The Merchant of Venice Study Guide

The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

The Merchant of Venice ranks with *Hamlet* as one of Shakespeare's most frequently performed dramas. Written sometime between 1594 and 1598, the play is primarily based on a story in *Il Pecorone,* a collection of tales and anecdotes by the fourteenth-century Italian writer Giovanni Fiorentino. There is considerable debate concerning the dramatist's intent in *The Merchant of Venice* because, although it conforms to the structure of a comedy, the play contains many tragic elements. One school of critics maintains that the drama is fundamentally allegorical, addressing such themes as the triumph of mercy over justice, New Testament forgiveness over Old Testament law, and love over material wealth. Another group of commentators, observing several ambiguities in the play's apparent endorsement of Christian values, contends that Shakespeare actually censures Antonio and the Venetians who oppose Shylock. In essence, these critics assert that the Christians' discrimination against Shylock which ultimately results in his forced conversion from Judaism, contradicts the New Testament precepts of love and mercy. Other commentators suggest that Shakespeare intentionally provided for both interpretations of the drama: although the playwright does not entirely support Shylock, they contend, neither does he endorse the actions of Antonio and the other Venetians in their punishment of the Jew.

Plot Summary

In Venice. Antonio is describing his mysterious state of melancholyto his companions Solanio and SaIerio when Bassanio approaches him for a loan. Bassanio is already in debt to the merchant, but he asks for an additional sum so that he can woo the wealthy and beautiful Portia in Belmont. Because most of his money is invested in three merchant vessels that have not returned from abroad, Antonio is unable to comply with his friend's request. Nevertheless, he authorizes Bassanio to borrow money using his name. Bassanio turns to Shylock, who hates Antonio because he is a Christian and because he lends money without interest. Shylock agrees to lend Antonio 3,000 ducats for three months: if the loan is not repaid in time, he will demand a pound of the merchant's flesh. Bassanio objects, but Antonio signs the bond, confident that his ships will return before the term expires. Meanwhile in Belmont, Portia laments the provision of her father's will that states she must wed the suitor who, from three caskets one of gold, one of silver, and one of lead-chooses the one containing her picture. She expresses her relief to Nerissa that all the previous suitors have failed the test, and then confesses her admiration for Bassanio.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

A merchant in Venice, Antonio, voices his concern over his melancholy. Antonio cannot find a reason for it and his friends, Salarino and Solanio, tell him that it must be his concern over his ships that he has sailing to various ports. Antonio tells them that it is not his ships, as he does not have all his wealth placed on one ship alone. Losing one ship will not ruin him financially. The men decide that Antonio must be in love, but Antonio denies that he is lovesick.

Antonio, Salarino, and Solanio run into Gratiano, Lorenzo, and Bassanio. Bassanio is Antonio's cousin. After Salarino and Solanio exit, Gratiano points out that Antonio looks sad, but Antonio tells him that the people are just players on the world's stage, and he must play his sad part. Gratiano advises Antonio to not become curmudgeonly. Gratiano and Lorenzo then take their leave.

Antonio asks Bassanio about his new love. Bassanio tells Antonio of his poor finances and asks Antonio to borrow money from him to woo his love, Portia, who is a rich heiress. Antonio tells him that he cannot lend him the money directly, as it is all tied up in his shipping ventures, but he promises to guarantee any loan that Bassanio can find.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

In the first scene of the play, we are introduced to the wealthy Christian class. The characters that begin the play show a class that has money and takes great pains to hide their concern over it. The audience sees in Antonio a Christian ethic in which caring for others takes precedence over his money. The audience also sees a bond between Bassanio and Antonio that goes deeper than money. Antonio truly cares for Bassanio as an elder brother figure. Antonio is willing to watch out for his friend and provide him with the financial means to woo the woman he loves.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Portia enters with her lady-in-waiting, Nerissa. Portia complains that she is tired of the world, because she cannot choose a husband for herself but must follow the rules stipulated in her father's will. Portia has been pursued by a number of wealthy and royal suitors, but none of them interested her, as they had some faults like ego and no sense of humor. One even had too much a fondness for his horse, and another was a drunk. None of them would even attempt the puzzle left by her father, which involved choosing among three caskets, or boxes, based on clues that would lead him to the correct box. There was one casket of gold, another of silver, and the third of lead. Each box had a clue, and the worthy suitor would choose the box that contained Portia's picture, thus earning her hand in marriage. The women's rants about the previous suitors were interrupted by a servant announcing that the Moroccan prince will arrive that night, not that Portia is pleased with the news.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

In the second scene, we are introduced to the wealthy Christian women of the play. Portia is a wise heiress longing to choose her own husband. However, she is a good daughter honoring her father by allowing his plan to find her a worthy husband to be played out. The audience learns of the scenario by which Portia's husband is to be found, and though it seems a simple puzzle to the reader, we also see Shakespeare pointing fun at the very upper class and royalty by their ego and faults. However, Shakespeare only points fun at those that are not Englishmen, showing some loyalty to his own country. The audience also sees that Portia is an honorable woman, but still bound by the limits her society places on her, as she is not trusted to choose her own husband.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

Shylock and Bassanio are working out the details of the loan. Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, tells Bassanio that Antonio must be a very good man to guarantee such a loan while his ships are all sailing. After all, who knows what will happen to them. Shylock asks to speak with Antonio, and Bassanio asks him to dine with them, but Shylock declines, as there will be pork at the table. As Antonio walks up, Shylock tells himself how much he hates Christian men like Antonio, whose lending out money generously has ruined interest rates in Venice.

Shylock tells the men that he will not charge any interest, though Antonio tells him in this one instance he is willing to bend his own rules against paying interest, for Bassanio. Instead, Shylock tells Antonio, that he wants a pound of flesh if the debt cannot be repaid. Despite Bassanio's protests, Antonio agrees, for he believes he will earn three times what he owes from his investments. Bassanio expresses his concerns when a villain like Shylock acts nicely.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

As a stark contrast to the fun-loving and caring Christian men we have seen so far the more harsh and disliked character of Shylock is introduced. It was not uncommon in Shakespeare's time to vilify Jews in theatrical presentations, yet Shylock is not a fully evil character. Shylock's malice is brought on by both his nature and his treatment by the Christians. The audience sees a major difference in the way Antonio treats Shylock versus Bassanio in the same scene.

It is seen that, though Shylock is jaded and seeks revenge, he is neither fully evil nor ignorant of Christian values. Shylock readily quotes the New Testament to the Christians, especially when they ask him to dine with them, knowing that he will not eat pork (Jewish custom forbids eating anything from a pig). However, instead of showing Shylock mercy, the Christian men compare him to the Devil, who is adept at quoting and twisting scripture. Shakespeare uses these scenes to exhibit a hypocrisy of many Christians in Venice.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

Back in Belmont, the Moroccan prince arrives, a dark skinned man dressed in white and followed by four servants. The prince asks Portia not to judge his skin color, but to look more at his beauty. Portia explains that she does not believe beauty is the way to her heart, but then laments that her husband is not hers to choose, either.

The prince decides to take on the challenge of the caskets, despite Portia's warnings that he will not be able to discuss marriage with any other woman if he chooses the wrong box.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

In this scene, we begin to understand more why men have not been willing so far to venture a guess toward the caskets, as they can never marry if they choose incorrectly. Portia's father has placed a great emphasis on character by laying out that stipulation. It is the first step toward determining who is worthy to marry his beloved daughter.

The audience also sees the differences in the types of men who come to choose versus Portia's character. The Moroccan prince believes her reserved manner is due to his dark skin color making him less attractive to her. While in fact, it is his boasting and ego that drives her away from him. Portia's desire to look beyond the outside appearance of her suitors says a great deal about her upstanding character.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 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.

Act 2, Scene 2 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.

Act 2, Scene 3

Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

Jessica, Shylock's daughter, tells Launcelot that she is sad to see him leave, but gives him a letter for Lorenzo. To herself, she deplores herself for being ashamed of her father. Yet she vows to become a Christian and marry Lorenzo.

Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

Again, Shylock seems condemned by those around him, even his own daughter. The audience wonders about Shylock's character since all these characters seem to hold him in such contempt, yet none voice any other reason for the malice except for Shylock being a Jew and somewhat tedious. This same voice coming from his daughter also calls into question her own virtue, as she berates herself for her own sin of being ashamed of Shylock. It calls into question her own morality and leads us to think of Jessica as a spoiled, impetuous girl.

Act 2, Scene 4

Act 2, Scene 4 Summary

Gratiano, Lorenzo, Salarino, and Solanio discuss the preparations for the masquerade party that evening and how they have no torchbearers. Launcelot enters and gives Lorenzo the letter, who excuses himself for a moment to read it. Launcelot exits to invite Shylock to dine with Bassanio that evening, while Salarino and Solanio exit to prepare for the party. Lorenzo tells Gratiano that the letter is from Jessica explaining how he is to help her run away from home that same night. Lorenzo tells Gratiano that if Shylock goes to Heaven, it will be because of Jessica. Lorenzo hands Gratiano the letter and tells him that Jessica will be his torchbearer for the masquerade.

Act 2, Scene 4 Analysis

The continued contempt of Shylock is again voiced by Lorenzo, who believes Jessica to be more virtuous by turning her back on her heritage and embracing Christianity due to her love of him. A play on words exists here, with Jessica becoming the torchbearer for Lorenzo, carrying a "torch" for the man she loves.

Act 2, Scene 5

Act 2, Scene 5 Summary

Shylock is lecturing Launcelot on how he will not receive the good treatment he has been accustomed to in his own home, now that Launcelot is working for Bassanio. Shylock calls for Jessica, and tells her that he is going to dine with Bassanio to spite him. When he learns from Launcelot that there will be a masquerade, he tells her to lock up the doors and windows and not to look out the windows at the partygoers. Launcelot exits, whispering to Jessica that a Christian is coming worth her looking out at him. Shylock reminds Jessica to lock things up so nothing gets stolen and he leaves to dine with Bassanio. Jessica bids him farewell, thinking that, if she is lucky, she will lose a father and he will lose a daughter.

Act 2, Scene 5 Analysis

Shylock is portrayed in this scene, not as an evil character, but as one that lives strictly by the Law and rules of his religion. Shylock seems almost Puritanical in his care to not revel in the masquerade. Shylock also determines that he will join Bassanio for dinner in order to spite him, which again shows his own contempt for the Christians who make him an outcast. Yet, we also see a concern for both his daughter and his possessions, as he tells Jessica not to watch the revelers in order to protect her purity to lock the doors to protect his possessions.

Act 2, Scene 6

Act 2, Scene 6 Summary

Gratiano and Salarino are waiting for Lorenzo who is late. The men wonder at the situation, as often lovers enjoy the chase, but then the love wanes once the relationship is consummated. Lorenzo arrives, apologizing for being late. Lorenzo calls for Jessica, who arrives on the balcony dressed as a page. Jessica tosses down a box of treasures, and laments her having to dress as a boy in front of her love. Jessica is scared to be Lorenzo's torchbearer, as she worries what people would think of her. Jessica returns to the house to lock up the house. Gratiano tells Lorenzo that Jessica cannot be a Jew, for she is too nice. When Jessica returns, she, Lorenzo, and Salarino leave for the masquerade. Antonio arrives telling Gratiano that the winds are right and Bassanio is setting sail immediately. Gratiano leaves to join Bassanio.

Act 2, Scene 6 Analysis

The audience sees how the men regard Jessica as a virtuous figure for leaving her father. Yet they regard her as virtuous while she is running away from a father who never mistreated her and is stealing his belongings. The men hold her above contempt despite her race, which again proves that the contempt for Shylock is not one from any direct action of Shylock's but just the fact that he is a Jew. The audience also sees Jessica, despite her contempt of her heritage, acting in a way befitting the stereotype by grabbing a number of treasures to bring with her.

Act 2, Scene 7

Act 2, Scene 7 Summary

Back at Belmont, the Moroccan prince is choosing between the caskets. The prince comes upon the gold casket with the inscription telling him that the box contains what many men want. The silver box has an inscription stating that the casket contains what he deserves. Meanwhile, the dull, lead box's inscription warns that the man who chooses the box risks all that he has. After much analysis, the prince chooses the gold casket, for he knows that many men come to woo Portia, and she is what they desire. However, upon opening the casket, he finds a skull with a poem explaining why he has chosen incorrectly. With few words, he takes his leave of the scene. Portia is glad to see him go and hopes that any others like him choose incorrectly, too.

Act 2, Scene 7 Analysis

Portia, though frustrated in not being able to choose her own husband, is glad when the Moroccan chooses incorrectly. Despite his ego, we can understand why he logically chose the gold box, and sympathize as he leaves quickly. In this scene we glimpse a cool Portia that cares little for the Moroccan's lonely future, but instead hopes that none of his kind chooses the right casket.

Act 2, Scene 8

Act 2, Scene 8 Summary

Salarino and Solanio are discussing the scene, when Shylock realizes that Lorenzo and Jessica had ran off together. Shylock appeals to the Duke to search Bassanio's ship, but they are too late, for Bassanio has already sailed. Antonio leads them off the path, saying that he saw them on a gondola. Shylock is visibly upset by both the loss of his daughter and his ducats. The two men voice concern for Antonio's debt, for if he is unable to pay, Shylock will be ready for vengeance at his loss. The concern is great, for there are rumors that Antonio's ships were wrecked in the English Channel. Solanio tells Salarino that he needs to tell Antonio what he has heard, but that he should tell him in time. The men feel that Antonio is too sad now that Bassanio has left, and so they go to cheer him up.

Act 2, Scene 8 Analysis

Salarino and Solanio serve to move the plot of the play forward by giving a summary account of what has been happening. Though they revel in Shylock's misfortune, the audience feels for Shylock's losses. Shylock is not a fully sympathetic villain, though, as he places the loss of his daughter on the same level as the loss of his money and valuables. However, we begin to worry for Antonio, for we now know that his ships may be lost at sea, and Shylock will have a way to seek his revenge.

Act 2, Scene 9

Act 2, Scene 9 Summary

The prince of Arragon is at Belmont and is about to make his choice. The prince is brusque and insulting to Portia. The man tells her that she would have to be more beautiful to him in order for him to pick the gold box. The prince dismisses the lead box, and so chooses the silver box since it contains what he deserves. However, he finds a portrait of an idiot inside with a poem describing him as a fool. The prince leaves quietly in his own anger. A servant enters telling Portia that a young Venetian has arrived looking like he is the perfect suitor. Portia and Nerissa go to see what man is worthy of such high praise from the servant, and Nerissa hopes it is Bassanio coming to win Portia's hand.

Act 2, Scene 9 Analysis

Again we see another suitor very unworthy of Portia's hand in marriage. This suitor is not only arrogant, but he is also insulting to her. The audience feels little sympathy for his loss and also realizes which box is the right casket, and wait now for Bassanio's choice.

