another 3,000 ducats so that he can equip himself to sail in style to Belmont to woo Portia, heiress to a great fortune. But this question also reveals to the audience what is hidden from Antonio. It is apparent that he has had a previous conversation with Bassanio, before his confession of malaise, during which Bassanio told him of his desire to woo a “lady.” If the cause of his (Antonio’s) low spirit is not anxiety about losing his merchandise to the “roaring waters,” “enrobed,” like a seductive woman “with [his] silks,” might it be anxiety about losing Bassanio to a wife?

With lavish declarations of love Antonio agrees to lend Bassanio the money, promising, “My purse, my person, my extremest means, / Lie all unlock’d to your occasions.” He continues:

You know me well, and herein spend but time
 To wind about my love with circumstance;
 And out of doubt you do me now more wrong
 In making question of my uttermost
 Than if you had made waste of all I have.

No doubt Antonio means what he says, but since, by his own admission, he has “much ado to know myself,” it is fair to suggest that he may not clearly know the motive of his generosity: the wish to secure Bassanio to himself by making himself essential to him. He can keep his hold fast even in an enterprise, the courtship of a wife, which threatens to loosen that hold, if he can be essential to that enterprise. Considering the bond, moreover, to which he will commit himself for Bassanio, the words “Than if you had made waste of all I have” are decidedly ominous. Antonio does not, however, have 3,000 ducats—his ventures are at sea. He instructs Bassanio, therefore, to ask around the Rialto and find a moneylender from whom he can, using Antonio’s credit, raise the sum. Thus, in the attempt to bind Bassanio to himself, Antonio will bind himself to Shylock, and Portia, to protect her marriage bond with Bassanio, will need to find the ways to undo both those other bonds.

Scene 2 moves from Venice to Belmont and introduces Portia, whose first words echo Antonio’s first words. “By my troth, Nerissa,” she says, “my little body is aware of this great world.” There is something she and Antonio share, something they have in common, something that makes them alike—the desire to possess Bassanio. Although Antonio is at a loss to know the cause of his sadness, it is not difficult for Portia—with the help of Nerissa, a wiser companion than Solanio and Salerio—to discover the source of her malaise and, by extension, to give a hint at the source of Antonio’s. “If your miseries were in the same abundance,” Nerissa says, almost chiding her mistress for her

melancholy, “as your good fortunes are,” then there would be cause to complain. But Nerissa’s second thought is deeper: Perhaps Portia is “sick” because she has “too much.” Unlike Antonio, who rejects his friends’ suggestion, Portia confirms Nerissa’s observation. She has a wealth of young energy which she cannot venture, as much as she wishes to, but which still churns within her: “The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o’er a cold decree; such a hare is madness the youth to skip o’er the meshes.” She is overripe with desire and wishes to give herself in marriage. This pulsing desire is not to be satisfied according to her own will, however, but according to the conditions established in her dead father’s will.

Before he died, Portia’s father had stipulated a test for her suitors. To win her, the successful suitor must choose the one of three caskets that contains her portrait. One casket represents gold, one silver, and one lead. Unsuccessful suitors must quit Belmont and live out their days unmarried. From all over the world suitors come, but none Portia desires. She quickens only when shrewd Nerissa reminds her of Bassanio, who visited Belmont once when her father was still alive.

Scene 3 introduces Shylock and the host of difficulties attendant upon his being a Jew, a moneylender, and, in the eyes of everyone else in the play, the villain of the piece. He is drawn according to a stereotype and he represents that stereotype. But Shakespeare provides him with an interiority which, although it does not allow him to transcend the stereotype, presents him as an actual man *alive* within it, not merely a type who can sink beneath it. Still, he is more of a stereotype than Othello, who does not stand for all Moors, not even to the other characters in *Othello*. Othello represents Othello, a man tormented by the fact of his blackness. Shylock, in contrast, represents a type. Despite how subtly his character is drawn, and despite the fact that another Jew, Tubal, appears briefly, as if to ensure that Shylock is one among many rather than a representative of all, Shylock still represents Jews and Jewishness. (His daughter, Jessica, is presented as an anomaly, the exception that proves the rule.) Like Fagin in Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, Shylock can be used to confirm anti-Semitic conceptions of Jews. Nevertheless, Shylock is not presented as motivelessly malignant, nor Antonio as quite saintly in his Christianity. Shylock is made the motive for Antonio’s outbreaks of nastiness, and Antonio’s ungenerous ill-treatment of Shylock is presented as the cause of Shylock’s desire for revenge. As powerful an imagined character as Shylock is, the play is not necessarily about him or about the nature of Jews. He is arguably a plot device in a larger scheme. *The Merchant of Venice* is about how Portia secures her husband’s faith—not his religious faith but his matrimonial faith—which she raises to the level of religious devotion.

