

***Reading Journal —
The Merchant of Venice
by William Shakespeare***

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An Overview

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

- Mother came from a prosperous farming family; his father was a glover, unable to write;
- Anglicanism
- Attended the town's grammar school, where education was grounded in classical rhetoric and oratory;
- Education influences his self-conscious classicism evident in his early writing;
- Features ten-syllabled, five-beat iambic pentameter;
- Uses psychological realism frequently;
- Married and had three children;
- Had a stable relationship with his company Lord Chamberlain's Men, so he knew the actors for whom he was writing and the conditions in which they performed;
- His play features wide intellectual and emotional scope;
- Interestingly, he lived most of his life in London, and likely never went to Venice or met a Jewish person in his life, so the play is largely based on Shakespeare's readings and the beliefs of the society around him.

CONTEXT

Context of production

The play was written in England in 1598

Like much of the rest of Europe, England severely restricted the rights of Jews. In fact, Jews were expelled completely from England around 1300, and were not allowed to return until 1655. 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. Jews served the role of money-lenders in English society because protestants/Christians were not allowed to lend money. One of the reasons Renaissance Christians disliked Jews was the Jews' willingness to practice usury. 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."

Context of reception

When Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* in 1596, there were few to none Jewish people living in England. Anti-semitism was very prevalent at the time because people feared differences in religion. The book shows the 1600s England of how they see Venice in Elizabethan time. In social ways, women are seen to be powerless in the hierarchy while men are seen as they are on top of the hierarchy and Jews are seen as people who are very fond of money and mirrored as devil while the Christianity is shown to be merciful. In a cultural way Venice is shown to be a perfect place even though it is not in reality.

LITERARY PERIOD

The Renaissance

GENRE

Comedy/tragicomedy

SETTING

16th Century Venice and Belmont, where Venice is a symbol for democracy and wealth and gathers businessmen from the world. It is also a male-dominant society. Belmont, on the other hand, stands for romance and tests for brave young men. In the play, these places are constantly compared for moral values and gender power.

INTERTEXTUALITY

The plot lines in the play are heavily influenced by other works such as Christopher Marlowe's "The Jew of Malta" and the medieval "Gesta Romanorum" (the story of the caskets). His understanding of Venice and Belmont

may have been influenced by literature describing these places as opposed to him having actually visited them.

THEME

Anti-semitism and Racism

Shylock, who pursues to the courtroom his right to exact a pound of flesh from Antonio, is the epitome of a Western anti-Semitic portrayal of the Jew as evil villain concerned only with money.

Portia, the outsider from Belmont, reminds everyone in the courtroom that Venice has harsh penalties especially reserved for any “other” who attempts to kill a Venetian citizen.

Portia, however, also holds discrimination towards the “other.” The Moroccan suitor’s first line, “Mislike me not for my complexion” (II.i.1), asks Portia to look at him more than dark skin. This also serves as a strong implication of Portia’s racism that is no different than the white Christian perspective.

Trade, usury, love

Venice was the commercial centre of the world, and Portia’s wealth is like a magnetic attracting suitors from around the world.

However, moneylending, in which money begets money, is not allowed. When Shylock uses the biblical narrative of Jacob and the sheep, Antonio asks: “Was this inserted to make interest good? Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?” (I.iii.91) “Ewe” uses two puns, on both “Jews” and “use”, referring to the fact that Jews put money out to use and earn the interest. Shylock replies, “I cannot tell, I make it breed as fast.” (93) Notice that Shylock is linking moneymaking with sexuality. This not only alludes to the story of Jacob, but also implies the status quo and the manipulative nature of people in Venice in the 16 and 17th century.

The similar linkage between sex and money is also evident in the relationship of Portia and Jessica. Antonio is always paying for someone else, be it for Bassanio or

other gentlemen. They may inherit a good fortune but have spent it all. To find more money to live a luxury life as before, they choose to marry money, like Portia with her caskets and Jessica with her Jew, inherited from their father. Both of the women are like objects for trade. For example, Jessica escapes from his father's repressive household through her disguise as a boy. In exchanging the wealth of her father with the future with her husband, Jessica works like a medium for trade and makes one into another.

