***The Merchant of Venice***

***Act 2 Scene 2***

***Summary and Analysis:***

***Summary:***

* Lancelot Gobbo, Shylock's servant, stands before Shylock's house, having a very serious and hilariously muddled conversation with himself about his desire to quit his job. He says his conscience tells him to stay with Shylock out of loyalty, but some fiend in his brain is telling him he should run away. He reasons crookedly: since his conscience tells him to stay with the devil incarnate, clearly the thing to do is run away, loyalty be damned.
* Just then Old Gobbo—Lancelot's dad, who is mostly blind—shows up looking for his son. He can't tell that he's actually talking to him.
* Lancelot decides to have some fun with his father before he reveals his identity. He teases that the old man should speak of "Master" Lancelot, not just Lancelot. Old Gobbo is quick to point out that young Gobbo is no *Master* Lancelot, but just *plain* *old* Lancelot, the son of a poor man.
* Lancelot continues to mess with the poor old blind man, telling him the "funny" joke that his son is dead.
* Lancelot finally reveals himself to be Old Gobbo's son, and there's much ado about how much he's grown. Old Gobbo has brought Shylock a present, and Lancelot suggests his dad give the present to Bassanio instead, as Bassanio is Lancelot's new chosen master. Being Shylock's servant has left him in such a state that you can count each of his ribs (i.e., he's not paid enough to eat properly).
* Bassanio enters the scene and hears a convoluted attempt on the part of both Lancelot and his father to get the younger man employed by Bassanio. Bassanio cuts off all the idiocy by announcing that Shylock's already given over Lancelot's service to him, though Lancelot will be leaving a rich Jew to serve a poor gentleman. Lancelot insists he's okay with this, and Bassanio sends Old Gobbo off with young Gobbo to buy some fancy new threads.
* Bassanio is then left to talk with the newly arrived Graziano. Graziano insists that Bassanio must take him along to Belmont when he goes to woo Portia. Bassanio is hesitant.
* Graziano promises he'll be on his very best behavior and won't do anything to ruin Bassanio's chance of winning Portia. Then they agree to put off all good behavior until tomorrow, as tonight is a night for celebration.

***Brief Summary:***

Launcelot, the clown, debates with himself about running away from his master, Shylock. Launcelot is bothered that Shylock is a devil of sorts, because Shylock is Jewish, yet his conscience reminds him that he is an honest person. When he decides that he will leave Shylock's employ, a half-blind man walks up asking how he can get to Shylock's home. Launcelot recognizes him as his father, Gobbo.

After toying with his father for a moment, Launcelot reveals himself to his father, though it takes a few moments before Gobbo accepts it. Launcelot tells his father that he is running away from the Jew to work for Bassanio, who enters soon after. The two both plead with Bassanio to accept Launcelot's services, which he does. As Launcelot leaves to get his things from Shylock's home, Gratiano asks Bassanio if he can go with him to Belmont. Bassanio agrees only if Gratiano promises to be on his best behavior.

***Brief Analysis:***

Again we see the contempt that the Christians feel toward Shylock in Launcelot's desire to leave the Jew for no other reason than his being a Jew. It adds a sympathetic feeling toward the villain of the story, which was not seen as much in Shakespeare's other works.

Though Launcelot's playing with his father's inability to see him as his son may seem cruel, it marks a common tool in plays of Shakespeare's time. Often throughout his works we see "clowns" or "fools" adding some comic content. The scene between the Gobbos is very much that comic interlude.