That Shylock becomes an actual threat to Antonio rather than a mere annoyance is the result of the bond Antonio agrees to for Bassanio’s sake, in order to finance his trip to Belmont to woo Portia. Paradoxically, being endangered

by Shylock, Antonio becomes a source of threat to Portia. After Bassanio has won her, and after she has overcome Shylock's hold on Antonio, Portia will have to lessen the strength of Antonio's hold on Bassanio in order to have complete marital possession of him. Antonio's hold is strengthened by his having risked himself as a sacrifice for Bassanio.

When Shylock is introduced, he first speaks in fragments rather than in full sentences. "Three thousand ducats," he says, repeating what Bassanio has just said and considering the matter. Unlike Antonio and Portia, who were introduced in the midst of introspection, Shylock is introduced with no interior, but rather in the pursuit of his function. Unlike Antonio, who is giving when asked, Shylock is grasping. But Shylock is not trying to overwhelm Bassanio with a show of love, as Antonio is. Shylock is merely doing business. Whereas Antonio and Portia meditate on the quality of experience, Shylock quantifies experience. How much for how long, and what guarantee? Antonio is sad, but Shylock is angry. He begins tight-lipped, but his eloquence and force of speech soon burst out. He is a coiled spring. Hate, not love, is his energy. A desire to punish rather than to possess determines him.

After Shylock has indicated he must talk with Antonio before he lends money to Bassanio, Shylock will not consent when invited to dine with Antonio and Bassanio. Declining the invitation may seem spiteful and ungracious, but Shylock is clear about his reasons. His pique is understandable. The dietary code he is bound to follow is contemned, yet he is still invited to eat—a gesture that shows Christian scorn for Jewish law and for individual persons. It is also a business invitation to dine with a man who has scorned him. That Shylock is not softened by Bassanio's easygoing manner is not surprising, nor to be held against him. How could he be? He is being used when needed by people who despise him.

That Shylock is a moneylender is not intrinsic to his being a Jew. The rules of society allowed him, as a Jew, no other course. Because of the prejudice of that society, his person and his function have become one. Antonio detests him as man, Jew, and moneylender without making distinction. Antonio condemns the fact that Shylock takes interest, that he makes money on money. Shylock's hatred of Christians is a reaction to their mistreatment of him, the result of the considerable and repeated abuse he suffers for being a Jew and for offering a service which Christians have relegated to him and of which they readily avail themselves. When Shylock reminds Antonio of how badly he has treated him in his speech beginning at Act I, scene 3, line 103, Antonio does not deny it. In fact, he asserts he will continue to treat Shylock with contempt.

Against this background of mutual animosity and anger, generated by Antonio, Shylock agrees to lend the 3,000 ducats to Bassanio without interest, but the forfeit, should Antonio be unable to repay the loan in three months, will be a pound of Antonio's flesh. Shylock relishes the possibility of revenge.

A horrified Bassanio objects, withdrawing his request, telling Antonio not to agree to that condition: “You shall not seal to such a bond for me! / I’ll rather dwell in my necessity.” But Antonio does not heed him, confident the ships carrying his wealth will have safely returned to Venice by the time the bond is due. He seems almost amused by the bargain, as if taking it more as a joke than a possibility. Such poor judgment on the part of an otherwise successful merchant—and lack of suspicion regarding a person he holds in such contempt—is telling: It suggests the force of passion weakening reason and Antonio’s wish to be irreplaceable. By binding himself so to Shylock, he is binding Bassanio to himself with the strongest possible bond, the bond established by offering to sacrifice himself for him. Portia will understand how powerful that is and how threatening to her position in her marriage.

Act II

Act II opens with Portia facing unwanted suitors in Belmont—first among them the Prince of Morocco, who chooses the golden casket and finds within it a death’s head rather than a portrait of Portia. Her second suitor, the Prince of Aragon, chooses the silver casket and is rewarded with the picture of “a blinking idiot.”