Act 3, Scene 1

Act 3, Scene 1 Summary

Salarino and Solanio discuss the rumors that another of Antonio's ships has been lost in the English Channel, and they hope that this is all he loses. Shylock enters, accusing them of being in on Jessica's plans to run away. Shylock tells them that she will be damned for her choice, but the men tell him that he is the very opposite of her daughter. Salarino asks Shylock if he has heard anything of Antonio's ships, and Shylock tells them that Antonio is hiding from them, because he will soon be bankrupt. Shylock tells them that he will gladly take a pound of Antonio's flesh in collection of the debt and use it as fish bait. Shylock vents to the men that he has been mistreated by Antonio just for being a Jew. Shylock tells them that he is a man, too, like them, but Antonio only sees him by his nationality and he will treat Antonio as badly as he has been treated by the men that call themselves Christians.

Tubal, another Jew, enters just as Solanio and Salarino enters. Tubal tells Shylock that he has been unable to find Jessica, but has heard news that Antonio's ship has been destroyed returning from Tripolis. However, he also heard that Jessica traded her mother's ring for money and spent 80 ducats in one night. Despite Shylock's despair over his daughter's betrayal, he spirits are lifted by the knowledge that Antonio is ruined, and he sends Tubal to have Antonio arrested.

Act 3, Scene 1 Analysis

Solanio and Salarino continue to fulfill their duties by catching up the audience on what has happened over the past three months with Antonio and Shylock. The two also set up the audience for Antonio's failure to repay his debt to Shylock. The audience sees their concern for Shylock's revenge as Shylock rants to them of his own misfortune at Antonio's hands. Shylock is justified in his contempt for Antonio, though we cannot feel completely sympathetic for Shylock, as he has no mercy for Antonio whatsoever. Shylock is consumed by revenge, which is difficult to overlook.

Act 3, Scene 2

Act 3, Scene 2 Summary

Back in Belmont, Bassanio is preparing to make his choice between the caskets, and Portia is pleading with him to wait until he knows her better. Portia is torn between letting him know which casket to choose and following her father's wishes. However, Bassanio does not want to wait. Portia requests that music be played while Bassanio chooses. Bassanio carefully looks over the caskets. Bassanio dismisses the gold casket, for its looks deceive and dismisses the silver box as something common. Bassanio is intrigued by the dangerous look of the lead box and so chooses it. Bassanio opens it to find the picture of Portia with a poem praising him on his wise choice.

Everyone celebrates the wise choice of Bassanio and the two declare their love for one another. Portia gives Bassanio a ring, telling him that it signifies their love and he should never part with it, as it would symbolize the end of their love. Gratiano congratulates the two and hopes to share in their nuptials, for he and Nerissa are also in love and wish to marry. The celebrating and planning is cut short, though, when Salarino gives Bassanio a letter from Antonio. All of Antonio's ships have been lost, and Shylock is planning to take the pound of flesh in payment. Bassanio feels guilty, and Portia tells him to take twenty times the sum to pay the debt. Jessica, however, voices her concern that Shylock is more interested in revenge than payment. Still, Portia urges Bassanio to go help his friend.

Act 3, Scene 2 Analysis

In this scene, we are offered closure to the drama of the caskets, and see happiness for Bassanio and Portia. Though there is some drama encompassed in the "will he or won't he" choose correctly, it seemed destined from the beginning of the story. However, the celebration is cut short by the drama happening in Venice, where Antonio is about to lose a pound of flesh to repay a debt of Bassanio's. The audience sees Portia's cool head and generosity rising, yet now we begin to lose a bit of sympathy for Shylock, who is about to gain revenge on them all for the loss of money and his daughter. Jessica voices her concern to all that her father seeks revenge more than restitution. Jessica's comment is not acknowledged by anyone, and shows her lack of acceptance by the group as a whole.

Act 3, Scene 3

Act 3, Scene 3 Summary

Shylock tells the jailer to watch out for Antonio, for Antonio will try to get him to feel sorry for him. Yet Shylock reminds Antonio of all the times he has had little sympathy for Shylock, and so now he has come to collect the debt owed to him. Antonio pleads with Shylock to listen to him, but gives up, believing that Shylock hates him for giving money to those who could not repay their debts to Shylock. Solanio tells Antonio that the Duke will never allow Shylock to take such a measure against him, but Antonio believes that the Duke will uphold the law, for if he does not, Venice will suffer. Shylock hopes that Bassanio will arrive to see him repay the debt.

Act 3, Scene 3 Analysis

Sympathy for Shylock evaporates in this scene, as we see him bent solely on revenge. Shylock takes his anger to extremes by demanding the pound of flesh from Antonio. Shylock is completely blinded to forgiveness and grace by his own rage and past humiliations. The audience is also introduced to the importance of law in Venice. While Solanio sees the Duke as a good, moral man, Antonio reminds him how important it is to keep emotions and the law separate. This distinction will play an important part in later scenes.

Act 3, Scene 4

Act 3, Scene 4 Summary

Lorenzo praises Portia for being so patient with her husband and letting him leave to repay his debt. Portia tells him that she will be dutiful in prayer and contemplation until his return. Portia leaves Lorenzo and Jessica in charge of the house, as she tells them that she will be going to the monastery to pray. In the meantime, she sends her servant with a letter to her cousin, who is a lawyer in Padua. Portia tells Nerissa that they will see their husbands sooner than they thought, for they are going to Venice dressed as men. Nerissa asks why they will be dressed as men, and Portia vows to explain everything on the ferry.

Act 3, Scene 4 Analysis

Portia's intelligence and determination come to the forefront, as she is about to confront the villain of the play. Portia plots to assist her husband in Venice by dressing as a boy. It was not an uncommon ploy of Shakespeare to have women dress as men to move a plot, and it is also a way of Shakespeare to exhibit a woman's intelligence in comparison to men.

Act 3, Scene 5

Act 3, Scene 5 Summary

Launcelot expresses his concern to Jessica that she is going to hell for the sins of her father. Launcelot tells her that she may only be saved by the small possibility that her father is not her real father. However, Jessica tells him that she will be saved, because her husband has made her a Christian. Launcelot tells her that all these conversions will do nothing but raise the price of bacon. Lorenzo scolds Launcelot for getting Portia's Moor servant pregnant. Launcelot makes a number of jokes and leaves to prepare the table for dinner. Lorenzo asks Jessica what she thinks of Portia, and she tells him that she thinks Portia's virtues cannot be matched by any other woman in the world. Lorenzo jokes that he hopes he can be as good a husband to her as Portia is a wife to Bassanio.

Act 3, Scene 5 Analysis

This scene does little to advance the plot of the play, yet it does allow for some comic relief in a serious part of the play. The audience gets some insight into Jessica's views of the people around her. Jessica understands what is considered virtuous in the society she is entering and strives for it, even though she was dismissed by many of those around her.

Act 4, Scene 1

Act 4, Scene 1 Summary

The Duke calls Shylock into the courtroom and tells him that everyone is expecting him to relent at the last moment and show Antonio mercy, as Antonio has already lost so much. However, Shylock tells the Duke that he expects the Duke to honor the contract and allow him to take a pound of Antonio's flesh. Shylock reminds the Duke that if he rules otherwise, Venice's charter could be endangered. Bassanio calls Shylock hard-hearted, and the two argue. Antonio tells him that arguing is useless, so Bassanio offers Shylock double the amount of the debt if he will drop the case against Antonio. Shylock turns him down, telling Bassanio that he would not even take ten times the dollar amount in lieu of the pound of flesh. The Duke asks Shylock how he thinks he will ever be shown mercy if he offers none himself. Yet Shylock reminds the Duke that he is not afraid of man's judgment, but if the Duke rules against him, all of Venice's laws become invalid.

Nerissa enters, dressed as a messenger coming from the lawyer Bellario's office in Padua introducing Balthazar, a young lawyer he has sent in his place to help the Duke decide on the matter. Balthazar is actually Portia dressed as a boy. Meanwhile, Shylock is listening to Gratiano berate him for having the soul of the wolf that was killed for slaughtering humans. However, Shylock stands by his desire for the law to be fulfilled.

Portia begins by acknowledging that Shylock has a valid claim against Antonio, and tells Shylock must show him mercy. Portia explains that mercy is a double blessing, in that it blesses both the giver and the receiver, and justice will not save anyone's soul. Shylock, dismisses the thought and continues to demand his revenge. Portia then changes her approach and asks Antonio if he is able to repay the debt. Portia tells him that she is shocked that he has not accepted the three times the monetary debt owed, and Shylock dismisses it and asks her to offer a verdict. Portia tells Antonio to prepare for his knife and she tells Shylock to have a doctor on hand to prevent Antonio from bleeding to death, but Shylock refuses, as it is not stipulated in the contract.

Antonio bids his friend, Bassanio, farewell. Antonio tells him not to grieve, because usually a man is meant to suffer after he has lost all his wealth. However, Bassanio and Gratiano both tell Antonio that they would give their dearly loved wives up if they could save him. Portia comments that the wives would not be so pleased to hear such statements. As Shylock prepares to cut the flesh from Antonio's chest, Portia warns him that he must not shed any of Antonio's blood, nor should he take any less or any more that one pound of flesh. If he does then he should be put to death, as he would then be conspiring to kill a Venetian. Shylock then decides that he will just take the money offered to him, but Portia tells him that he has already refused, so he cannot take the money.

Portia reminds the court that half of Shylock's estate must go to Antonio, as he is the Venetian whose life Shylock threatened, and the other half must go to the state. After pleading to the Court for mercy, the Duke agrees to reduce the state's half to a fine, but Antonio promises to return his half to Shylock if Shylock converts to Christianity and leaves his estate to Jessica and Lorenzo upon his death. Shylock reluctantly agrees, and he leaves saying that he is not feeling well.

The Duke invites Portia to dinner, but she tells him that she must leave. Antonio and Bassanio tell her that they must repay her for the work she has done. Portia tells Antonio that she will take his gloves in payment and Bassanio's ring. Bassanio tells her that the ring is but a trifle, and he will find her the most expensive ring in Venice. Yet she says it is the ring or nothing. Bassanio explains that it was a gift from his beloved wife, yet she tells him many men use that excuse. Antonio tells Bassanio to let her have the ring, as he should value the saving of his life as more worthy than the demands of his wife. Bassanio relents and sends Gratiano to give Portia the ring.

Act 4, Scene 1 Analysis

At the start of the longest scene in the play, Shylock again appears villainous and cruel. Shylock is blinded completely by his own desire for his revenge, and continues to demand the pound of flesh. The men are at a loss to make any decisions, and plead for Shylock to see reason and offer mercy. However, it is upon the entrance of Portia that we see cooler heads prevail.

It was not uncommon for Shakespeare to make women more intellectually superior than men. In a time when women were regulated to specific gender roles, Shakespeare broke through that and offered up women's intelligence to his audience. It is not any of the men that save Antonio from his fate, but a woman. It is not a man that offers judgment on Shylock, but a woman.

By the end of the chapter, the modern audience wonders, though, if Shylock's sentence is too cruel. The audience is able to admire Portia's intelligence, but wonder at her harsh treatment of the Jew. Yet, in Shakespeare's time, conversion was to come at any cost. Though Shylock lost his faith and his method of employment, the audience would believe it was well worth it. By today's standards, the end events offer the modern audience the ability to feel sorrier for Shylock, who is one of Shakespeare's more complicated villains.

Act 4, Scene 2

Act 4, Scene 2 Summary

Portia tells Nerissa to bring the deed to Shylock's house and tells her how happy Lorenzo will be with what they have done. The women plan to return to Belmont when Gratiano arrives with the ring. Portia asks him to show Nerissa to Shylock's home, and Nerissa tells Portia that she will also try to get her ring from Gratiano. Portia imagines she will, and thinks how they will embarrass their husbands when they swear they gave the rings to men.

Act 4, Scene 2 Analysis

By getting the rings away from the men, Portia is again exhibiting her superior cunning and intellectual skills. The letting go of the ring again brings the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio to question, as it appears that Antonio feels he should be valued above any wife and Bassanio defers to that thought. Though Antonio's attitude toward women is more reflective of the reality of women's roles at the time, Bassanio is caught between the reality and the love and respect he has for his wife.

Act 5, Scene 1

Act 5, Scene 1 Summary

Lorenzo and Jessica are spending a romantic night in Belmont comparing themselves to famous lovers like Thisbee and Pyramus, Dido and Aenaeus, and Jason and Medea. A messenger interrupts them to tell the pair that Portia and Nerissa will be returning from the monastery soon. As the duo prepares to greet her, Launcelot enters, telling them that Bassanio will return the next day.

Portia and Nerissa arrive, and they are greeted by Lorenzo and Jessica. Portia makes them promise not to tell her husband that they ever left. Bassanio enters and happily greets his wife. Bassanio introduces her to Antonio, telling her that he has been acquitted by the court in Venice. The two overhear Nerissa and Gratiano arguing over the ring that he gave away to the clerk in Venice. Portia reprimands him and tells him that her husband would never part with her ring. Yet Gratiano tells her that he would not have given away his ring, but for the fact that Bassanio gave his to the young lawyer who freed Antonio.

Portia rails against Bassanio for having no heart, and she vows to never visit his bed again unless he gets the ring back. Bassanio begs for Portia to understand that he gave the ring to the lawyer for saving Antonio's life. Yet Portia tells him that he probably gave it to another woman and is just using the lawyer as an excuse. Antonio intercedes, telling Portia that she can have his soul if Bassanio ever betrays her again. Portia and Nerissa then relent and tell the men of all the events. Portia also offers Antonio a letter letting him know that all of his ships have arrived safely in port and tells Lorenzo that he is now heir to Shylock's wealth.

Act 5, Scene 1 Analysis

As typical of comedy, the last scene of the play is a joyous one. It ends with the women toying with their husbands and showing off their continued intellectual superiority. The women even get Antonio to believe in their deception, though in the previous act he dismissed the wife's love as below what Bassanio should show to him, he now relents and offers up his soul to preserve it.

Though it is supposed to be a happy ending, we wonder at the future of the pairings. Lorenzo and Jessica compare themselves to some of the most tragic figures in literary history. None of the couples they mentioned ended happily. Also, Portia and Nerissa's intelligence seem so much more advanced than their husbands, we wonder if their futures will be as pleasant as they are in the moment.