***Detailed Summary:***

Launcelot Gobbo, a servant of Shylock’s, struggles to decide whether or not he should run away from his master. Part of him, which he calls “[t]he fiend . . . at mine elbow,” wants to leave, while his conscience reminds him of his honest nature and urges him to stay (II.ii.2). Although Launcelot has no specific complaints, he seems troubled by the fact that his master is Jewish, or, as Launcelot puts it, “a kind of devil” (II.ii.19). Just when Launcelot determines to run away, his father, Old Gobbo, enters. The old man is blind, and he asks how to get to Shylock’s house, where he hopes to find young Launcelot. Because his father does not recognize him, Launcelot decides to play a prank on him—he gives the old man confusing directions and reports that Launcelot is dead. When Launcelot reveals the deception, Old Gobbo doubts that the man before him is his son, but Launcelot soon convinces his father of his identity. Launcelot confesses to his father that he is leaving Shylock’s employment in the hopes of serving Bassanio. Just then, Bassanio enters and the two plead with him to accept Launcelot as his servant. Bassanio takes several moments to understand their bumbling proposition, but he accepts the offer. Bassanio then meets Gratiano, who asks to accompany him to Belmont, and agrees on the condition that Gratiano tame his characteristically wild behavior. Gratiano promises to be on his best behavior, and the two men plan a night of merriment to celebrate their departure.

***Detailed Analysis:***

After the last, rather serious scene in Belmont, we return to Venice, and the initial emphasis here is on Launcelot Gobbo, Shylock's servant, an "unthrifty knight." Launcelot is debating with himself as to whether or not he should remain in Shylock's service; he is tempted to leave and find employment elsewhere, but he is unable to make up his mind. The decision is difficult, he says, for he feels the weight of his "conscience hanging about the neck of his heart."

The comedy builds when Launcelot's father, Old Gobbo, comes onstage. Old Gobbo is "more than sandblind" and does not recognize his son. He sees before him only the dim image of a man who he hopes can direct him to Shylock's house. Launcelot is delighted to encounter his father, whom he has not seen for a long time, and so he conceals his true identity and playfully confuses the old man with much clowning and double-talk, before revealing who he really is and kneeling to receive his father's blessing.

Bassanio now enters, along with Leonardo and other followers, and he is enthusiastically talking of preparations for a dinner tonight, complete with a masque, to which he has invited his friends to celebrate his departure for Belmont, where he will begin his courtship of Portia. Launcelot is quick to note Bassanio's good mood, and he immediately speaks to him about Bassanio's hiring him as a servant. Bassanio agrees and orders a new set of livery for his new servant.

Gratiano enters, looking for Bassanio, and tells him, "I must go with you to Belmont." Bassanio is hesitant, but he finally consents, urging Gratiano to modify his "wild behaviour," which Gratiano agrees to do. But he will do that tomorrow. Tonight, he says, shall be a night of merriment, a gala inaugurating his setting out for Belmont.

This scene, like Scene 1 and most of the rest of the nine scenes in Act II, deals with minor diversions and developments in the plot — the elopement of Lorenzo and Jessica, and Launcelot Gobbo's transfer of his services from Shylock to Bassanio.

Almost all of this scene is taken up with the antics of Launcelot Gobbo, and it may be useful here to consider for a moment the clowns and comedy of the Elizabethan stage. Two of the most important members of any Elizabethan theatrical company were the actor who played the tragic hero and the actor who played the clown. It is obvious why the actor who played the great tragic roles was important, but it is perhaps not so easy for us to see, from the standpoint of the modern theater, why the role of a clown took on so much importance. The clowns, though, were great favorites with the Elizabethan audiences. Their parts involved a great deal of comic stage business — improvised actions, gestures, and expressions — and they had their own special routines. Launcelot, for example, would be given a great deal of leeway in using his own special comic devices. Much here depends on the actor's "business" — mime, expressions of horror or stupid self-satisfaction, burlesque or parody movements around the stage, and so forth. This sort of scene is not written for verbal comedy (as Portia's scenes are); rather, Shakespeare wrote them to give his actors as much scope as was necessary for visual antics. Today we call these gimmicks "sight gags" or "slapstick." The dialogue itself is not particularly witty because the comedy was meant to be mostly physical. Launcelot's opening speech takes the form of a debate between "the fiend" and his own "conscience." The comedy here lies in the fact that the jester-clown Launcelot should regard himself as the hero of a religious drama, but this gives him the opportunity to mimic two separate parts, jumping back and forth on the stage and addressing himself: "Well, my conscience says, 'Launcelot, budge not.' 'Budge,' says the fiend. 'Budge not,' says my conscience" (18-20). Visually, this makes for good comedy; while reading this play aloud, one can enhance this brief scene by imagining that the voice of the conscience is delivered in high, falsetto, flute-like tones; the voice of the fiend, in contrast, is delivered in low, evil-sounding growls.

