

# The Merchant of Venice



## BACKGROUND INFO

### AUTHOR BIO

**Full Name:** William Shakespeare

**Date of Birth:** 1564

**Place of Birth:** Stratford-upon-Avon, England

**Date of Death:** 1616

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

### KEY FACTS

**Full Title:** *The Merchant of Venice*

**Genre:** Comedy/tragicomedy; Revenge tragedy

**Setting:** Venice, and the nearby country estate of Belmont

**Climax:** The trial of Antonio, the merchant, and Shylock, the Jewish moneylender

**Protagonists:** Antonio, Bassanio, Portia

**Antagonist:** Shylock

### HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

**When Written:** 1596–8

**Where Written:** England

**When Published:** 1623

**Literary Period:** The Renaissance

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

**Related Historical Events:** Like much of the rest of Europe, England severely restricted the rights of Jews. In fact, Jews were banished completely from England in 1290 by King Edward I, and were not officially allowed to return until 1655, when Oliver Cromwell allowed Jews to return. This exile was technically in effect during Shakespeare's time, but scholars believe that a few hundred Jews still lived around London in the guise of Christians. One of the reasons Renaissance Christians disliked Jews was the Jews' willingness to practice usury—the practice of charging interest or "use" on borrowed money.

There was a long tradition in Classical and Christian moral thinking against usury. Shakespeare's contemporary, the philosopher and statesman Sir Francis Bacon, argued in his essay *On Usury* that it was "against nature for money to beget money."

### EXTRA CREDIT

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



## PLOT SUMMARY

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

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

Bassanio asks the Jewish moneylender, **Shylock**, to lend him 3000 ducats. After much hesitation, Shylock agrees—Antonio will guarantee the loan with his property as collateral. However, when Antonio himself arrives and begins insulting Shylock for committing usury (charging interest on his loans), Shylock proposes a bizarre alternative. He will not charge Bassanio any interest for three months. However, if Antonio defaults, Shylock will be entitled to cut one pound of flesh from anywhere on Antonio's body that he likes. Confident that his ships will return to Venice, with many times 3000 ducats, well before Shylock's deadline, Antonio accepts.

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

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

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

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

In the court of Venice, the Duke is presiding over Antonio's trial. Shylock resists their requests that he show mercy and insists on pursuing his "pound of flesh," despite the fact that Bassanio has offered him 9000 ducats instead.

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

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

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



## CHARACTERS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Solanio** - A Venetian nobleman and good friend of **Salerio**.

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

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

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

**Old Gobbo** - **Launcelot**'s blind father.

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

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

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



## THEMES

### PREJUDICE AND INTOLERANCE

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

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

### HUMAN AND ANIMAL

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

fundamentally similar to the way in which other Venetians might buy slaves or livestock.

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

## LAW, MERCY, AND REVENGE

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

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

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

## GREED VS. GENEROSITY

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

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

## READING AND INTERPRETATION

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

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

## LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

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

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



## SYMBOLS

### STONES, RINGS, AND CASKETS

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

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



## QUOTES

### ACT 1 QUOTES

In sooth, I know not why I am so sad. (1)



I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano—  
A stage, where every man must play a part;  
And mine a sad one. (77–79)



In my school-days, when I had lost one shaft,  
I shot his fellow of the selfsame flight  
The selfsame way, with more advised watch,  
To find the other forth; and by adventuring both,  
I oft found both. (140–144)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

They are as sick that surfeit with too much, as they that starve with nothing.  
(5–6)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

When he is best, he is a little worse than a man; and when he is worst, he is  
little better than a beast. (89)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

I dote on his very absence. (110)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

My meaning in saying he is a good man, is to have you understand me that he is  
sufficient. (17)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

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. (37)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose. (98)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

Many a time and oft  
In the Rialto you have rated me  
About my moneys and my usances:  
Still I have borne it with a patient shrug,  
For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.  
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,  
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,  
And all for use of that which is mine own. (106–113)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

When did friendship take  
A breed for barren metal of his friend? (133–134)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

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. (148–151)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

## ACT 2 QUOTES

Mislike me not for my complexion,  
The shadow'd livery of the burnish'd sun. (1–2)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

In the twinkling of an eye. (167)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

All things that are,  
Are with more spirit chased than enjoy'd. (12–13)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