Characters

Antonio:

Antonio is a merchant of Venice, perhaps "the" merchant of Venice. When Bassanio asks him for money to impress Portia, Antonio wants to give it to him but cannot because all of his money is tied up in goods that are being transported by ship to ports where they will be sold. Out of kindness to Bassanio he agrees to secure any loan Bassanio might get in the marketplace. Bassanio requests that loan from Shylock, a moneylender with whom Antonio is not on the best of terms. Antonio has criticized Shylock for usury, and Shylock, in turn, resents Antonio's generosity in loaning money out at no interest. To get back at Antonio, Shylock proposes a bond that stipulates Antonio will forfeit "a pound of flesh" if he cannot repay the loan. Again, out of kindness to his friend and a certainty that his ships will have come in by the deadline, Antonio agrees to the terms of the bond. When he loses his fortune through a series of unexpected accidents, Shylock brings him to trial, intending to fulfill the terms of the bond. Antonio's reputation for generosity and kindness is such that when his friends are informed of his predicament they rally around him and appeal to Shylock to show him mercy.

Antonio is a difficult character to interpret. At the beginning of the play he expresses a troubling sadness which is the result of neither a concern for the safety of his merchandise nor a condition of love. Although the play never explains Antonio's sadness, it might, perhaps, result from an uneasiness with the very profession he has chosen. So often praised for his Christian generosity in loaning mon ey and charging no interest, we might wonder how Antonio makes any money. Obviously, his impulse to give freely contradicts the nature of his dealings as a merchant, a profession requiring that profit be made off of others. Although the play is set in Venice, it is likely that Shakespeare communicates the cultural values of Elizabethan England as he depicts the characters and plans the narrative of the play. Shakespeare's Protestant audience may have seen the completely unexpected loss of Antonio's goods as perhaps a providential condemnation of the profit-driven desires of Antonio.

The carving of flesh which Shylock proposes cannot be taken lightly. In the absence of any sophisticated surgical procedures, it would have killed Antonio. Yet Antonio faces the prospect calmly, concerned only with the well-being of his friend. It has been observed that he is Christ-like in his unselfishness, and here, too, Shakespeare's audience would have perhaps responded to anti-semitic attitudes, seeing Shylock's intended killing of Antonio as parallel with the Jews killing of Christ in Biblical accounts of the story. But as we have seen, this reading of Antonio must be weighed against the reading of Antonio's hypocrisy in both his condemnation of Shylock for business practices in which he himself engages and for the revenge he exacts on Shylock instead of showing the mercy he expected in his own situation.

Arragon (The Prince of Arragon):

The prince of Arragon is the second suitor to try for Portia's hand. He reveals the conditions of the trial: all those gambling to win Portia in marriage agree that if they lose they will never reveal their choice, never propose marriage to another maid, and leave immediately upon failing to choose correctly. Arragon rejects the lead casket because it is a base metal not worth hazarding all for. He reads the inscription on the gold casket "Who chooseth me will gain what many men desire" and concludes that he is far and above the commonplace multitude represented by the "many," his very name suggesting the arrogance of this supposition. He chooses the silver casket and finds only the picture of a fool's head and a note describing the aptness of this image to his attitude. According to the agreement, he leaves immediately saying, "With one fool's head I came to woo, / But I go away with two" (H.ix.75-76).

Attendants:

The princes of Arragon and Morocco are described as having trains of followers amongst whom would have been several attendants. Portia's train of followers is also referred to.

Balthazar:

Balthazar is Portia's servant. When Bassanio leaves Belmont upon learning that Antonio is in trouble, Portia sends Balthazar with a letter ac quainting her cousin Doctor Bellario with the present circumstances and urges Balthazar quickly to convey to her whatever disguises or letters of recommendation Bellario sends. The young doctor that Portia impersonates is named "Balthazar" in Bellario's letter to the duke, a letter which praises the intelligence and judicial knowledge of one so young.

Bassanio:

Bassanio is a young and not very frugal friend of Antonio's. He is a spendthrift who has wasted whatever inheritance he might have had. Having heard of the fortune that will belong to the man who marries Portia, he wants to borrow money from Antonio so that he can present himself as a finan cially suitable suitor to her. He has met Portia before and has read amorous looks in her glances, quite probably presenting himself as having greater means than he actually has, as is his habit. With the money he receives from Antonio, he hopes to recoup his losses with Portia's estate. A good indication of his impulsive character can be found in the description he gives Antonio of a childhood procedure for finding lost arrows. It was his practice, as a child, to shoot a second arrow in the direction of the lost one, paying closer attention to the arrow's flight on this subsequent shooting. This procedure is at best foolhardy and more likely to lose a second arrow than recover the first. Knowing that Bassanio will be taking a similar gamble in the choosing of the correct casket, it is surprising that Antonio agrees to the

proposal. The fact that he does agree is another indication of how ill-suited he is to the role of merchant.

Bassanio is what some today would call a gold digger. Although he is helped along in his choice of caskets by the hints provided by Portia, his situation fits the inscription on the lead casket□"Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath" (II.ix..21)□and he might have chosen correctly on his own since he must know he is indeed hazarding all. His fortune-hunting intentions do not seem likely to provide a good foundation for a lasting relationship with Portia. Still, it becomes obvious that the two are genuinely in love with each other. The acute anticipation they experience before Bassanio's trial with the caskets and their impassioned exchanges after he has chosen successfully are reminiscent of the breathless and intense love demonstrated by Romeo and Juliet at their first meeting.

Bassanio, many commentators note, is not the self-indulgent character he at first seems to be in his generosity with Portia's money; he offers to take Antonio's place and forfeit his hands, head, or heart, attesting to the real friendship between the two men. In Elizabethan society the amorous relationships between men and women were considered secondary to the fraternal bonds between men. It is fitting, then, that Antonio appears in the last scene of the play transferring the wedding ring from Portia to Bassanio. In this transfer, Antonio symbolically sanctions the marriage and discharges the debt Bassanio owes Antonio for having endured so much on Bassanio's behalf.

Gobbo (Launcelot Gobbo):

Launcelot is a clown and a servant to Shylock. While in Shylock's employ, he carries a letter from Jessica to Lorenzo. Shylock describes Launcelot as "kind enough, but a huge feeder, / Snail-slow in profit, and he sleeps by day / More than the wildcat" (II.v.46-48). Launcelot is lazy and a huge drain on Shylock's money, and Shylock is glad when Launcelot quits his service and becomes a servant to Bassanio, hoping he will be a similar drain on Bassanio's resources.

Launcelot's name reminds us of Sir Lancelot from Arthurian legend. That knight was reputed for the chivalric code of ideals he embodied. Launcelot in *The Merchant of Venice* seems to embrace no ideals at all. At one point, in a confused struggle with his conscience, he determines to leave Shy lock's service because he believes the Jew to be the devil incarnate, but later he confidently offers, to Jessica and Lorenzo, the ridiculous argument that Christians raise the price of pork by converting Jews to Christianity. Lorenzo responds that the financial consequence of those conversions would be easier to justify than the ethically irresponsible act Launcelot has committed by impregnating and abandoning a Moorish woman.

Gobbo (Old Gobbo):

Old Gobbo is Launcelot's father. He is nearly blind and does not recognize his son when he encounters him on the street. Launcelot tries to evoke recognition from his father but

is at first unsuccessful. When Old Gobbo finally does recognize Launcelot, he tries to help his son gain employ ment with Bassanio, adding his own confused appeals to those offered by Launcelot. Both men ramble, offer garbled arguments, and utter comic malapropisms (using a word that sounds similar to the intended one but is incorrect in context).

Gratiano:

Gratiano talks a great deal but says very little. According to Bassanio, "Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing, more than any man in Venice" (I.i.l 14-15), and "His reasons are as two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff' (I.i.115-16). He pleads with Bassanio to allow him to go with him to Belmont, and Bassanio consents after cautioning Gratiano to keep quiet once there, lest his enthusiasm and loose tongue reveal Bassanio's real social station and financial circumstances. Gratiano mimics Bassanio. When the latter marries Portia, Gratiano marries Nerissa. Similarly, when Bassanio gives his wedding ring to the young doctor, Gratiano is easily persuaded to do the same.

At Antonio's trial in the Court of Justice, Gratiano is extremely vocal in his criticism of Shylock. He says that Shylock's wolf-like behavior might make Gratiano believe in Pythagoras's phi losophy of reincarnation. When the tables are turned on Shylock, and Portia inquires what mercy Anton io might extend to the moneylender, Gratiano chimes in with "A halter gratis" (IV.i.379).That is, he will give Shylock a noose to hang himself, perhaps alluding to the halter Judas Iscariot used to hang himself after betraying Christ. But we must question how important and how representative Gratiano's statements are in this instance, when even his friends characterize him as something like an empty-head ed loudmouth.

Jailer:

The jailer appears briefly on a street in Venice with Antonio in his custody. Shylock encounters the two and admonishes the jailer for having been persuaded by Antonio to let him out of close confinement. Shylock also admonishes the jailer not to talk of mercy for Antonio; he reminds the jailer that Antonio has lent money out at no interest, a foolish act in Shylock's estimation.

Jessica:

Jessica is Shylock's daughter. She has agreed to run away with the Christian Lorenzo, who comes by her house disguised amongst a group of masquers, when her father is away. Jessica adopts the disguise of a young male torchbearer in order to avoid notice. She steals her father's money and jewels when she elopes with Lorenzo, and the two go on a spending spree of sorts. Tubal reports to Shy lock that Jessica has spent eighty ducats in Genoa in one night. Tubal also tells Shylock that his daughter has traded one

of her mother's jewels for a monkey. This news infuri ates Shylock, and he says that Jessica will be damned for her actions.

Launcelot Gobbo, on the other hand, tells Jessica that she is damned in her very birthright, the unalterable fact that she has Jewish parents. Jessica responds to this by saying, "I shall be sav'd by my husband, he hath made me a Christian!" (III.v.19). Shakespeare's audience would have applauded her conversion to Christianity as the proper course, but her callous treatment of her father and her mother's memory seems to be a rather harsh consequence of that conversion. Even though Jessica has converted to Christianity, there is the sense that she is never fully accepted into the communal atmosphere of Belmont.

Launcelot Gobbo:

See Gobbo

Leonardo:

Leonardo is Bassanio's servant. He is sent by Bassanio to procure a number of items for a dinner to which Bassanio has invited Shylock. The dinner provides Lorenzo and friends the opportunity to abduct Jessica and Shylock's money and jewels while he is away from his house.

Lorenzo:

Lorenzo is part of the circle of friends that includes Antonio, Bassanio, Gratiano, Salerio, and Solanio. In arranging for his elopement with Jessica, Lorenzo takes advantage of the fact that Shylock will be dining with Bassanio. Lorenzo assembles a group of his friends as masquers□like Halloween celebrants, masquers adopted disguises to enact historical episodes or short dramatic pieces written for specific occasions. This group of masquers arrives at Shylock's house, and Lorenzo carries away Jessica and Shylock's money and jewels. After a short but seemingly extravagant stay in Genoa, he and Jessica travel to Belmont. He and Jessica are installed as masters of Portia's Belmont estate when Bassanio and Portia return to Venice to help Antonio.

It is difficult to get beyond the impression that Lorenzo, like Bassanio, marries for money. Every thing that Lorenzo gets comes through the efforts of others. Even though he steals Shylock's wealth, at the end of the play he stands to inherit that wealth legally through Antonio's negotiations. He is temporary master at Belmont and seems perfectly comfortable in that role; throughout the play, the only role he plays is that of an impostor. Unlike Bassanio, whose affection for Portia seems genuine, Lorenzo's love for Jessica is suspect. Near the end of the play, Lorenzo and Jessica compare their love to the loves of famous historical figures: Troilus and Cressida; Aeneas and Dido; and Medea and Jason. Each of these famous love affairs involved betrayal and desertion.

The allusion to these historical person ages is perhaps a foreshadowing of the same kind of fate for Lorenzo and Jessica.

Magnificoes:

The magnificoes are high-ranking noblemen of Venice. They are present at Antonio's trial because they have an interest in its outcome. Like the duke of Venice, they do not want to see Venice's reputation as a center of commerce suffer as a consequence of the government's failure to enforce a mutually agreed upon contract. If it became widely known that Venice did not recognize the contracts into which its merchants entered, the financial interests of Venice would suffer.

Morocco (The Prince of Morocco):

Morocco is the first suitor who tries to choose the correct casket and win Portia in marriage. He reads the inscription on the gold casket□"Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire" (II.vii.37)□and debates with himself that "what many men desire" is certainly Portia. He concludes that since she is much desired by men everywhere, the lead and silver caskets are beneath her dignity; he chooses the gold casket. When he opens it he discovers a death's-head and a scroll that reminds him "All that glisters is not gold ..." (II.vii.65). Like Arragon, Morocco has agreed never to reveal his choice, never propose marriage to another maid, and leave immediately upon failing to choose correctly. Unlike Arragon, he seems to value Portia above himself. So, when Portia says "Let all of his complexion choose me so" (II.vii.79) her dismissal of him seems exceptionally cruel.

Nerissa:

Nerissa is Portia's waiting woman and confidante. She sympathizes with Portia's frustration at being constrained by her father's will and participates in Portia's expression of dissatisfaction with the list of suitors. When Portia goes to Antonio's trial disguised as a young doctor, Nerissa accompa nies her disguised as a young male law clerk. When Portia marries Bassanio, Nerissa marries Gratiano. Almost a mirror image of Portia, Nerissa imitates the actions and embraces the values of her mistress. In the copycat wedding of Nerissa and Gratiano and in the parallels of the ring subplot, *The Merchant of Venice* offers a lesson in Elizabethan social conduct: lower-class persons should mimic their social superiors.

Officers:

These are the officers of the Venetian Court of Justice. We can assume that some of these officers serve as bailiffs, executive officers present to preserve order in the courtroom. Another officer, a clerk, is ordered by Portia/Balthazar (the young but learned doctor) to draw up a deed of gift recording Shylock's agreement to bequeath all his

possessions to Jessica and Lorenzo, an agreement insisted upon by Antonio as part of the settlement with Shylock.

Old Gobbo:

See Gobbo

Portia:

When we first hear of Portia, Bassanio is extol ling her virtues to Antonio. Chief among these virtues, in Bassanio's estimation, is the money she stands to inherit. When we first meet Portia in Belmont, she is bemoaning the constraints her deceased father has placed on that inheritance. She must marry the man who correctly identifies one of three caskets, and Portia punningly complains, "so is the will of a living daughter curb' d by the will of a dead father" (I.ii.24-25). Portia, however, is not a character who will allow her will to be curbed. Bassanio may have wanted to marry Portia for her money, but that wedding would never have become a reality if Portia had not wanted him. She guides Bassanio to the correct choice by giving him hints in a song. Later, in the ring subplot, she manipulates Bassanio further. She gets his wedding ring and evokes his jealousy, telling Bassanio she has slept with the young doctor Balthazar to get it. She uses his jealousy and breach of promise to reinforce his fidelity to her. As the young doctor Balthazar in the Venetian Court of Justice, she exhibits a keen and aggressive intelligence that only her femininity prevents her from exhibiting in every aspect of her life.