In addition to this clowning business, verbal confusion was also a favorite device in this sort of scene, and it occurs throughout the play. Notice, for example, the directions for finding Shylock's house which Launcelot gives to his father: "Turn up on your right hand at the next turning, but at the next turning of all, on your left; marry, at the very next turning of no hand, but turn down indirectly." Small wonder that Old Gobbo exclaims, "'twill be a hard way to hit!"

There is more visual comedy when the two Gobbos confront Bassanio at line 120. Here, it is suggested by the lines that Launcelot bends down behind his father, popping up to interrupt him at every other line and finishing his sentences for him. This kind of comedy depends on visual and verbal confusion, especially mistaking obvious words and phrases. Particularly characteristic of this clowning is the confusion of word meanings. Here, Launcelot speaks of his "true-begotten father," and he uses "infection" for affection, "frutify" for certify, "defect" for effect, and so on.

Toward the close of the scene, two more details of the central plot are developed. First, Launcelot leaves Shylock's household for that of Bassanio; this prepares us for a similar, if a much greater defection from Shylock by his daughter, Jessica, in the following scene. It also makes it possible for Launcelot to appear at Belmont in the final act, where a little of his clowning adds to the general good humor. Second, Gratiano announces his intention of going to Belmont with Bassanio; he must be there to marry Nerissa and take part in the comedy of the "ring story," which ends the play with lighthearted teasing wit.

***Critical Study:***

Launcelot Gobbo works for [Shylock](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Shylock) as a servant, but he is debating whether or not to leave his job and seek a new master. His conscience tells him to remain with Shylock because it is the honest and responsible thing to do, even though Launcelot hates Shylock. The "fiend," as Launcelot calls his opposite impulse, tells him to run away. Launcelot talks with his father, Old Gobbo, and reveals his desire to leave Shylock's employ. At that moment [Bassanio](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Bassanio) appears, and Old Gobbo engages him in a conversation telling him Launcelot is unhappy in his current position and wishes to serve another employer. Bassanio becomes impatient with their wordiness, but Launcelot steps in and asks Bassanio for a job—a wish Bassanio immediately grants. Launcelot is overjoyed and reads a positive, if unlikely, fortune in his own palm before leaving to give Shylock notice.

[Gratiano](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Gratiano) finds Bassanio and asks to accompany him to Belmont. Bassanio is afraid Gratiano is "too wild, too rude and bold of voice" and his behavior might ruin Bassanio's chances with [Portia](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Portia). Gratiano promises to "put on a sober habit" and behave himself as a man might "to please his grandam." Bassanio agrees to let Gratiano come along, but he allows Gratiano this night to indulge his "merriment" without judgment.

Launcelot's name is spelled "Lancelet" in the first published versions of the play. A lancelet is a small sword or "man-at-arms," which is descriptive of his lower position as a house servant. Some modern versions of the play use the spelling "Lancelot," which alludes to the heroic knight Sir Lancelot of the legends of King Arthur, which creates an ironic contrast with the indecisive and comical figure of [Shakespeare](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/author/)'s Launcelot Gobbo.