Meanwhile, Bassanio is preparing to leave Venice for Belmont. Gratiano has begged to accompany him. In addition, Lorenzo, another friend of Bassanio’s, sets out, ultimately for Belmont, with Shylock’s daughter, Jessica. On the night that Bassanio and Gratiano set sail for Belmont, Lorenzo elopes with Jessica, and Jessica takes with her a substantial portion of her father’s wealth in ducats and jewelry.

Act III

Shylock is distraught at the loss of his daughter and his ducats, but the Venetians, like Salerio and Solanio, who describe Shylock’s distress, find it grotesque and hilarious. Antonio, too, suffers a blow when the news comes that his argosies have been wrecked at sea. That puts him in Shylock’s power, for when the bond falls due, he is unable to repay it, and Shylock is determined to exercise the right forfeit bestows upon him.

Once in Belmont, Bassanio chooses the leaden casket and finds within the portrait of Portia. As a kind of clue, each casket bears an inscription on the outside. The gold casket suggests it offers “what many men desire”—but the pursuit of gold ends in death. The silver casket offers the seeker “as much as he deserve”—but a man who goes by appearances, who sees a silver surface but not the true depth, is shown to be the image of a fool. The leaden casket offers nothing: “Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.” The one whom this description truly fits is not Bassanio, but Antonio, who gives and risks everything he has—his wealth, his flesh, and, even, by aiding him

in his wooing, Bassanio himself, whom he must lose to a wife should Bassanio succeed. Bassanio, in contrast, risks little. It is not *his* wealth he hazards, but Antonio's. Shylock, of course, is the antithesis of the man invoked by the leaden casket: He hazards nothing in his dealings and always has his eye on getting. For him, giving is but venturing, an investment. Ironically, this is the model that Bassanio is following in his venture to Belmont, as he makes clear in his petition for Antonio's aid beginning at Act I, scene 1, line 140. Bassanio speaks of shooting a second arrow and watching its flight in the hope of helping him find a previously lost one so he may bring them both back. By arrows, he means Antonio's loans to him.

After Bassanio has chosen correctly, Portia "commits" herself to him "to be directed, / As from her lord, her governor, her king." She explains:

Myself and what is mine to you and yours
 Is now converted: but now I was the lord
 Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
 Queen o'er myself: and even now, but now,
 This house, these servants and this same myself
 Are yours, my lord.

While this may be so formally, Portia actually never relinquishes control. She is, after all, the daughter of a father who extended his control even from the grave. Portia ends up mastering every situation and everyone in the play. As the sign that she gives herself to him, Portia gives Bassanio a ring, which signifies not only possession but also the condition upon which possession depends. "When you part from, lose, or give away" the ring, she tells him, "Let it presage the ruin of your love." Despite her gift of herself and of all that is hers, she demands to control the attitude with which the recipient views the gift. If Bassanio parts with the ring, he breaks faith with the way she is to be valued, and she will no longer be his. The condition for obtaining her, after all, was to "give and hazard all" you have.

But a part of Bassanio is reserved for Antonio, as Portia learns immediately following his triumphant choice of casket. Salerio comes from Venice, bringing with him Lorenzo and Jessica and a letter from Antonio. The latter, as Portia discerns from the increasingly pained and distressed expression on Bassanio's face as he reads it, concerns and affects him deeply. Saying she is a part of him, Portia insists he tell her what ill news he has received. In his report that the bond is forfeit, all Antonio's ships have floundered, and that Antonio must render to Shylock a pound of his flesh, Bassanio confesses his debt, describing Antonio as a "dear friend." After hearing everything, Portia asks, "Is it your dear friend that is thus in trouble?" To which Bassanio responds,

The dearest friend to me, the kindest man,
 The best-condition'd and unwearied spirit

In doing courtesies, and one in whom
 The ancient Roman honor more appears
 Than any that draws breath in Italy.

Her response is swift and generous, but also shrewd and self-protective. She tells him that immediately after their marriage service is performed, and before they consummate their union, he will go to Venice with money enough, many times more than the original sum, and rescue Antonio, for she says that Bassanio “never shall . . . lie by Portia’s side / With an unquiet soul.” An unquiet soul is one that does not rest entirely in her. The nature of the disquiet that will haunt Bassanio is hinted at in Antonio’s letter, which begins, “Sweet Bassanio,” and concludes: “it is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared between you and I, if I might but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your pleasure: if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter.” To the end Antonio portrays himself as a pathetic sacrifice for Bassanio. It is a strategy, whether consciously deliberate or not, to bind the youth to him as strongly as his contract binds him to Shylock. “Pray God Bassanio come,” Antonio says as he is being led to jail after Shylock has refused to hear his plea for leniency, “To see me pay my debt, and then I care not.”