On the other hand, Portia also links love with money by saying to Bassanio: "Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear." (III.ii.313) There is a startling resemblance when Shylock says in Act 4: "The pound of flesh which I demand of him / is dearly bought' However, Shylock refuses to take 60,000 ducats but rather wants to kill Antonio. The reason is his hatred. Antonio calls him usurer, but there is no sign that Shylock charges high rates of interest. Antonio's practice of lending without interest must have an effect on other moneylenders' rates of interest. He explicitly expresses his anger of this title in Act 3 scene 1: "He was wont to call me usurer." (43)

SYMBOLS

The rings:

Rings have a special potency in the economic system of Venice of value and denial. It is a sign of linking of people together in marriage bonds. The giving of a ring alone was, at that time, significant enough an event for courts to accept it as firm proof of betrothal.

In this play, rings are embodied both sentimental value and monetary value. Portia claims that "This house, these servants, and this same myself / Are yours, my lord's. I give them with this ring." The ring here signifies a transfer of wealth, status, love, and even Portia herself, who has been trapped by the power of males all her life.

On the other hand, Jessica gives away her ring stolen from Shylock. She must know the history of this ring, and how Shylock values it as the gift from his

beloved deceased wife. Jessica makes a particular cruel substitution using the ring for a monkey, which was the Elizabethan symbol of lust.

The play ends with a direct dirty joke: “Well, while I live I’ll fear no other thing / So sore as keeping safe Narissa’s ring.” By ring, Gratiano means both the one on her finger and her vulva, which also alludes to an old joke. This seems to be horrific manipulation and control over women rather than love as Gratiano states. In this punning it demeans the romantic world of Belmont and reminds the audience of the male dominant society in Venice. This applies to the other female characters’ rings as well—they are under males’ control and no longer signify anything beyond ducats but a symbol of sexual possession and male control.

Dark skin:

Darker skin is a symbol of the devil. At that time, not only were Jews thought of as having darker skin (Shylock), Morocco also has darker skin. The first thing he says to Portia is not to judge him based on skin color. The golden casket says “gilded tombs do worms infold”. Can be seen as a comment on Portia’s racism.

On the other hand, light skin is a symbol for goodness and god.

The Plot

ACT 1

- Introduction (characters & situations)- order is stable

Scene I

In Venice, the merchant Antonio is talking to friends about his ships at sea, which he seems to be worried about. Bassanio, a poor gentlemen, comes to borrow money. He falls in love with Portia, a fair wealthy woman in Belmont. Though Antonio has all his fortune at sea, he decides to get a loan from Shylock.

Scene II

Meanwhile in Belmont, Portia is frustrated for her father's will, which controls her over future romantic relationship. Whoever wants to marry the lady needs to choose the correct casket among the three made of gold, silver and lead. Portia mocks all the suitors from around the world.

Scene III

Back in Venice, Shylock the Jewish moneylender agrees to loan Antonio 3,000 ducats for the forfeit of a pound of Antonio's flesh. Antonio, who has despised the Jew for long, agrees to the bond.

ACT 2

- Intro continues & complications occur- order is in jeopardy

Scene I

At Belmont, the prince of Morocco has arrived to try his fortune with the caskets. He tells Portia to not dislike his dark skin and proceeds to dine with her.

Scene II

Launcelot Gobbo, Shylock's servant, is having a mental debate whether or leave his master and serve for Bassanio. Just then the blind old Gobbo appears and asks for the way to Shylock's house. Launcelot plays on his father and finally reveals himself and tells his father that he doesn't want to serve a Jew anymore. The father and son go to Bassanio, who readily accepts him.

After the servant leaves, Gratiano asks to go along to Belmont. After some hesitation and warning, Bassanio agrees.

Scene III

Launcelot goes to Shylock's house to say farewell, and Jessica the daughter gives him a letter and asks him to give it secretly to Lorenzo. Jessica is planning to flee the house and convert to Christian to marry Lorenzo.

Scene IV

Lorenzo, after reading the letter, is joyful about Jessica's decision. Launcelot is again asked to bring Jessica the message. Lorenzo tells Gratiano that Jessica is going to steal gold and jewel and flee with him tonight.

Scene V

Shylock is scolding Launcelot for deserting him and tells Jessica about his plan to dine with Bassanio despite himself. Before leaving, he reinforces that Jessica should keep herself safe in the house. Alone in the house, Jessica is waiting to escape.

Scene VI

Lorenzo arrives late and calls out to Jessica, who first sends down the gold and jewels and then descends from the window. She dressed as his torchbearer and hurries away to the ship.

Scene VII

At Belmont, the prince of Morocco nervously chooses the gold casket. It turns out to have a skull inside, with a scroll stuck inside, reproaching him for his choice. Portia, however, is secretly happy about his failure.