Launcelot describes his objection to [Shylock](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Merchant-of-Venice/character-analysis/#Shylock) by saying "My master's a very Jew," and saying he is "famished" in Shylock's service. These lines imply that Shylock does not feed Launcelot sufficiently or that he does not pay Launcelot enough to feed himself. Either way, the description plays into the negative stereotype of Jewish people as greedy and stingy. As in other scenes that illustrate such prejudices, the audience hears Launcelot speak of this behavior, but Shylock and Launcelot directly interact very little onstage. It is impossible to be sure Launcelot's complaints are entirely objective and are not colored by his prejudice. Launcelot and his father's silliness, including the comical palm reading near the end of the scene, are an example of the play's inherent ambiguity. It may be interpreted that these foolish and uneducated men are meant to be superior to Shylock, underlining his inferiority in this society. Certainly, these men enjoy greater freedom in Venice than Shylock does. At the same time, their foolishness and lack of education could also indicate their inadequacy as judges of Shylock's character.

***Summary and Analysis Part by Part:***

***Summary Part 1:***

[Launcelot Gobbo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters), [Shylock](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/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).

***Analysis Part 1:***

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.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Launcelot](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) has just resolved to leave [Shylock](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/shylock) for good when his father, the blind [Old Gobbo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters), 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.

***Analysis Part 2:***

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.

***Summary Part 3:***

After some confusion, [Gobbo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) accepts that [Launcelot](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) 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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/shylock) influence: "I am a Jew if I serve the Jew any longer," (2.2.106–7) he says.

***Analysis Part 3:***

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.

***Summary Part 4:***

At this moment, [Bassanio](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/bassanio) arrives with [Lorenzo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) and several followers. [Launcelot](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) and [Gobbo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) seize the opportunity and beg Bassanio to employ Launcelot so that he can escape [Shylock](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters/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.

***Analysis Part 4:***

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.

***Summary Part 5:***

As [Launcelot](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) is leaving, [Gratiano](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters) 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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-merchant-of-venice/characters), but that he will come to Bassanio's house for supper.

***Analysis Part 5:***

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.

***Important Quotations:***

***Quotation1:***

LANCELET  
Nay, indeed, if you had your eyes, you might  
fail of the knowing me. It is a wise father that  
knows his own child. (2.2.73-75)

***Explanation 1:***

Lancelot never makes clear that he loves his father, but teases him instead. (And teases pretty cruelly, joking that Old Gobbo's son is dead.) It seems Lancelot takes advantage of his father's blindness and the fact that he doesn't really know him. This is a seemingly silly aside, but it's actually an interesting parallel to the relationship between Jessica and Shylock. We're never really clear on whether they love each other, but it is clear that Shylock doesn't really know who Jessica is. Jessica, like Lancelot, betrays her father, but while Lancelot does it in jest, Jessica's betrayal is much graver and seriously calls her love and loyalty into question.

***Quotation 2:***

LANCELOT  
"Budge," says the fiend. "Budge not," says my conscience.  
"Conscience," say I, you counsel well." "Fiend," say I, "you  
counsel well." To be rul'd by my conscience, I should stay with  
the Jew my master, who—God bless the mark!—is a kind of devil;  
and, to run away from the Jew, I should be ruled by the fiend,  
who—saving your reverence!—is the devil himself. Certainly the    Jew is the very devil incarnation; and, in my conscience, my  
conscience is but a kind of hard conscience to offer to counsel  
me to stay with the Jew. The fiend gives the more friendly  
counsel. I will run, fiend; my heels are at your commandment; I  
will run. (2.2.1)

***Explanation:***

There's no evidence that Shylock is particularly awful to Lancelot—it seems that religious attitudes are at work in painting Shylock as the devil incarnate. He's caught between a rock and a hard place, as often happens in the play. Lancelot gives no reason for his choice; he just dismisses his conscience as a hard one, giving worse advice than the fiend.

This is particularly interesting when we think of the other person who must choose between Shylock and something else: Jessica. Though we never really see her reasoning, maybe Shakespeare is suggesting it was something similar to this?