Bassanio departs for Venice with Gratiano, leaving Portia and Nerissa, whom Gratiano has married, in Belmont. It is not, however, Portia’s intention to remain behind. She leaves her home in Belmont to the care of Lorenzo and Jessica, sends to a great lawyer in Padua an account of Shylock’s legal case against Antonio, and, armed with his opinion regarding its merit, travels to Venice. Portia and Nerissa arrive disguised as young men: Portia as a lawyer, Nerissa as his clerk.

Act IV

In court, Shylock is obdurate in his expression of hatred for Antonio and in his refusal, at the request of the Duke of Venice, who is presiding over the court, to show him mercy and not only withdraw his action against Antonio, but also, in recognition of his losses, forgive a part of the debt itself. Shylock insists that he has justice, the law, on his side and is therefore within his rights to pursue his remedy. According to the law, then, the court rules that Shylock is entitled to a pound of Antonio’s flesh and there is no more to be done. Antonio accepts the judgment with the self-effacement of a martyr, a self-effacement which seems sure to arouse pity in others:

I am a tainted wether of the flock,
 Meetest for death: the weakest kind of fruit
 Drops earliest to the ground; and so let me
 You cannot better be employ’d, Bassanio,
 Than to live still and write mine epitaph.

It seems quite clear from his last words that Antonio is playing for Bassanio's pity and a very special place in his heart when he recommends that there can be no better thing for him to do than devote himself to treasuring his memory. It is not something Portia would appreciate.

Just at the point when Antonio's martyrdom is going to be sealed, turning him into a sort of ideal for Bassanio, worthy of devoted and loving commemoration, Portia and Nerissa enter the court in the guise of Balthasar, a young lawyer recommended by the great lawyer of Padua, and his clerk. Portia reviews the case, assents that Shylock has justice on his side, and when, after her encouragement, he still refuses to grant mercy to Antonio, she affirms his right to Antonio's flesh. As Shylock is sharpening his knife to cut into the flesh, Portia stops him, informing him and the court that whereas the bond allows for his taking a pound of flesh, no allowance is made for blood or for any amount of flesh over a pound. Moreover, Portia cites other Venetian laws which make it criminal for a stranger (a non-Venetian)—which, being a Jew, Shylock is—to conspire to take the life of a Venetian, which is what it appears Shylock has done. Shylock tries to save himself, offering simply to take the money he is owed, but it is too late. As he desired justice, his opponents announce, so he will get justice. The law provides for his execution and the seizure of his estate, but to show him the Christian mercy he refused to exercise, he will be allowed to live. In addition, half his estate will go to Antonio; the other half, upon his death, will go to Lorenzo, his daughter's Christian husband; and he (Shylock) will become a convert to Christianity. He agrees to everything, says he does not feel well, and is allowed to go home. That is the last that is seen or heard of him.

This ought to be the end of the play. Bassanio is married. So are Gratiano and Lorenzo. Antonio is rescued, and Shylock, who has been more than once characterized as a dog, has been defanged. But it is not the end, for there is Portia's disguise as the lawyer to resolve. And it might have been quickly resolved by having her pull off her lawyer's headgear and letting her own hair tumble down. Instead, there is one more trick *The Merchant of Venice* must play after the previous ones about the pound of flesh and the three caskets.

Overwhelmed with gratitude, Bassanio and Antonio offer to give the young lawyer the 3,000 ducats they did not have to return to Shylock. But Portia refuses it with pieties about being well paid by being well satisfied at having done good work. Still, Bassanio presses her to permit them to give her something, so Portia says she will wear his gloves. When he removes them and she sees his ring—the one she gave him when he chose the lead casket and she told him that parting with it was the same as parting from her—she asks for it. When he explains that it is impossible for him to give the ring and tries to explain why, she will have none of it and remarks that he has made of her a beggar by encouraging her to ask for something and then treated her like a beggar by refusing to give to her when she did ask. She leaves miffed at his refusal to part with the ring.

That might have ended it, with Bassanio proving his devotion to Portia above all. But, tellingly, it is Antonio, once Portia disguised as Balthasar has gone, who says, “let him have the ring. / Let his deservings and my love withal, / Be valued against your wife’s commandment.” He is setting himself above Portia, encouraging Bassanio to allow his imperative to trump hers—and Bassanio shows greater obedience to Antonio’s imperative than to Portia’s.