But love is blind, and lovers cannot see  
The pretty follies that themselves commit. (36–37)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

All that glisters is not gold. (65)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

## ACT 3 QUOTES

If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. (54)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions,  
senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same  
weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed  
and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us,  
do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not  
die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we  
will resemble you in that. (58–68)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard, but I will better the  
instruction. (73)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

If he lose, he makes a swan-like end,  
Fading in music. (44–45)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

Tell me where is fancy bred,  
Or in the heart or in the head?  
How begot, how nourished?  
Reply, reply.  
It is engender'd in the eyes,  
With gazing fed; and fancy dies  
In the cradle, where it lies.  
Let us all ring fancy's knell;  
I'll begin it – Ding, dong, bell. (63–71)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

There is no vice so simple but assumes  
Some mark of virtue in his outward parts. (81–82)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

The seeming truth which cunning times put on  
To entrap the wisest. (100–101)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

## ACT 4 QUOTES

We all expect a gentle answer, Jew! (34)

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

The pound of flesh, which I demand of him,  
Is dearly bought: tis mine and I will have it.



If you deny me, fie upon your law!  
There is no force in the decrees of Venice.  
I stand for judgement: answer; shall I have it? (99–103)



I am a tainted wether of the flock,  
Meetest for death: the weakest kind of fruit  
Drops earliest to the ground. (114–116)



I never knew so young a body with so old a head. (163–164)



Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew? (174)



The quality of mercy is not strain'd,  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.  
'T is mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown;  
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,  
The attribute to awe and majesty,  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;  
But mercy is above this sceptred sway,  
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,  
It is an attribute to God himself;  
And earthly power doth then show likest God's,  
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,  
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,  
That in the course of justice none of us  
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;  
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render  
The deeds of mercy. (184–202)



My deeds upon my head! I crave the law,  
The penalty and forfeit of my bond. (206–207)



A Daniel come to judgment! yea, a Daniel! (223)



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. (374–377)



Art thou contended Jew? (393)



## ACT 5 QUOTES

The man that hath no music in himself,  
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,  
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;  
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,  
And his affections dark as Erebus.  
Let no such man be trusted. (83–88)



We will answer all things faithfully. (299)



## SUMMARY & ANALYSIS

### ACT 1, SCENE 1

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

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



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

*Polite manners cement friendly relationships between the noblemen of Venice.*



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

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



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

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



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

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



## ACT 1, SCENE 2

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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



## ACT 1, SCENE 3

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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



## ACT 2, SCENE 1

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

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



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

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



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

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



## ACT 2, SCENE 2

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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



## ACT 2, SCENE 3

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

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



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

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



## ACT 2, SCENE 4

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

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



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

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



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

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



## ACT 2, SCENE 5

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

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



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

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



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

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





## ACT 2, SCENE 6

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

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



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

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



As **Jessica**, **Lorenzo**, and the other "masqueing mates" head out into the street, **Antonio** intercepts them. He scolds **Gratiano** for being late to **Bassanio's** dinner. They all hurry off toward Bassanio's house.

*The rollicking "masque" joins up with the somber Antonio to enjoy Bassanio's hospitality.*



## ACT 2, SCENE 7

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

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



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

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



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

*Portia's prejudice surfaces again.*



## ACT 2, SCENE 8

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

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



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

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



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

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



## ACT 2, SCENE 9

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

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



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

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

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

## ACT 3, SCENE 1

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

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

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



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



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



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



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



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

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

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

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

## ACT 3, SCENE 2

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

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



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



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



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



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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



### ACT 3, SCENE 3

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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



### ACT 3, SCENE 4

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

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



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

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



## ACT 3, SCENE 5

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

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



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

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



## ACT 4, SCENE 1

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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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





The **Duke** reports that **Bellario** has recommended that the court hear the opinion of a young and learned lawyer, named **Balthazar**, who has studied the case with Bellario and knows his opinion. **Portia** enters, disguised as Balthazar. The Duke greets her and asks whether she is familiar with the facts of the case. Portia replies that she is. "Which here is the merchant? And which the Jew?" (1.70), she asks. Antonio and Shylock come forth together.

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



## ACT 4, SCENE 2

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

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



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

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



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

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



## ACT 5, SCENE 1

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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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



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

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

