

The lives of Jews in Venice

Bassanio, a young Venetian, wants to travel to Belmont to woo the beautiful and wealthy heiress Portia. He approaches his friend Antonio, a merchant, for 3000 ducats needed to subsidize his traveling expenditures for three months. As all of Antonio's ships and merchandise are tied at sea, Antonio approaches the Jewish moneylender Shylock for a loan. Shylock, hateful of Antonio, proposes a malicious condition. If Antonio is unable to repay the loan at the specified date, Shylock will be free to take a pound of Antonio's flesh from

where ever he pleases. Although Bassanio does not want

"I like not fair terms and a villain's mind" (Act I, Scene III).

"All that Glisters is not Gold."

such a condition for his sake, Antonio, surprised by what he sees as the moneylender's generosity, signs the agreement. With money at hand, Bassanio leaves for Belmont with another friend Gratiano.

At Belmont, Portia has no lack of suitors. Portia's father, however, has left a will stipulating each of her suitors to choose

"The Devil can cite Scripture for his purpose". (Act I, Scene III).

one of three caskets: one each of gold, silvers, and lead. In order to be granted an opportunity to marry Portia, each suitor must agree in advance to live out his life as a bachelor were he to select wrongly. The suitor who correctly looks past the outward appearance of the caskets will find Portia's portrait inside and win her hand. After two suitors choose

incorrectly, Bassanio makes the correct choice, that of the leaden casket, aided by a subtle hint from Portia and knowledge of the Gesta Romanorum which explains which casket to pick.

At Venice, all ships bearing Antonio's goods are reported lost at sea, leaving him unable to satisfy the bond. Shylock is determined to exact revenge from

Christians after his daughter Jessica

"But love is blind, and lovers cannot see".

flees his home to convert to Christianity and elope with the Christian Lorenzo, taking a substantial amount of Shylock's wealth with her. With the bond at hand, Shylock has Antonio arrested and brought before court.

At Belmont, Portia and Bassanio have just been married,

along with their friends Gratiano and Portia's handmaid Nerissa. He receives a letter telling him that Antonio has defaulted on his loan from Shylock. Shocked, Bassanio and Gratiano leave for Venice immediately, with money from Portia, to save Antonio's life. Unbeknownst to Bassanio and Gratiano, Portia and Nerissa leave Belmont to seek the counsel of Portia's cousin, Bellario, a lawyer, at Padova.

The dramatic center of the play comes in the court of the Duke of Venice. Shylock refuses Bassanio's offer, despite Bassanio increasing the repayment to

6000 ducats (twice the specified loan). He demands the pound of flesh from Antonio. The Duke, wishing to save Antonio but unwilling to set a dangerous legal precedent of nullifying a contract, refers the case to Balthasar, a

young male "doctor of the law" who is actually Portia

in

disguise, with his/her lawyer's clerk, who

is Nerissa in disguise. Portia

asks Shylock to show mercy in a famous speech (The quality of mercy is not strained — Act IV, Scene I, 185), but Shylock refuses. Thus the court allows Shylock to extract the pound of flesh.

At the very moment Shylock is about to cut Antonio with his knife, Portia points out a flaw in the contract. The bond only allows Shylock to remove the flesh, not blood, of Antonio. If Shylock were to shed any drop of Antonio's blood in doing so, his "lands and goods" will

"If you prick us, So we not bleed? If you tickle us, So we not laugh? If you poison us, So we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" - (Act III, Scene I).

be forfeited under Venetian laws. Compare to this the Norse legend of the making of Mjolnir where Loki loses his head in a bet, but was not forced to give the bet since his neck was not part of the bet.

Defeated, Shylock accedes to accept monetary payment for the defaulted bond, but is denied. Portia pronounces none should be given, and for his attempt to

take the life of a citizen, Shylock's property will be forfeit, half to the government and half to Antonio, and his life will be at the mercy of the Duke.

The Duke can beg share ing

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pardons his life before Shylock for it, and Antonio holds his "in use" (that is, reserving the principal amount while taking only income) until Shylock's death,

when the principal will be given Lorenzo Jessica. At

Antonio's request, the Duke grants remission of the state's half of forfeiture, but in return, Shylock is forced to convert to Christianity and to bequeath the rest of his property to Lorenzo and Jessica (Act IV, scene 1). Bassanio does not recognize his disguised wife. He offers to give him/her a present. First she declines, but after he insists, Portia requests his ring. Reluctantly he gives the ring, although earlier he has promised his wife never to lose it, sell it or give it away.

At Belmont, Portia and Nerissa taunt their husbands before revealing they were really the lawyer and his clerk in disguise. After all the other characters make amends, all ends happily (save for Shylock) as Antonio learns that his ships have returned safely after all.