As with Antonio, Portia's good nature is praised by other characters in the play. Morocco says of her, "From the four corners of the earth they come / To kiss this shrine, this mortal breathing saint" (II.vii.39-40). Jessica says that "the poor rude world / Hath not her fellow" (III.v.82-83). According to Jessica, no woman on earth can compare with Portia. Yet for all the praise of her virtue, Portia's own speeches and actions embody a contradiction. As Balthazar at the trial of Antonio she delivers a moving speech on the quality of mercy; then, she refuses to extend mercy to Shylock when she gets an advantage over him. She utters a racist slur against Morocco, saying "good riddance" to him and all of his dark com plexion. And the ethnic stereotypes she uses to describe her original four suitors are nothing short of malicious. At times, Portia seems to be a model of Christian tolerance. At other times, she seems narrow-minded, malicious, and petty.

Salerio:

Salerio, like Antonio, is a merchant in Venice. He is a friend to Antonio and Bassanio. In the opening scene of the play, he attributes Antonio's sadness to a concern for the merchandise Antonio has shipped to distant ports, admitting that an enter prise like that would cause him a good deal of concern. He is one of the masquers who aids Lorenzo in his abduction of Jessica, and he is present at Antonio's trial. He appears at intervals throughout the play discussing rumors and reports of Antonio's losses. It is Salerio who

travels to Belmont with Jessica and Lorenzo as a messenger informing Bassanio of Antonio's situation with Shylock. He engages in harsh exchanges with Shylock on the streets of Venice. In his virulent condemnation of Shylock and his glorification of the qualities of Antonio, Salerio acts as a representative of public opinion.

Servants:

These are the servants of Portia in Belmont. In I.ii, a serving-man enters and announces the arrival of Morocco and Arragon in quest of marriage to Portia. Morocco and Arragon are not part of the group of four suitors whose qualities Portia has earlier derided; those four suitors have left, deciding that Portia's fortune was not worth the risk.

Shylock:

A rich Jewish moneylender in Venice, Shylock is the villain of *The Merchant of Venice* in that the problem he initiates causes great concern in the Christian community of that city. He insists that Antonio keep his bond and forfeit a "pound of flesh" since he has failed to make good the three thousand ducats Shylock has loaned to Bassanio on Antonio's guarantee. When the case goes to trial, it presents a problem for the government of Venice. The duke, along with Antonio's friends, asks Shylock to drop the case and demonstrate mercy toward Antonio. Shylock will not do so, and we must ask ourselves why he refuses what seems to be a reasonable request.

Shylock admits that he does not like Antonio, saying at one point, "I hate him for he is a Chris tian" (I.iii.42). He goes on to offer another reason for disliking Antonio: Antonio lends money out without charging interest and brings down the inter est rates on loans in Venice. At Antonio's trial he is asked why he persists in his hatred of Antonio, and he answers that his reason for disliking the man is as inexplicable as the reason some men cannot stand to see cats or gaping pigs or cannot stand the sound of bagpipes. None of these perhaps is the real reason he hates Antonio; it seems more likely that he hates Antonio because Antonio hates him. Antonio has spat upon Shylock and treated him like a dog in the Rialto, a public area of commercial exchange. Salerio asks Shylock what he will do with Antonio's flesh since, unlike the meat of cows or goats, it is useless. Shylock responds, "To bait fish withal" (III.i.53). In the speech which follows this statement□Shy lock's famous speech about his humanity□Shylock relates how Antonio has laughed at his losses and mocked his successes. Shylock says that Jews have learned to take revenge from the example set by Christians. He sees himself as the wronged party in the dispute and considers his actions to be justi fied vengeance rather than malicious instigation.

The sentence pronounced upon Shylock at the end of the civil action may seem merciful at first glance, but when examined, it will most likely sap his will to live. Shylock is commanded to turn over half of his wealth to the government of Venice. The other half he must give to Antonio to loan out at interest. These two actions will strip Shylock of his livelihood, a man's lifeblood. To add insult to injury, he is informed that the principal and

the profits on the money given to Antonio, along with any other wealth Shylock might manage to accumulate, will be given to Lorenzo, the man who has robbed him of his daughter and his goods. Finally, he is ordered to convert to Christianity. With this final stroke, Shylock is effectively stripped of all his financial, emotional, and spiritual supports.

Solanio:

Solanio is yet another merchant in Venice and friend to Antonio and Bassanio. In the opening scene of the play, after Antonio has dismissed Salerio's conjecture that Antonio's sadness is caused by a concern for his property, Solanio offers that Antonio's sadness is a consequence of love. It is Solanio who reports Shylock's reaction to Jessica's theft and abandonment of him. He describes how the children follow Shylock and make fun of his agonized losses. Like Salerio, he appears occasionally throughout the play informing the audience of Antonio's misfortunes. He too, in his disgust with Shylock and praise of Antonio is meant to function as a representative attitude of the Venetian populace.

Stephana:

Stephano is another of Portia's servants. He is sent by her to Belmont where he announces to Lorenzo and Jessica that Portia will return the next morning. He inquires if his master□his newly acquired master Bassanio□has yet returned. Lorenzo informs Stephano that Bassanio has not yet re turned, and since Lorenzo does not make the obvi ous connection, we can assume that he and Jessica are ignorant of Portia's disguised presence in Venice.

Tubal:

Tubal is Shylock's friend and a Jewish moneylender in Venice. Shylock does not have the cash at hand to loan to Bassanio, but he knows that he can get the three thousand ducats from his friend Tubal. After Jessica has eloped with Lorenzo, Tubal brings Shylock a mixture of good and bad news. He reports Jessica's spending spree and the news of Antonio's loss at Genoa. Tubal's presence in the play works against the flat portrayal of Shylock as an insensitive and totally alien person. When the two men part, Shylock reminds Tubal to meet him at the synagogue, the audience glimpsing in this reminder a reference to a sense of community and sense of values different from the dominant Christian ones.

Venice (Duke of Venice):

The duke of Venice is placed in a difficult situation by the litigation of the quarrel between Shylock and Antonio. Although he sympathizes with Antonio and, in fact, appeals to Shylock to show him mercy, he cannot nullify the bond between them. To do

so would be to establish a dangerous precedent unscrupulous businessmen might use to wrangle out of their financial obliga tions. The duke must consider the reputation Venice has as a center of commerce. It is highly likely that other trades-people would not be inclined to transact their business in a city where the government sus pended legal commercial contracts at its whim.

Character Studies

The Merchant of Venice is often considered Shylock's play, for the reading of his character generally influences the interpretation of the drama as a whole. If Shylock is perceived as a comic villain, with all the stock characteristics associated with such a role, then he receives his due in the trial scene and the work is truly a comedy. However, if Shylock is seen as the hero of the drama, then his humiliation indicates that the work is a tragedy. Both views can be argued based on the content of the play. Numerous commentators have discussed the extent to which Shakespeare was influenced by the anti-Semitic sentiment of his day. While it is true that the playwright began writing his play with the stereotypical Elizabethan conception of a Jewish usurer in mind, he created in Shylock an ambiguous, yet memorable figure who defies those conventional attributes and who overshadows the rest of the work. By giving Shylock sympathetic human traits-most notably his feelings of persecution at the hands of the VenetiansShakespeare raised the question of whether Shylock's villainous behavior toward Antonio is purely malicious, or whether his actions reflect the desperate attempts of an outsider to secure justice and revenge against the enemies who have wronged him.

Many commentators assert that Portia is one of Shakespeare's finest dramatic creations. Highly intelligent and resourceful, she is viewed as a para gon of femininity, with much more complexity of character than the fairy-tale princesses found in the literary sources available to the playwright. Some critics view Portia as an initially disruptive force in the play because, as an unmarried and wealthy young woman, she poses a threat to the male-dominated Elizabethan worldview. This dramatic tension is relieved, however, when she con *forms* to societal conventions through her marriage to Bassanio. On a more symbolic level, Portia represents the influence of Christian mercy and forgiveness. Perhaps the two most notable instances of Portia's benevolence occur when she attempts to persuade Shylock to have compassion on Antonio during the trial scene and when she pardons Bassanio for forfeiting her ring. Shakespeare invented Bassanio by exploiting a popular dramat ic convention of the time in which a hero of a play wins the hand of a maiden by solving a perplexing riddle. Due to the significance Bassanio places on Portia's wealth early in the play, his character has been interpreted in two conflicting ways. Some commentators maintain that Bassanio is a schem ing opportunist, drawn only to Portia's wealth and position. By contrast, others view the character as a portrait of the ideal Elizabethan lover, arguing that Shakespeare's audience probably considered Bassanio's actions perfectly acceptable. Critics generally agree that while the title character of the drama. the merchant Antonio, is generally overshadowed by both Shylock and Portia. he nonetheless remains crucial to the interweaving of the Belmont and Venice plots. Commentators note that while Antonio is depicted as the consummate Christian because of his humility and charity, his treatment of Shylock conforms to conventional attitudes toward Jews rather than the unconditional love advocated in the New Testament. In addition, the curious circumstances surrounding Antonio's melancholy at the beginning of the play have generated some debate among critics. Some commentators interpret the merchant's sadness as an

indication of his inability to reconcile'the accumulation of wealth with his Christian faith; others read Antonio's sorrow as a manifestation of his unconscious homosexuallove for Bassanio.

Conclusion

The Merchant of Venice is a popular work that allows for a wide variety of interpretations. The complexity of the characters of Portia and Shylock in particular continue to intrigue actors, critics, and readers alike. As S. C. Sen Gupta has stated, *"The Merchant of Venice* introduces us to the middle of Shakespeare's dramatic career" in which "we find not the apprentice of promise but the artist of full genius." (See also *Shakespearean Criticism,* Vols. 4, 12)

Themes

Economics is a prime concern in *The Merchant of Venice,* and one major critical perspective treats the playas a clash between emerging mercantile sensibilities and religious traditions. During Shakespeare's time, usury (lending money for interest) became an accepted business practice as profits became increasingly more important than religious principles. The rivalry between Antonio andShylock is often viewed as an example of two conflicting business ethics. Although Shylock rep resents usury as a pragmatic and legitimate business practice, Antonio embodies a more idealistic perspective of the profession. Following Christian precepts, the merchant generously lends his money interest-free because his wealth and means allow him to do so. This fundamental economic contention, in addition to the two characters' religious differences, establishes their enmity toward one another and creates a rivalry that reaches its climax in the trial sequence (Act IV, scene i). Bassanio's marriage to Portia demonstrates another economic dimension of the play. Due to rising costs during the Renaissance, aristocrats in many cases had to concern themselves with obtaining more wealth to maintain their expected lifestyle, and a generous dowry was considered a respectable means of achieving this end. Many critics contend that even though Bassanio is virtually penniless because of his extravagant spending, his open desire to marry Portia for her money-in addition to her charm and beauty-should not be construed by modem readers as the shrewd enterprise of an unscrupulous fortune hunter. In fact, they continue, an Elizabethan audience probably would have interpreted Bassanio's suit of love as an ordinary and perfectly acceptable arrangement.

Kinds of love and rivalry in love are other important topics in *The Merchant of Venice.* The suitors who vie for Portia all represent different types of love. Arragon and Morocco-the two unsuccessful petitioners-symbolize a shallow and limited form of love. By selecting the silver casket on the basis of its inscription ("Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves" [II. vii. 7]), Arragon reveals that his concept of love is self-serving and vain. Morocco's choice of the gold casket indicates that his notion of love is based on superficiality ("All that glisters is not gold" [II. vii. 65]). However, when Bassanio correctly identifies the lead casket, he demonstrates a superior understanding of love by judging the box on the inner qualities it may pos sess rather than on its dull appearance. The issue of rivalry in love is evident in the association between Antonio, Portia, and Bassanio. Some critics argue that the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio may be a homosexual one, citing the merchant's unexplained melancholy at the beginning of the playas the result of Portia displacing him as the object of Bassanio's affection. In addition, couples-Bassanio and Portia and Jessica and Lorenzo-represent two antithetical kinds of love in *The Merchant of Venice.* Bassanio and Portia demonstrate a socially acceptable courtship; not only do they obey her father's request that Portia's suitor successfully endure the casket test, but they also uphold the legal provisions of the test as mandated in the father's wiii. Jessica and Lorenzo's courtship, however, illustrates a romantic love linked to the great lovers of myth, particularly in the illicitness of their elopement. Unlike Portia and Bassanio's union, Jessica and Lorenzo's defies

social traditions because their aspiration to get married causes them to step out of the bounds of the accepted rules of society.

Shakespeare's delicate balancing of the worlds of Venice and Belmont is another central issue in *The Merchant of Venice.* Venice represents the realistic, civilized world that is supposedly governed by Christian values. However, the Christians are shown to be hypocritical in their treatment of Shylock. For all his purported charity and virtue, Antonio discriminates against the Jew, ultimately forcing Shylock to renounce Judaism and embrace Christianity. Shylock and the other Jews contribute a mercenary dimension to the affairs of the city, in which lending money for interest is considered a legitimate business practice and breaches of contract are immediately redressed with legal action. Although accepted by the Venetians on an economic level, Shylock remains an outsider in the city. His actions are governed by Judaic law and the Old Testament rather than imposed Christian values. Shylock's quest for revenge against Antonio is therefore a retributive action sanctioned by his faith. This desire for vengeance is due to the fact that Shylock has never received mercy or charity from the Christians, and, not surprisingly, it is another outsider, Portia of Belmont, who attempts to inspire compassion in the Jew during Antonio's trial. Portia's Belmont presents the counterpoint to Venice by embodying the qualities of an idealistic world which markedly contrasts with the hypocrisy, revenge, and commercial exploitation which dominate affairs in the city. In essence, Belmont represents a fairy-tale realm where happiness and love flourish and Christian charity and forgiveness hold sway. These benevolent qualities manifest themselves in Portia, whose confrontation with Shylock can be interpreted as a direct clash between the retributive justice ordained in the Old Testament and the mercy and charity advocated in the New Testament. Shakespeare provides *The Merchant of Venice* with a happy ending by emphasizing the love, joy, and forgiveness that thrives in Belmont; but the reader is nevertheless left with the unsettling impression that hypocrisy and hatred persist in Venice.