Scene VIII

In Venice, Salerio and Solanio are gossiping about Jessica and Lorenzo's flee and Bassanio's departure for Portia. They laugh at Shylock for his irritation and desperation. They feel sorry that Antonio is going to forfeit for his bond for his ship was wrecked at sea. They decide to go find Antonio about the bad news.

Scene IX

In Belmont, the Prince of Aragon arrives, wishing to give it a try. After rejecting directly the lead and the gold, he chooses the silver one. It turns out to contain a portrait of a blinking idiot. Feeling insulted, Aragon leaves angrily.

Just then, a messenger comes to inform Portia that a lord arrives with gifts of rich value. Both Portia and Nerissa are hoping to see Bassanio.

ACT 3

- Rising Action- order is disrupted

Scene I

Solanio and Salerio are discussing again about Antonio when running into Shylock. Shylock accuses the two for helping Jessica, but the two just keep teasing at him. Shylock resentfully tells them to ask Antonio “look to his bond” and assures them that he will “feed his revenge” because Antonio used to mock at him for his identity.

After the two leave, Tubal, a friend of Shylock, enters. He rumours that Jessica has spent lavishly his money and even traded her mother’s ring for a monkey. Shylock is pleased again when informed that Antonio’s ship is lost.

Scene II

In Belmont, Bassanio goes straight to the caskets confidently. Portia is more worried and instructs to play music for him. Bassanio opens the lead caskets and finds inside a portrait of Portia and a poem praising his wisdom. Portia gives him a ring to confirm their love. At the same time, Gratiano announces his engagement with Nerissa. The four of them plan to share a wedding.

Before they have time to celebrate, a letter brings bad news, reading that Antonio is going to forfeit for his bond. Portia agrees to let Bassanio go and offers 20 times the debt.

Scene III

Back in Venice, Shylock refuses to show any mercy before Antonio’s begging. Antonio, understanding that Shylock is determined for revenge and that the Duke won’t define the course of law, urges the jailer on, only hoping to see Bassanio again.

Scene IV

After Bassanio’s departure, Portia, knowing Antonio being a true gentleman, decides to seek help from Doctor Bellario. She and Nerissa dress up as young men to help their husbands out.

Scene V

Jessica believes that her marriage will save her from her father's sins. Lorenzo scolds Launcelot for getting a Moorish servant pregnant. Alone with Lorenzo, Jessica expresses her affection towards Portia and head to dinner together.

ACT 4

- Rising actions continue- climax

Scene I

At the court, Duke tries to persuade Shylock to show mercy. Antonio, however, chooses to accept Shylock's revenge with dignity. Shylock also insists that he wants his bond and hope the Duke obeys the Venetian law. The reason is the hatred. He continues to comment on the Venetians' slaves and compares that with his purchasing of Antonio.

While Shylock is already stoning his knife, Portia, disguised as Balthazar, enters. She pleads Shylock again to accept the money and be merciful to Antonio. Shylock refuses several more times and insists on his justice. While Shylock takes out his scale and Antonio bears his chest, Bassanio expresses his love towards Antonio with the cost of the world.

Just as Shylock is about to cut Antonio, Portia stops him. She points out that Shylock should not shed a single drop of blood. Because of Shylock's attempt at killing Antonio, he will have to give all his fortune to the state and convert to Christian. The Duke spares Shylock his life.

After the trial, Portia asks Bassanio for his ring as return.

Scene II

Bassanio, under Antonio's instruction, has no choice and gives the ring out, so does Gratiano, giving the ring to Nerissa, disguised as the doctor's clerk.

ACT 5

- Denouement- order is restored

Scene I

Lorenzo and Jessica are flirting with each other by comparing themselves to lovers in history. They are told by messengers that Portia is returning. They arrange music as welcome and get immersed to the music themselves.

When Portia returns, she asks Lorenzo to keep their departure secret. Just then, Bassanio, Antonio, and Gratiano enter. They are welcomed, but Nerissa soon begins an argument with Gratiano for losing her ring. Bassanio admits hesitantly that he also gave the ring out, but to the doctor, and pleads for forgiveness. Seeing the two couples arguing, Antonio promises that Bassanio will never do this again, with his soul as the bond. Portia accepts and gives Bassanio a new ring. However, Bassanio recognizes the ring as the old one. Portia explains that she laid with the doctor to get the ring. Seeing the husbands turning irritated, Portia and Nerissa admit what they have done. Everyone is happy again: Antonio's ships are all back with riches and Jessica gets the deed from Shylock.