Bassanio sends Gratiano after the lawyer to give the ring to him. Portia accepts the ring; meanwhile, Nerissa plots to get the ring she gave Gratiano away from him, too. They anticipate their husbands’ clumsy and comic responses when they cannot show the rings with which they had promised never to part.

Act V

A. W. Schlegel described Act V of *The Merchant of Venice* as “a musical afterlude in the piece itself,” which Shakespeare “added,” as if it were not really integral to the play, because he “was unwilling to dismiss his audience with the gloomy impressions which Antonio’s acquittal, effected with so much difficulty, and contrary to all expectation, and the condemnation of Shylock, were calculated to leave behind them.” Schlegel summarizes the action of the last act as follows:

The scene opens with the playful prattling of two lovers in a summer evening; it is followed by soft music, and a rapturous eulogy on this powerful disposer of the human mind and the world; the principal characters then make their appearance, and after a simulated quarrel, which is gracefully maintained, the whole ends with the most exhilarating mirth.

This interpretation is, arguably, off the mark in many respects and therefore very useful as a guide for a closer reading.

The “playful prattling of two lovers” is not quite what Schlegel makes it out to be. With sweet language and courtly constructions, as if they were celebrating true unions, always repeating the introductory phrase, “In such a night,” Lorenzo and Jessica describe the plights of Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, Dido and Aeneas, and Jason and Medea. These are not sweet examples of sweet love which young lovers might happily celebrate as models for their love. The stories of Troilus and Cressida and Dido and Aeneas are stories of betrayal and abandonment. The story of Medea and Jason is one of betrayal, rage, and murder. Only in the story of Pyramus and Thisbe are the lovers true to each other, but that story ends with a tragic and confused double suicide. Beneath the polish and glister, something troubling is evident. The idea of betrayal in love has been suggestively introduced. Regarding the effect of music in this “musical afterlude,” Jessica says, “I am never merry when I hear sweet music.” Music can be disturbing as well as soothing. The “simulated quarrel . . . so gracefully

maintained,” which follows upon Portia’s discovery that Bassanio gave his ring, at Antonio’s behest, to the lawyer, is in fact not simulated. Portia is absolutely earnest when she tells Bassanio, “I will ne’er come in your bed / Until I see the ring.” And all his excuses, explanations, and apologies do not move her. Only when Antonio intervenes, implicitly recognizing Portia’s right to Bassanio over his, Antonio’s, does Portia relent. The power of Antonio’s hold on Bassanio and of Bassanio’s attachment to Antonio, as well as Portia’s awareness of their tie, had been emphasized only some 35 lines before the trouble over the rings begins. Introducing Antonio to Portia, Bassanio says, “this is Antonio, / To whom I am so infinitely bound.” Portia emphasizes that she understands the force of his words, repeating the word “bound” twice: “You should in all sense be much bound to him. / For, as I hear, he was much bound for you.” There is something wry in her tone, too, suggesting she finds something awry in their attachment. When Antonio finally intervenes in the argument over the ring—in order to take responsibility for Bassanio’s parting with it and for his encouraging Bassanio to betray a sacred, ceremonial vow—he says:

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.

He is promising to honor Bassanio’s bond to Portia over any other obligation Bassanio might have. And “advisedly,” although it means “deliberately,” also carries the suggestion of “by my advice.” This oath by Antonio to withdraw his claim on Bassanio constitutes the final stage in a succession of events that began with Bassanio’s selection of the right casket. Portia gives Antonio the ring and tells him to give it to Bassanio, “And bid him keep it better than the other one.” Antonio thus becomes a part, the last part, of the ceremony joining Portia and Bassanio. When he gives Portia’s ring to Bassanio, he gives Bassanio to Portia. “Swear to keep this ring,” he instructs Bassanio. After he has made this surrender, Portia informs Antonio that, contrary to what they had heard earlier, “three of your argosies / Are richly come to harbor suddenly.” With this news, she releases Bassanio from any further debt to Antonio and she indebts Antonio to her, for when he reads “for certain that my ships / Are safely” anchored, he says to her, “Sweet lady, you have given me my life and living!” The problem of Antonio’s sadness has been solved; additionally, the cause of Portia’s weariness—first her father’s intervention and then Antonio’s influence—has been removed. Antonio is restored to his community freed of an enervating desire and Portia is married in a marriage of her own definition.