Modern Connections

The Merchant of Venice is considered one of Shakespeare's problem comedies in part due to its anti-Semitism. A problem play introduces moral dilemmas without offering clear-cut or comforting solutions to these dilemmas. In *The Merchant of Venice,* the Christian Antonio and his friends plead with the Jewish Shy lock to show mercy towards Antonio, yet when the situation is reversed and Antonio and his friends are in a position to show Shylock mercy, they do not. Instead, they strip him of his worldly possessions and force him to convert to Christianity. Since there were few or no Jews in Shakespeare's England, his depiction of Shylock is probably based on stereotypes rather than the intimate knowledge acquired through contact. Shylock is depicted as a Jewish moneylender who makes his money through "usury," a practice in which exor bitant interest is charged on loans. He hates Antonio because Antonio loans money without interest and cuts into Shylock's business. It is reported by Solanio that when Shylock discovers his daughter and his money missing he wanders the streets crying, "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!" (II.viii.15). Solanio implies that Shylock values his daughter and his money equally, another stereotypical image of Jews in the Elizabethan age.

Shakespeare's audience would have expected this kind of stereotype and probably would have applauded Shylock's harsh treatment at the hands of the Christians in the play. But for modern audiences, this treatment of Shylock is neither funny nor necessary. In fact, we tend to read a certain hypocrisy in the contrast between the Christians' speeches and actions. For all their talk of "mercy," they show Shylock none at all when the tables are turned. We can read, after all, the glimpses of Shylock's humanity Shakespeare gives us beneath the veneer of stereotype. Shylock asks, "Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?" (III.i.59-60). When his friend Tubal tells him that one of Shylock's stolen jewels has been given in exchange for a monkey, Shylock reveals that the jewel was one he had given his wife, Leah. He says, "I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys" (III.i. 123). From these references, one can infer that Shylock has loved deeply and experiences pain.

In *The Merchant of Venice,* Shakespeare dramatizes the contrast between "law" and "mercy" in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Shylock represents law as it is stressed in the Old Testament of the Bible, and Portia and the others represent the mercy associated with Christianity and the New Testament. The message of the play seems to be that laws are necessary but must be tempered with mercy and compassion. Shakespeare emphasizes that it is important to observe the "spirit" rather than the "letter" of the law. For example, the spirit of the law or bond negotiated between Shylock and Antonio is the guarantee of restitution□Antonio will see that the ducats loaned by Shylock will be repaid. Shylock should have been satisfied with the offers by Bassanio and Portia to double or even triple the original amount of the loan; instead, he insists on cutting off a pound of Antonio's flesh. Since this surgery would most certainly have killed Antonio, conforming to the letter of the bond would have been an instance of state-licensed murder, disrupting the system of laws instituted for the protection of Venetian society.

The play's insistence on conforming to the spirit rather than the letter of the law is evident not only in the main plot but in the two subplots as well.

In the subplot of the caskets, Portia is faced with the law of her deceased father's will. She must marry the suitor who passes the test devised by her father to correctly choose a certain casket. Portia perhaps violates the letter of her father's will by helping Bassanio choose correctly but not the spirit of her father's will. We can only imagine that the test was devised to procure for Portia an intelligent and financially stable husband with certain values. If the test of choosing the right casket is meant to insure Portia's happiness, we can hardly imagine that Portia's father would have been disappointed with the success achieved by Bassanio through her manipulation.

In the subplot of the rings, Bassanio and Gratiano have promised never to give away their wedding rings. Obviously, they have not really given the rings away since it is Portia who receives them after she and Nerissa have tricked them. Even so, the two men are correct to argue that they have not violated the commitment of love and devotion for which the rings are only the outward symbol. Today, we would call what Portia does to Bassanio entrapment□encouraging someone to commit a crime he did not actively seek to commit. Portia and Nerissa forgive their husbands because they realize that Bassanio and Gratiano have not betrayed a trust by giving their wedding rings to the young doctor; their intention was to reward the young doctor for a perceived kindness. This forgiveness is another example in the play of the importance of weighing intention when judging a person's actions.

The concern with the letter and the spirit of the law shown in *The Merchant of Venice* is not peculiar to Shakespeare's time. In our own age, we know that laws are necessary to prevent anarchy and to insure peace and order. But we also know that no law can anticipate every circumstance and inten tion. At the same time we realize that a proliferation of laws to remedy this situation would compromise our freedom. The alternative to this dilemma is to enforce each law with common sense, always remembering the spirit or intention with which that law was formulated.

Overviews

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Critical Essay #1

[Kermode presents a concise overview of The Merchant of Venice, initially examining Shakespeare's punning of the term "gentle" and discussing the word's various meanings throughout the play. The critic identifies two readings of " gentle" which have a significant bearing on the drama: the sense of " gentleness" as in civility or an improved nature; and the notion of "Gentile," or Christian, which stands in contrast to Shylock and Judaism In addition. Kermode asserts that justice is a primary theme of the dram, noting that while the Christians stress mercy, love, and charity, Shylock advocates the letter (rather than the spirit) of the law, hate, and vengeance. The Merchant of Venice, the critic concludes, is about 'Judgment, redemption, and mercy; the supersession in human history of the grim four thousand years of unalleviated justice by the era of love and mercy."]

We are not likely, whether or no we share his high opinion of Shakespeare as a comic writer, to fall into Johnson's error when he dismissed the reiteration of the word 'gentle' in *[The Merchant of Venice]* as only another example of Shakespeare's weakness *for* this 'fatal Cleopatra', the pun. 'Gentleness' in this play means civility in its old full sense, nature improved: but it also means 'Gentile', in the sense of Christian, which amounts, in a way, to the same thing. Here are some of the passages in which it occurs:

Hie thee, gentle Jew.
The Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows
kind.
[I. iii. 177-78]
If e'er the Jew her father come to heaven, It will be *for* his gentle daughter's sake.
[II. iv. 33-4]

(Jessica is also called 'gentle' in 1. 19)

Now, by my hood, a Gentile [gentle] and no
Jew
[II. vi. 51]
. . . to leave a rich Jew's service and
become
The follower of so poor a gentleman
[II. ii. 147-48]

The Duke urges Shylock to be merciful: asking him not only to loose the forfeiture,

But, touch'd with human gentleness and
love,
Forgive a moiety of the principal. . . .
We all expect a gentle answer, Jew.
[IV. i. 24-33]

Other 'gentle' objects are Antonio's ships, and Portia, many times over: and Portia speaks of mercy as a 'gentle rain'.

There is a straightforward contrast between gentleness, the 'mind of love', and its opposite, for which Shylock stands. He lends money at interest, which is not only unchristian, but an obvious misdirection of love; Antonio ventures with his ships, trusts his wealth to the hand of God (and so they are 'gentle' ships). It is true that a Jew hath eyes etc.; this does not reduce the difference between man and man, when one is gentle and the other not. To make all this clear, Shakespeare twice inserts the kind of passage he later learned to do without; the kind which tells the audience how to interpret the action. It is normal to cut these scenes in acting texts, but only because these plays are so grossly misunderstood. The first such is the debate on Genesis, xxxi. 37 ff. (Jacob's device to produce ringstraked, speckled and spotted lambs) which occurs when Antonio first asks for the loan [I. iii. 61 ff.]. The correct interpretation of this passage, as given by Christian commentators on Genesis (see A. Williams, *The Common Expositor,* 1950), is that Jacob was making a venture ('A thing not in his power to bring to pass. / but sway'd and fashion'd by the hand of heaven': compare *Faerie Queene,* V. iv). But Shylock sees no difference between the breeding of metal and the breeding of sheep-a constant charge against usurers. . . . Later, in II. viii, we have a pair of almost Spenserian *exempla* [examples] to make this point clear. First Solanio describes Shylock's grief at the loss of daughter and ducats; he cannot distinguish properly between them, or lament the one more than the other. Then Solario describes the parting of Antonio and Bassanio: Antonio urges Bassanio not even to consider money; the loss ofBassanio is serious, but he urges him to be merry and not to think of Shylock's bond. When love is measured out. confused by the 'spirit of calculation' (R. B. Heilman's phrase in his discussion of the errors of Lear [II. ix. 21]), the result is moral chaos.

Bassanio's visit to Belmont is frankly presented as a venture, like Jason's for the Golden Fleece; and the theme of gentle venturing is deepened in the scenes of the choice of caskets. The breeding metals' gold and silver, are to be rejected: the good lead requires that the chooser should 'give and hazard all he hath' [II. ix. 21]. Morocco (II. vii) supposes that Portia cannot be got by any casket save the golden one, tacitly confusing her living worth with that of gold, the value of gentleness with that of the best breeding metal. Arragon (II. ix-the intervening scene contains the lamentation of Shylock over his daughter-ducats) rejects gold out of pride only, ironically giving the right reasons for despising the choice of the 'many', that they are swayed not by Truth but by Opinion, a mere false appearance of Truth, not Truth itself. (In this sense the Jews are enslaved to Opinion.) He chooses silver because he 'assumes desert', another matter from trusting to the hand of God; and his reward is 'a shadow's bliss' [II. ix. 67]. After another scene in which Shylock rejoices over Antonio's losses and again laments Jessica's treachery, there follows (III. ii) the central scene of choice, in which Bassanio comes to 'hazard' and 'venture' for Portia. The point of the little song is certainly that in matters of love the eye is a treacherous agent, and can mistake substance for shadow. Bassanio, rejecting the barren metals which appear to breed, avoids the curse of barrenness on himself (for that is the punishment of failure); and he finds in the leaden casket Portia's true image. The scroll speaks of the 'fortune' which has fallen to him. Portia, in her happiness,

speaks of Bassanio's prize as not rich enough, deploring the poorness of her 'full sum': and Gratiano speaks of the forthcoming marriage as the solemnization of 'the bargain of your faith' [III. ii. 193]. Bassanio the merchant has 'won the fleece' [III. ii. 241]; but at the same moment Antonio has lost his. Bassanio is 'dear bought', as Portia says: but Antonio will not have him return for any reason save love: 'if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter' [III. ii. 321-22].

At this point the conflict between gentleness (Antonio's laying down his life for his friend) and a harsh ungentle legalism becomes the main burden of the plot. Shylock demands his bond; this is just, like Angelo's strict application of the law against fornication in the hard case of Claudio [in *Measure for Measure].* It is, in a way. characteristic of Shakespeare's inspired luck with his themes that Shylock in the old stories will take flesh for money. There is no substantial difference: he lacks the power to distinguish gold, goat's flesh, man's flesh, and thinks of Antonio's body as carrion. The differ ence between this and a 'gentle' attitude reflects a greater difference:

DUKE: How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none?
SHYLOCK: What judgement shall I dread,
doing no wrong?
[IV. i. 88-9]

There is no need to sentimentalize this; as Shakespeare is careful to show in *Measurefor Measure* the arguments for justice are strong, and in the coUrse of Christian doctrine it Is necessarily satlsfied before mercy operates. . . . Shylock has legally bought his pound of flesh: if he does not get it 'there is no force in the decrees of Venice' [IV. i. 102]. But as heavenly mercy Is never deserved. it Is an adornment of human authority to exercise it with the same grace:

. .. 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.
[IV. i. 196-200]

But this plea does not work on the stony unregenerate heart: Shylock persists in the demand for justice, and gets it. Like any other human being, he must lose all by such a demand. In offering to meet the demands of strict justice (in accordance with the Old Law) Antonio will pay in blood the price of his friend's happiness: and it cannot be extravagant to argue that he Is here a type of the divine Redeemer, as Shylock Is of the unredeemed.

Shakespeare's last act, another 'thematic' appendix to the dramatic action. Is motivated by the device of the rings. It begins with a most remarkable passage, Lorenzo's famous 'praise of music'. In this are treatedtopics' which. as James Hutton shows in an

extremely important study ['Some En glish Poems in Praise of Music', *English Miscella ny* II (1951)], are all evidently the regular parts of a coherent and familiar theme-so familiar indeed. that Shakespeare permits himself to treat It 'in a kind of shorthand'. The implications of this 'theme' are vast: but behind it lies the notion. very explicit in Milton's 'Ode at a Solemn Musick', of the universal harmony impaired by sin and restored by the Redemption. The lovers, in the restored harmony of Belmont. have a debt to Antonio:

You should In all sense be much bound to
him,
For, as I hear, he was much bound foryou.
[V. i. 136-37]

In such an atmosphere the amorous sufferings of Troilus, Thisbe, Dido and Medea are only shadows of possible disaster [cf. V.i. 1-14],like the mechanicals' *play in A Midsummer Night's Dream;* Antonio on his arrival is allowed by the *contretemps* [inop portune and embarrassing occurence] of the ringplot. to affirm once more the nature of his love, standing guarantor for Bassanio in perpetuity, 'my soul upon the forfeit' (V. i. 252], *The Merchant of Venice,* then, Is 'about' judgment. redemption and mercy; the supersession in human history of the grim four thousand years of unalleviated justice by the era of love and mercy. It begins with usury and corrupt love; it ends with harmony and perfect love. And all the time it tells its audience that this is its subject: only by a determined effort to avoid the obvious can one mistake the theme of *The Merchant of Venice.* (pp. 221-24)

Frank Kermode, "The Mature Comedies, in Early Shakespeare, *edited by John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris, Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd, 1961, pp. 211-27.*

Critical Essay #2

[Ludowyk offers a brief synopsis of the main characters in The Merchant of Venice, emphasizing the attributes which involve them in situations of trial or test The critic considers Antonio a virtuous and generous Christian merchant, who is also "mysteriously and romantically tinged with melancholy. " Bassanio is a romantic hero, Ludowyk asserts, albeit one whose life of extravagance has lift him penniless. Shakespeare probably did not intend to depict him as "a mercenary fortune hunter"; rather "he is the ideal man to attempt to win the fairy princess, " Portia. Shylock is the evil outsider, the critic continues, a Jew despised by Christians, and as evil as Antonio is good. Portia is the fairy-tale princess of Belmont, Ludowyk maintains, the prize for which the heroes contend. She also embodies divine grace and demonstrates an angelic quality by miraculously appearing in Venice to save Antonio from Shylock's bond.]

The material of *[The Merchant of Venice]* has often been likened to a fairy tale. Enchanting though it may be,. . . the play touches on matters of seriousness, so that there is something to be taken away from it besides the very satisfying impression of ro mance.

Shakespeare took his story from the Italian. It differs only in its ratio of romance to reality, a reality Elizabethans would understand, from all those stories of love and adventure, which they were eagerly reading in translation-such stories as those of Romeo and Juliet, of Othello, and so on. Whether Shakespeare got his story directly from some Italian source, or from an earlier play, we do not know, nor does it matter greatly. All sorts of fairy-tale material are used in this play, some of it not originally Italian but of very ancient Oriental provenance, as for instance the story of the caskets, and of the pound of flesh. The wealth of story-telling in Eastem, particularly Indian, cultures had given rise to classical Greek, Latin and Islamic analogues, so the story Shakespeare used may have existed in various forms. What is important is the use he made of a well-known tale.

The special stamp Shakespeare gave his material is that of the suggestion of something serious, and real, in addition to the romance or the fairy-tale. We. . . notice throughout *The Merchant of Venice* how everything in the play has a double character: a connection with the externals of romance, and at the same time an allusion to, or some link with, undoubted moral seriousness. In most of his comedies we find a similar tendency-that of evoking through the gaiety, even the light-heartedness, of its situations the suggestion of something more serious and grave.

In the popular theatre there were no strict rules by which plays had to be written, and Shakespeare's form is often a concoction of various materials. Tragedy could be the story of a great man who came to an unhappy end. Comedy could be a story ('historie') with a happy ending, and it could include something other than, or even opposed to, the pleasurable lightness usually associated with comedy today. We . . . see in *Twelfth Night* how the two-the grave and the gay-are blended. There is the same process here. The theatre to Elizabethans was often like the pulpit in the sound morality it preached.

And to all people at that time the business ofliterature and the arts was to teach. So the romantic story of the extreme situation of Antonio, who is saved from the ogreish Shylock by Portia, the fairy-princess whom Bassanio wins as his bride, and all its other stories have a serious undertone. The impossibility of the 'historie' is based on a moral reality which poses such questions as were the subjects of moral interlude.

The structure of the play depends on a number of situations of trial or test. At various points in the action a character is tested, or a trial takes place. These tests are based on moral criteria such as how should one decide between three offered choices (the casket test), or in the great trial scene which is better; Justice or Mercy? And often everything seems to turn on deciding between appearance and reality. (pp. 118-20) [By examining] the way in which [the characters] are described and presented we can see how naturally and easily they come to be involved in the situations of trial or test in which they figure.

Antonio. To take Antonio first, the merchant of Venice. He is what the Duke calls a 'royal merchant'. This is Gratiano's description of him too [III. ii. 239]. He is not only wealthy, but also a person of a royal or kingly disposition. As a man of great wealth Antonio is in a prominent position; in most cultures, certainly in Eastern cultures, the possession of wealth would entitle him to respect. for with it went responsibilities and duties. So in the East the man of wealth is often given an honorific title. Not so long ago in India the wealthy Zamindar was often a Rajah; and in Malaya and China there are special terms of respect to designate the rich man. Such men were expected to be generous, to be spenders of their wealth, and not to be miserly but charitable. Antonio is a man of this kind. He gives all, even his life, to help his friend, the poor man Bassanio, with whom he is, in the way of these romances, linked. That Antonio uses his wealth to help others, we know from [III. iii. 21ff.].

He is also mysteriously and romantically tinged with melancholy. It may be that Shakespeare in shaping his materials interposes a hint of what is to follow. He gives Antonio a premonition of his fate. His melancholy would be due, too, to his loss of Bassanio. That he loves Bassanio so devotedly would not make him specially romantic in Elizabethan eyes, for it was a commonplace that two men could be so devoted to each other. In an early play of Shakespeare's *[The Two Gentlemen of Verona]* we have Proteus and Valentine who are sworn brothers, and . . . in *Twelfth Night.* . . the sea captain, Antonio, risks his life to follow Sebastian only because of his great attachment to him.

But there is something else. Antonio is not only the fabulous merchant, of an interesting melancholic turn of mind. He is a Christian. This is the first remark made of him by his enemy Shylock. In describing him as a Christian Shylock calls him 'fawning publican', which recalls the type of person Christ preferred to the self-righteous Pharisee.

Antonio, in the use of his wealth, comes near to the prescription given to the rich young ruler whom

Christ advised to sell everything that he had. The rich young ruler did not do as Christ recommended, but Antonio's pledging of all his wealth to help a friend and his generosity should be contrasted with Shylock's miserliness, and be reckoned part of his 'royal', Christian disposition. In Shylock's own words Antonio was wont to lend money 'for Christian courtesy' [III. i. 49]. Of him Salerio says 'a kinder gentleman treads not the earth' [II. viii. 35], where 'kind' would mean not only of a kindly disposition, but also full of what should be natural to human beings-feeling for others. ('Kind' is a word with the two senses of which Shakespeare often played.) To Bassanio he is

the kindest man
The best-conditioned and unwearied spirit
In doing courtesies.
[III. ii. 292-94]

We shall see in the central scene in the play with what Christian virtue Antonio bears himself. Round this romantic merchant prince of true Christian virtue are a group of characters of whom we can say little, because the dramatist evidently intends them simply as the train to Antonio. As Morocco is attended by a train, as Bassanio goes on his quest similarly attended, so Antonio is given his Solanios and Salerios. If their number was mistakenly increased and a third by name Salerino invented through confusion between Solanio and Salerio, it all goes to show how unimportant they are as persons in the play. They have no function but as frame to Antonio-in his glory and in his distress. *Bassanio.* Bassanio is another romantic character-the young man without means beloved by the merchant prince. Shakespeare makes him a figure recognizable to the Londoners of his time-the young man who through extravagance (as Bassanio confesses 'somewhat showing a more swelling port Than my faint means would grant continuance' [cf. I. i. 124-25]) has no money. But this weakness of the young should not be held against him. since he shows as much by his attitude as by what is reported of him, that though young and foolish in the past, he is in the play the ideal man to attempt to win the fairy princess. We should not think of him as a mercenary fortune hunter, since social institutions then made the desire of a young man for a wealthy bride perfectly regular. Arranged marriages where the doWIY of the girl is an important consideration are well known both in the East and the West. Bassanio, when he first speaks of Portia. describes her as a 'lady richly left' [I. i. 161] (she has inherited wealth from her father), but he goes on to speak of her as 'fair', and fairer than that word,

Of wondrous virtues.
[I. i. 162-631

He compares her with Brutus's Portia. and then proclaims her the fabulous object of desperate adventure-the golden fleece after which Jason sailed [cf. I. i. 165-72].

Bassanio is, in Nerissa's words which gain Portia's approval, a 'scholar and a soldier. . . of all the men that ever my foolish eyes looked upon, the best deserving a fair lady' [I. ii. 113ff.]. And most important of all, we shall see in the first of the great trials with which this play is concerned, how nobly he bears himself, and how rightly he chooses. To Portia in [III. ii. 60] he recalls the demi-god Hercules who rescued the Trojan maiden.

Shakespeare gives Bassanio the character of a man of virtue. We should, remembering the test, judge Bassanio not by the outward show but by what lies within. He is attended by Gratiano, who is, according to his description in the play and in numerous Italian comedies some of which Shakespeare' might have seen in London, a comical figure who always will be talking. In the lists of characters in Italian comedy there is often a Dottore Gratiano" a pompous talker. *Shylock.* Shylock is the contrast to the good Anto nio. Romance likes to work in black and white, and he is black to Antonio's white. If explanation were needed of his ogreishness, then we should have to say that he is a Jew is reason enough. Christian Europe reviled the Jew, and portrayed him as a hateful monster. If we are inclined to flatter ourselves that we are better in this respect, we need only pause for a moment to consider our own record in this century, when racial hatreds have involved not only Jews but countless others of all races in shameful treatment from people like our own enlightened selves. Shakespeare's reaction to Shylock as a Jew is likely to have been that of his time. We can understand and condemn it, but we need not consider that it detracts seriously from the quality of *The Merchant of Venice,* for in the play Shakespeare is not concerned with teaching his audience, or ourselves, how Jews should be treated. If this had been his object then we could feel that there is something gravely at fault with the playas a manual of ethics. Shylock's vengefulness, not his Jewishness, is the centre of the play, and it is not written by a dramatist who felt Shylock's wrongs or those of his race deeply. If we read the famous lines Shakespeare gave Shy lock in [III. i. 53ff.], we shall see that they do not suggest that a Jew, because he is as much a human being as any Christian, should therefore be treated accordingly. Their intention is to prove that as Jews and Christians are both human beings, it is natural for them both to revenge wrongs done them-a point of view which would seem damnable both to orthodox Christian opinion and Jewish. Shylock is not asking for our tears, he is putting forward the point of view of a detestable ogre.

The desperateness of Shylock's evil intentions would, to the audience of that time have been adequately accounted for by his religion. The trial and execution of the Jewish physician Roderigo Lopez in 1594 for plotting to assassinate both Queen Elizabeth and the claimant to the Portuguese throne, would have made audiences the more ready to accept the conventional notion that such dastardly conduct came naturally to his coreligionists. We should not forget, too, that Shylock is a 'stranger' -strange in his religion, his dress, his manner of speech probably (certainly his Old Testament allusions give his language a colour of its own). He could quite easily be taken as that figure in the community who by his difference from the rest has to incur hostility. It is easy to remember how strongly emotions could be stirred against shopkeepers of another race who include money lending as part of their business activities.

Shylock is presented to us by the dramatist not only as Jew, but more importantly and significantly as 'dog', wild beast and devil. There are several references to him which insist on his 'currish' disposition. In this matter, too, Shakespeare would seem to the humanitarians of our time in need of reprimand, for he always associated with the dog traits which were dangerous and contemptible: dogs always fawned and flattered; they were to be seen in great households licking at sweets-a messy and disgusting habit. It was their nature to snarl and bite, which may seem absolutely contradictory to the

fawning, but what seems to be clear is that the image of dog suggested to Shakespeare what was contemptible.

Shylock is time and time again referred to as 'dog'. He himself reports that this is how Antonio had addressed him and treated him. We might ask whether we should think the worse of Antonio on this account. This was the treatment conventionally accorded to Jews, and we shall see, in the most significant scene of the play, how Antonio behaves towards Shylock. His generous attitude to Shylock immediately after he has been saved by Portia is Shakespeare's own invention, and should be taken as characteristic. To the other characters in the play Shylock is 'the villain Jew' [II. viii. 4], 'the dog Jew' [II. viii. 14], an 'impenetrable cur' [III. iii. 18], and Gratiano in execration ofhim thinks of him as both dog and wolf, with perhaps a reference to Lopez whose name was derived from the Latin *lupus-wolf.* Shylock himself states ironically 'since I am a dog beware my fangs' [III. iii. 7].

As the opponent of the good Antonio, Shylock is thought of as devil. The conflict of the good man with the devil was a simple Christian fable, and the writer without intending to be explicitly moral can give his work a simple moral point of view.

So we can see Shylock as devil, the natural adversary of Antonio. Indeed he is often pictured as such in the play. Antonio himself, in a warning to Bassanio of which he himself fails to take heed, looking at Shylock on the stage lost in his reckonings ana mutterings and remembering his reference to the biblical story of Jacob and Laban, says 'The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose' [I. iii. 98]. To Lancelot his master is, 'God bless the mark' [II. ii. 24], as he puts it. because some obscene phrase is to follow, 'a kind of devil' [II. ii. 24]. To Solanio in [III. i] he is throughout the devil. To Bassanio in [IV. i. 287] he is 'this devil'. And the situation facing Portia, as she sees it in [III. iv. 20-1], is that of

Purchasing the semblance of my soul
From out the state of hellish cruelty.

This we might take as the substance of the serious side of the play seen in miniature. To the Duke in the trial scene Shylock is an 'inhuman wretch', a term which unites both the suggestions of 'dog' (animal and not human) and 'devil' (wretch being the person expelled and driven out as the devil was from heaven). *Portia.* Portia in the romance is the fairy-princess, the rich prize for which the heroes contend. To win her they have to undergo a test or trial, a familiar legend both in the East and West. With Portia are associated all the images of rich treasure and fabulous adventure. Many critics of the play have contrasted Belmont, where she lives, with the mart of Venice, to which she goes only to rescue Antonio. Her house is associated with music and harmony, while the world outside is 'naughty' or full of wickedness. In the eulogy pronounced by Morocco in [II. vii. 38ff.] she is the world's wonder. To Portia herself her situation, waiting to be won by the champion, resembles that of Hesione saved from the sea monster by Hercules, the force of classical fable adding its colour to the poet's presentation of her.

On all these scores she is the fairy-princess of romance. The caskets by which she is to be won, the ring she wears and which she presents to the hero who wins her, and what happens to it-all these are its familiar ingredients. Romantic, too, is the mode of her entry into the Duke's court in the disguise of a young lawyer. But like all the major characters in the play she is associated with things of deeper seriousness. She is not only the princess of romance, she is thought of as divine and a saint. At the very opening of the play Bassanio, in Antonio's words, has sworn 'a secret pilgrimage' to her [I. i. 120]. Her suitors have to swear a solemn oath at a temple or chapel accepting the conditions on which they are permitted to take the test. Morocco thinks of Belmont as a place of pilgrimage where from the four comers of the world the devout come to kiss the shrine of the saint [II. vii. 39-40]. To him Portia is an angel, as he puns on the comparison with the English gold coin, the angel [II. vii. 55ff.]. To Bassanio her portrait is like that of a goddess. When she sets out with Nerissa to the rescue of Antonio, she goes and returns to the accompaniment of suggestions of some religious exercise or retreat in which she is taking part. To Jessica in [III. v. 73ff.] the winning of Portia must be to Bassanio the equivalent of finding the joys of heaven on this earth. And at the very end of the play, to Lorenzo, she is like God who drops manna from heaven on those he pleases to help.

Her role in the main section of the play resembles that of the angel of the Lord who saved Isaac in the nick of time when he was bound on the altar of sacrifice. She comes mysteriously from Belmont to help Antonio, she meets the devil Shylock on his own ground and discomfits him. She departs just as mysteriously, but not without extracting some token by which her miraculous descent into the law-court of Venice is to be made known. Typical of her is the music associated with her home, which she commands at the fateful moment of the test. Music is characteristic of concord, love and the triumph of good over the discordant forces of evil, and it is, on earth, the counterpart of the music of the spheres of which Lorenzo speaks (V. i. 60-5]. This heavenly music, in popular belief, was produced by the motion of the heavenly bodies as they circled round the earth. Human ears could not hear it, but inunortal souls. . . could. Persons such as these could be involved in situa tions which are the stock in trade of romantic tale, if we overlooked the serious side in them. The play could be looked at as a series of romantic and impossible tests; it could also be seen to turn on important moral decisions. The latter seems stronger than the former as a mode of approach to the play, for to Elizabethans a comedy which had some moral to enforce would be in a familiar tradition. (pp. 121-28)

E. F. C. *Ludowyk, "The Merchant of Venice," in his* Understanding Shakespeare, *Cambridge at the University Press,* 1962, *pp.* 118-44.

Critical Essay #3

[Draper provides historical background on English Jews and the practice of usury (money lending for interest) as they existed in Shakespeare's time to prove that the chief concern of The Merchant of Venice is conflicting economic ideals rather than race or religion. The critic argues that Shylock hates Antonio not only because he lends money interest free, but also because he denigrates Shylock's profession and thwarts his business. According to Draper, Shakespeare is merely representative of his age when he idealistically compares Antonia's Christian business ethic with Shylock's more rigid and unforgiving value system. This fundamental distinction, the critic concludes, reflects "the difficult transition from the medieval economic system to modem capitalism" which was occurring in Elizabethan England.]

The character portrayal of Shakespeare shows the widest human sympathy, but Shylock is an exception. He is an object of loathing and contempt: he is depicted as unprincipled in business and unfeeling in his home. In the end he pays a terrible penalty, even more severe than does his prototype in *Ii Pecorone,* the probable source of the play, or indeed in any of the other versions of the old folk tale; and no one, not even the kindly Antonio, says a single word in his favor: the dramatist apparently expected his audience to be even more unsympathetic toward Shylock than toward the notorious Richard III, whose overthrow had brought to the throne the glorious House of Tudor. This *unwontedsaeva indignatio* [furious indignation] of Shakespeare is usually attributed to an anti-Semiticism inherited from the Middle Ages and kept alive by the illegal presence of Jews in London and especially aroused at the time by the alleged attempt in 1594 of Lopez, the court physician, to poison the Queen. As a matter of fact, however, the prejudice of the Middle Ages must have been dying out, even in clerical circles, for under Cromwell the Jews were permitted to return: moreover, such few Spaniards of Jewish descent as lived in London had long since been converted to at least outward Catholic conformity, and so were indistinguishable from other Spaniards; and the *cause celebre* [celebrated case] of Lopez, though perhaps the occasion for one or two anti-Jewish plays, is too far removed both from Shakespeare's character and from his plot to have furnished the chief motive for either. Shylock the Machiavellian Jew, would seem, indeed, to have been a study not in Elizabethan realism but in Italian local color; for Italy, especially Venice where the Jews were go-betweens in the Turkish trade. had become, since their expulsion from Spain, their chief refuge in Western Europe, Merely as a Jew, therefore, Shylock could hardly call forth the contemptuous abhorrence manifest in the play, for that side of his character was the stuff of exotic romance: and, furthermore, Shakespeare's one appeal to the sympathy of the audience for Shylock is the latter's defense of his race and religion: "Hath not a *Jew* eyes? hath not a *Jew* hands, organs, dementions. . . . ?" [cf. III. i. 59-60].

The conflict between Shylock and Antonio is not so much a matter of religion but rather of mercantile ideals, as Shylock declares in an aside at the entrance of Antonio:

I hate him for he is a Christian:

But more. for that in low simplicitie
He lends out money gratis, and brings
downe
The rate ofvsance here with vs in *Venice.*
[I. iii. 42-5]

The audience is amply informed that Shylock hates Antonio because the latter has called him "Usurer," and spat upon him, and "thwarted" his "bargaines": and Antonio openly glories in having cast such slurs. Upon the Rialto he has railed at Shylock, not for religion, but for usury-as Shylock puts it, "all forvse of that which is mine owne" [I. iii. 113]. In the crucial third act, Shylock twice reiterates this theme: and Antonio himself assures the audience:

He seekes my life, his reason well I know; I oft deliuered from his forfeitures
Many that haue at times made mone to
me,
Therefore he hates me.
[III. i 21-4]

Race and religion, then, are not the main theme of the play; it is rather conflicting economic ideals. In Elizabethan parlance, "usurer" meant anyone who took even the lowest interest on money. Antonio follows the medieval ideal, and, like Chaucer's Merchant [in *The Canterbury Tales],* is supposed "neither to lend nor borrow" [cf. I. iii. 61] at interest; and Shylock, like the modem capitalist, makes interest the very basis of his business. Again and again, in Shakespeare. this allusion to usury recurs, and commonly with a fling at its un Christian ethics and its bitter consequences. It is "forbidden": and the usurer is a simile of shame: the citizens in *Coriolanus* are outraged that the senators pass "edicts for usury to support usurers" *[Coriolonus,* I. 1. 82]; and *Timon* is full of attacks upon the system as undermining the Christian virtues and the state. In other Elizabethan dramatists also the usurer is a common object of hatred shading into contemptuous ridicule. Partly classical, partly medieval in origin, he is often, like Vice in the old Morality plays, both wicked and comic: Shylock is clearly in this tradition, and follows directly upon Marlowe's Barabas [in *TheJew of Malta)* who also combines moneylender and Italianate Jew. The widespread currency of this theme and the intensity of emotion that it aroused suggest that it could not have been purely a dramatic convention, and that it struck closer home to the Elizabethans than a mere medieval tradition or a bit of Venetian local color, Like the *miles gloriosus* [boastful soldier], the Elizabethan usurer owes something to Latin comedy; but, like Falstaff, Shylock is more than a classical survival: if not a characteristic London type, he at least exemplified an immediate and crying problem, the iniquity of English usurers and the interest that they charged: and this theme in *The Merchant if Venice* can hardly be the accidental petrified remains of Shakespeare's "clerical predecessor," the author of the lost play *The Jew;* for it is too prominent both in this and in other plays by Shakespeare.

Indeed, the question of the moral and the legal justification of interest came close home to every Elizabethan, and was crucial in the transition from feudal society to modern

capitalism. The hardships of this transition appear in the "misery and squalor" of the age. Gold was pouring into Europe from America; prices were rising, and merchants grew rich, but classes with fixed incomes suffered intensely. The rural aristocracy, whom political life was drawing to London, could no longer live directly off the produce of their estates, but required ample supplies of ready money, which they had to borrow at an interest inflated by competition with the merchants who could afford to pay exorbitant rates. Even miners, weavers, and other classes of artisans worked on small loans often at ruinous interest. The increasing need for large capital, both in industry and in commerce, required similar large-scale organization of finance: and the devolution of the medieval guilds, begun by the exactions of Henry VII and continued during the sixteenth century, put much of this business into the hands of almost unregulated individuals or of new organizations. The players themselves sometimes had reason to be bitter at the demands of [Rose Theatre manager Philip] Henslowe and others who supplied them with buildings and furnishings; and thus both audience and actors had personal motives for hating the usurer. (pp. 37-41)

Shakespeare took the regular attitude of the 1590's. Indeed, most revelatory of the dramatist's point of view are the excuses that Shylock gives for his trade. . . Like the devil, he quotes Scripture to his purpose, though the audience doubtless had by memory more than one text that forbade it. He parodies Aristotle's attack on usury as if it were an argument in favor [cf. I. iii. 76-90]. He declares that ne is unjustly hated "all for use of that which is mine owne" [t iii. 113]: and anyone would have told him that since a usurer's goods were got by a sort of theft, they were not his own. Of course, it was this feeling on the :Rart of the audience that justified the treatment of Shylock at the denouement. He calls Antonio a "prodigall," though the term is clearly misapplied; for usurers preyed on the youthful heirs of noble families, and so, to the horror of the age. brought ruin on ancient houses. He hates Antonio for reducing the rate of interest "here with us in *Venice"* [I. iii. 45], and so upholds the extortionate charges of the day. With a callous presumption, he publicly demands "justice" for his compounded iniquities; he calls upon his oath in a "heaven" whose law he flouts; and he claims the support of the Venetian commonwealth, whose well-being his practices were supposed to undermine. To the Elizabethans all this was mordant casuistry; and, by making Shylock himself call up almost every argument against his own way of life, Shakespeare, with keen dramatic irony, implies that not one honest word can be said in his favor.

For Shylock the Jew, there is no such rationale of bitterness: and so utter and thorough a philippie [tirade] must surely have been intentional.

Not only does *The Merchant of Venice* reflect the Elizabethan attitude toward interest, but the details of the play constantly refer to current business customs. Such a "merry bond," signed under pretense of friendliness, was not without precedent in actual fact. Bassanio, to seal the bargain, follows the usual etiquette of asking the lender to dine: and later Shylock actually goes to a feast, like a true usurer, to help use up the borrowed sum and so insure a forfeiture. . . . Shylock, moreover, carefully avoids the term "usury," is insulted at being called a "usurer," and, with an exquisite delicacy, objects even to having his "well won thrift" [I. iii. 50] described as "interest"-though this euphemism was commonly allowed by contemporary moneylenders. London usurers-

perhaps because they had risen from poverty by extreme penuriousness-were supposed to run their households in a stingy, not to say starving, expenditure; and Shylock and Gobbo mutually complain of each other in this regard. Usurers regularly wished the forfeiture rather than the repayment of the loan; and in [Thomas] Lodge's *[Looking-glass for London and England*], the young gentleman, like Bassanio, offers much more than the nominated sum; but the moneylender, like Shylock, refuses and demands the forfeiture, Contemporary London, therefore, would seem to have supplied both the commercial decorum and the business trickery of Shakespeare's Venice; and this suggests that the dramatist intended to bring before his audience with immediate realism his economic theme.

Even the idealized Antonio reflects Elizabethan London. He "was wont to lend out money for a Christian curtsie" [III. i. 49], according to the highest ethics of the age. . . The comparison of Antonio to a "royal Merchant" suggests England as well as Venice: for the London merchants had grown rich, and in their "comely entertainment" were not to be "matched by any foreign opposition." Hunter, on Shylock's word. declared that Antonio condemned interest "through simplicity," and that, as Shylock says, he was a "prodigal" wasting an ample patrimony [in *The Merchant of Venice,* eel. H. H. Furness]: but the dramatist clearly expects us to admire his probity rather than condemn his ignorance and waste. . . . As a matter of fact, Antonio knew well the exactions of usurers, and realized that if he would accommodate his friend, he must accept hard terms. Elsewhere he appears as a skilful merchant who does not risk his "whole estate Upon the fortune of this present yeere" [I. i. 43-4]: and. like a shrewd man of affairs, he does not seem overanxious early in the play to divulge his business secrets. He is, indeed. the ideal merchant, very much as Othello and Henry V are the ideal of army life; and, just as Shakespeare heightened his effect by contrasting Hotspur and Prince Hal with the poltroonery of Falstaff [in 1 *Henry IV],* so, in *The Merchant of Venice,* he put Shylock and Antonio side by side as comparative studies in business ethics. Shylock the Jew was merely exotic local color: Shylock the usurer was a commentary on London life, The moneylender had been hated for centuries: and, in Shakespeare's day, the difficult transition from the medieval economic system to modern capitalism especially subjected both rich and poor to his exactions. Efforts to find realism in Shylock have generally looked to Venice or the Orient regions of which Shakespeare knew none too much and the groundlings even less: the crux of the play is nearer home: and it reflects the current uses of commercial life and the current attitude toward them. Nevertheless. *The Merchant of Venice* is not strictly a problem play *like Alls Well,* or even mainly one as is *Othello,* for it is written *ex parte* [from a one-sided point of view]: to Shakespeare there is but one answer, and so there is no problem; and. moreover, the old stories upon which it is founded dictated a happy ending that forbade the logical conclusion of the theme and kept the playa romantic comedy; but, to the Elizabethans, it had a verve and realism that is lost upon the present reader. Just as the stories of the romances were changed and reinterpreted century by century, so Shakespeare gave timely significance and telling vividness to his borrowed origins: and this intensified reality is perhaps his chief contribution to Elizabethan drama. Usually the matrix from which his play developed was a plot. as in *King Lear;* sometimes both plot and character, as in *Henry V;* and, on this matrix, he built a drama that, almost certainly in details of setting and style and often in motivation and theme, shows the immediate impress of his age. *Julius*

Caesar is full of English setting: the background and motives of Desaemona [in *Othello]* are thoroughly Elizabethan: in *Twelfth Night* he transplai1ted an English household and staff of servants to the confines of Illyria; the character of Falstaff is a realistic foil to the romantic wars of chivalry; and, *in Merry Wives,* even the plot would seem to have been borrowed from common contemporary situations. *The Merchant of Venice* is a romantic comedy built of old folk material, to which has been added a realistic theme and motivation; and this theme, although Shakespeare has not yet learned to make it entirely implicit in his plot, obviously portrays the downfall of hated usury and the triumph of Christian charity in the person of a princely merchant. (pp. 43-7)

John Draper, "Usury in 'The Merchant of Venice: " *in* Modern Philology, *Vol XXXIII, No.1, August, 1935,pp.* 3747.

Critical Essay #4

[Felheim identifies several dualities in The *Merchant of Venice , including joy and sadness, Venice and Belmont, Jew versus Christian, and Old Testament justice against New Testament mercy. According to the critic the play opens with inexplicable sadness primarily present in the characters of Antonio and Portia. Bassanio, Salerio and Solanio interrupt the initial seriousness of the dramatic action with some mirth, Felheim continues, but for the most part a strain of melancholy pervades the play. Perhaps the most concrete example of this duality is embodied in the contrasting worlds of Venice and Belmont Sadness is the prominent emotion in Venice, the critic notes, where the characters are exposed to usury and legal proceedings; but in Belmont, the "world of candlelight and music," happiness reigns. The oppositions of Jew and Christian as well as of Old Testament and New Testament attitudes are uncovered in the initial rivalry between Antonio and Shylock increase the dramatic tension in the "pound of flesh" episodes and culminate in the trial scene (Act III, scene I). Shakespeare develops this opposition between Old Testament and New Testament values in the characters of Shylock, who represents law and vengeance, and Portia, who signifies love and mercy. Felheim also examines three significant episodes in* The *Merchant of Venice -the bond plot, the casket plot, and the ring plot-describing their significance to the overall structure of the play.]*

Certainly *The Merchant of Venice* is one of the most challenging of Shakespeare's plays. At first glance, the great court scene with Portia's justly famous speech on mercy and the lovely concluding act, so full of good will and magnificent poetry. seem to give the play its core of meaning: Christian charity and human love will and should triumph: three joyous couples and the merchant of Venice himself are at Belmont to celebrate victory and weddings.

But, on reflection, there are many disturbing elements to upset this all-too-easy view, For one thing, the play opens with inexplicable sadness: for another, the three principal characters-Antonio, Portia and Shylock-are shown more in seriousness than in joy; finally, their seriousness is tinged with a most unsettling kind of melancholy. In the very opening line, Antonio tells us: "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad" [I. i. I]. He then rejects the suggestions of Salerio and Solanio who offer conventional explanations: worry over his "merchandise," *love,* and "because you are not merry" [I. i 48] (a "humourous" explanation). True. Antonio seems to emerge from his melancholy with the appearance of his friend and relative, Bassanio. But we must note that Bassanio confronts him not merely with the face of friendship and kinship but with serious financial problems. So, his change of mood is prompted in large part by the need for his services as financier as much as (more than?) his position as friend and kinsman. Throughout the play, moreover, we never see Antonio in what might be called a merry mood, for almost immediately troubles, in the form of loss of his argosies and the resultant law suit, beset him. And the final moments of triumph are not really his: the saving of his life in Act IV is sub ordinated, dramatically, to Portia's success as a dis_sed Doctor ofLaws, to the sentencing of ShylocK, and to the exchanging of the rings: indeed, at the very moment when his life has been saved, Antonio must turn his

attention to thanking Balthazar (Portia) and to persuading Bassanio "to let him have the ring" [IV, L 449], Then. in Act V, Antonio is byno means either the central figure or the most joyous. Portia apologizes for her seeming lack of courtesy and hospitality Sir, you are very welcome to our house, It must appear in other ways than wo_ Therefore I scant this breathing courtesy [V. 1. 139-41] only to become embroiled at once in the question of the rings; again, Antonio must pledge himself for Bassanio, only this time he binds his "soul" rather than his flesh to assure Portia that her husband "Will never more break faith advisedly" [V. i. 253].

Lastly, in the distribution of favors, Portia discloses that she has "better news in store" for him than he expects and she gives him a "letter."

There you shall find three of your argosies Are richly come to harbour suddenly,
[V. i. 276-77]

but she adds, enigmatically,

You shall not know by what strange accident
I chanced on this letter,
IV. i. 278-79]

a curious, somewhat callous attitude which belies the very assertion of friendliness and hospitality she had made earlier. Antonio's reply, less than half a line, is "I am dumb" (V. i 279]: he even has difficulty in squeezing these three simple words in between Portia's disclosures and Bassanio's and Gratiano's amazement at their wives' virtuosity. To cap his pleasure, Antonio is finally permitted three more lines:

Sweet lady, you have given me life and living; For here I read for certain that my ships Are safely come to road
[IV. i. 286-88]

Thus the role of the merchant of Venice is concluded One feels that perhaps Salerio was correct in his original diagnosis: that Antonio's sadness was because his "mind is tossing on the ocean" [I. i. 8], At any event, in this comedy labelled *The Merchant if Venice* one must agree that the merchant himself has sailing, that he opens the play a man wearied and sad, that he endures great tribu lations and a serious trial in which his life is nearly taken, that his survival is merely a part of more exciting goings-on and that his eventual triumph is simply the inexplicable return of his ships. Indeed, he seems doomed, as he states initially:

But how I caught it [sadness], found it, or
came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn.
[I. i 3-5]

This notion appears to have had its origin in his (typically Shakespearean) philosophy:

I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano.
Astage where every man must play a part,
And mine a sad one.
[I. i. 77-9]

Thus isolated, the merchant appears a pathetic figure. I have'not questioned here his goodness, his willingness to help others and his mercy to Shylock: presumably these qualities could provide him with a kind of quietgIow. But there is no indication that his initial unexplained sadness is ever miti gated or that the similarly unexplained return of his merchandise at the conclusion will do much to make him happy, for as he predicted

. . .such a want-wit sadness
makes of me
That I have much ado to know myself.
II. i. 6-7]

Antonio is not alone in proclaiming his sadness, however, Portia's first speech picks up the theme:

"By my troth, Nerissa. my little body is aweary of this great world" [I. ii. I).
As in the case of Antonio, her statement suggests a kind of cosmic condition. And like Salerio and Solanio, Nerissa offers an *ex* planation: that Portia has an "abundance" of "good fortunes," that she is simply too rich, surfeited and bored. But the Lady 0 Belmont rejects her maid's "good sentences." Her sadness has another cause: her father's will which has effectively "curbed" her choice of a husband It is a mark of Shakespeare's subtle art that he puts these speeches of Portia and Nerissa in prose, just where one would expect poetry, whereas the opening speeches on "A Street. Venice" are in poetry. The purpose is not only to contrast the different types of melancholy in scenes one and two, but to establish, as well, the contrary nature of this play and to suggest that both a mingling of poetry with the business world of Venice and a prose basis for the beauty of Belmont are necessary conditions.

Finally, sadness is also typical of Shylock. The elopement of his daughter with a Christian, the loss of money and the punishments he suffers in court are calamitous episodes in his pathetic life. Clearly, then, a strain of melancholy pervades this comedy and conditions the over-all tone of the play. In this connection I feel that the concluding act, too, despite its apparent joyousness, has overtones of despair, even bitterness. As the last act begins, Jessica and Lorenzo are discussing love and nature: "The moon shines bright. In such a night as this" (V, i 1] lovers have enjoyed, . . what? Well, Troilus "mounted the Troyan walls, / And sigh'd his soul toward the Grecian tents" [V. i. 4-5]; Thisby did "fearfully o'ertrip the dew, / And saw the lion's shadow. . ., / And ran dismayed away" (V. i. 7-9]: Dido stood "Upon the wild sea-banks, and waft her love / To come again to Carthage" [V. i. 1012]: and Medea "gathered the enchanted herbs / That did renew old Aeson" [V. i. 13-14], Hardly a happy couple among the four. These lines, full of melancholy accounts of tragic loves and lovers, have been much praised, but most critics have failed to note that neither the subject matter nor the love affairs referred to

give us a felicitious picture oflove; on the contrary, the content of the lines is at odds with the situation itself (although Jessica and Lorenzo include themselves in the list oflovers) and casts a disturbing, howbeit lovely, tone over the moonlit scene. This mood, after an interlude on the nature of music. gives way to the workings-out of the ring plot. And so the act which began with reminiscences about unhappy loves and lovers concludes with the cynical resolution of the ring story. Counter to all this sadness there is mirth, and there are joyous characters. Bassanio, Salerio and Solanio are consistently optimistic and cheerful, Bassanio particularly so in the face of odds. The course of the love affair between Jessica and Lorenzo runs smoothly, without a hitch. Portia, herself, has periods of intense happiness (in Bassanio's success in choosing the correct casket), of witty triumph (over the unsuccessful suitors) and of joyful satisfaction (both in court and in the final confrontation at Belmont). This beautifully maintained balance is characteristic of *The Merchant of Venice;* indeed, in this play, contrast is the primary dramaturgical method.

The setting provides the most obvious contrast: the Rialto and Belmont, the world of Venice, of usury, of the court, and the world of candlelight and music that is Belmont. We note that certain characteristics of the former place, the Rialto, are present in the latter; there are commercial and material aspects to Belmont, too: the dead, but legal, hand of a wealthy father lies heavily upon this rich world, the prize gem of which is Portia herself, the lady of the "sunny locks" which "Hang on her temples like a golden fleece" [I. 1. 170]. Her riches, her beauty and her virtue are, in truth, like the rocks which shipwreck so many Venetian argosies. Even at the moment of Basanio's triumph over the riddle of the caskets, the speeches of the lovers are replete with commercial terms; he says:

Fair lady, by your leave;
I came by *note,* to *give* and to *receive,*
[III. ii. 139-40]

but he cannot be sure of his success

Until *confirm'd, sign'd, ratified* by you.
[III. ii. 148]

She replies, in part,

That only to *stand high* in your *account* I might in virtues, beauties, *livings,*
friends
Exceed account But the full *sum* of me Is *sum ofsomething.* . . .
[III. ii. 156-59]

By introducing into Belmont these symbolic elements from the commercial world of Venice, Shakespeare fuses two aspects of life; they are not separate, the Rialto and Belmont, however much they may be geographically distinct. Bassanio is the "arrow. : . adventuring" from one world into the other: in return, Portia brings wisdom, judgment, and poetry to Venice. The significant linkage of the two in marriage indicates the extent

to which the two must be joined in order to exist; each is dependent upon the other and insofar as this is true this comedy presents us with the ultimate in realism: the acknowledgement that these worlds not only coexist but *must* coexist: this is the human condition, pictured without unnecessary sentimentality, with the romantic elements occupying their proper place, coordinated with the other elements, neither isolated nor superior but equal. The result is what can be called Shakespeare's comic vision, as steady a view of life as is possible, a world of sorrows and joys but essentially human, where even wedded love must wait upon more pressing obligations, where disguise, deception and cynicism can live side by side with sweeter qualities, where contrast and combination are the essential reality.

The delicate balancing of these contrasting elements is Shakespeare's great dramatic skiii. And this device pervades the play. For example, there are the human contrasts between parents and children, specifically fathers and children, and between masters and servants. In the later category fit, for instance, Portia and her servants, Nerissa and Balthasar; when Portia disguises herself as a lawyer, to preach the gospel of charity, it seems significant that Shakespeare gives her the name of her servant, Balthazar. Shylock, on the other hand, speaks slightingly of the way Venetians treat some of their servants, those who are "purchas'd slaves," which

. . . like your asses and your dogs and
mules,
You use in abject and in slavish parts.
[IV. i. 91-2]

He sets up, as he always does, an absolute of behavior, an Old Testament absolute, against which the action plays. He carries the argument to an extreme: masters become owners, servants slaves. Our sympathies, as usual, are engaged by his characteristic manner. And we realize that he has made a telling point: that he also wants what is his, what he has bought and paid for. But his example also has the effect of setting up the opposite, the ideal, the world beyond Venice (an aspect, perhaps, of Belmont) where there are neither owners nor slaves. What inevitably happens when Shylock talks is that we are confronted with an ideal situation-where there would be no discrimination, no hatred or fear, no cruelty or inhumanity. But such a condition is always predicated in terms of opposites and in almost strictly legal terms, a world, on the one hand, where there is legal usury or, on the other, none at all. Reality-the world of legal usury which must be tempered by human charity-is the world Shylock rejects (or which rejects Shylock). (pp. 94-8) All these contrasts, whether of physical settings or of human characteristics, have a common basis in the central moral contrast of the play. This contrast is variously embodied, but is nowhere more clear than in the confrontation of Shylock and Portia, specifically in the way in which each suggests one aspect of the Bible, Shylock appropriately the Old Testament and Portia aptly the New. For Shy lock the world exists in terms of absolutes, in terms of justice, in terms of Old Testament morality. This approach is most interestingly summarized in his story of Jacob and Laban's sheep: ". . . thrift is blessing, if men steal it not" [I. iii. 85]. Or, as he tells Jessica, "Fast bind, fast find"-[II. v. 53]. For Shylock there can be no compromise: "all the earilings which were streak'd and pied / Should fall as Jacob's hire"' [I. iii. 79-80]: this is

the rule. Human beings are subservient to law, to an absolute code. So he sets up his frame of reference. What makes Antonio evil in Shylock's eyes is that "He was wont to lend money for a Christian courtesy" [III. 1. 49]; Antonio was a man who behaved contrary to the customs of the Rialto (could this possibly be the cause of his sadness? his capacity to see the human condition and yet to act independently in terms of friendship and courtesy? is his a cosmic sadness?).

And what should be done about him? Shylock, the Jew, the avenging arm of Jehovah, would act: "revenge," both in terms of Old Testament standards and in light of Christian behavior; "The villainy you teach me I will execute"
[III. i. 71-2].

Such a philosophy knows no compromise: "I say my daughter is my flesh and my blood" [III. i. 37] asserts Shylock (Jessica has already added the human corollary: "Though I am a daughter to his blood I am not to his manners" [II. iii. 18-19]): further, rather than adjust to the world he insists "I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear; would she were hears'd at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin" [III. i. 87-90]. This explains, too, his concern for his money, which, like his daughter, like Jacob's sheep, is his and his alone. He exists only on this level. "I crave the law" [IV. 1. 206], he cries: "I am aJew" [III. i. 58], he states. Could anything be more clear?

As usual, Shakespeare does not stop here. For one thing, he has the advantage of writing at a time when the Jew's place in society was enigmatical, so, in the social sense alone, the role of a Jew cannot be seen simply from a one-dimensional point of view. The Jew, in the Renaissance world, was hedged about with restrictions and superstitions, so that neither his role nor his place in society were clear-cut: Shakespeare has all the advantage of this complex situation. Further, Shylock is, in a dramatic sense, a type character: he is the Old Vice, he is the "humour" character. He evidences this role, for example, in a typically Shakespearean way, in his attitude toward music and gaiety. For, when he learns that there are to be "masques" he warns Jessica against "the drum / And the vile squealing of the wry-neck'd fife" [II. v. 29-30], and orders her

Let not the sound of shallow follow' enter
My sober house.
[II. v. 34-5]

His dislike for music marks him as a "villain," had not Salerio and Solanio already used the term to abuse him. But it remains for his new son-in-law, Lorenzo, to put the situation into proper philosophical and poetic terms. As he tells Jessica.

The man that hath no music In himself,
Nor is mov'd with concord of;. sweet
sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils.
[V. 1. 83-5]

How like Shakespeare to give us both the theory and the reality.

Opposing Shylock is Portia. She stands for Christian charity and mercy-with some human variations (she can, for example, be most caustic about her suitors). Shakespeare shows us her essential character in two significant scenes, one when Bassanio chooses the lead casket and the other in the court in Venice. Like other comic heroines, particularly Rosalind and Viola [in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night],* Portia is no demure, passive lady. Forced by the provisions of her father's will to wait for her true lover, she knows in advance whom she wants. In answer to Nerissa's inquiry-"Do you re member, lady, in your father's time, a Venetian, a scholar and a soldier?" [cf. I. ii. 112-13].-she blurts out, "Yes, yes, it was Bassanio" [I. ii. 115], before her maidenly reserve prompts her to add "as I think, so was he call'd" [I. ii. 115-16] And when Bassanio arrives, decked though he may be in borrowed garments, she begs him to "tarry" awhile.

I could teach you
How to choose right
[III. ii. 10-11]

she proposes, then withdraws her offer (it would be perjury) only to proclaim:

One half of me is yours, the other half
yours.
[III. ii. 16]

Then, she orders:

Let music sound while he doth make his
choice
[III. ii. 43]

(for Morocco and Arragon there had been only a "Flourish of Comets"). And when, at last, Bassanio makes the right choice,

And here choose I. Joy be the consequence!
[III. ii. 107]

her speech rises to the proper pitch, for she is

Happy in this, she is not yet so old
But she may learn; happier than this,
She is not bred so dull but she can learn;
Happiest of all is that her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours to be directed,
As from her lord, her governor, her king.
[III. ii. 161-66]

Shakespeare preserves the human equilibrium by having her conclude this speech with the giving of the "ring." thereby setting up the somewhat lewd but earthly antithesis to all this lofty eloquence. But it is in the courtroom that Portia reaches the apex; here, she truly embodies the spirit of Christian charity: for. as she makes clear,

. . . earthly power doth then show likest
God's
When mercy seasons justice.
(IV. I. 191-92]

Ironically, it is not she ("He shall have merely justice" (IV. i. 339) she decides) but the Duke and Antonio who practice what she has preached. But, here again, Shakespeare shows his great wisdom. his sense of decorum and reallty. which allows the head of the state. the Duke. to be the God-like dispenser of mercy; Portia. having served as the agent of justice, reverts to the clever, somewhat niggling young heroine, concerned about her "ring." It is certainly notable, too, that Shakespeare chooses to present the voice of mercy in disguise. True enough. he had convention (the boy actor) and his source (Ser Giovanni's *n Pecorone)* as a basis for so doing. But the fact that the words urging divine mercy are uttered in Venice under the cloak of a disguise is still significant. Is Shakespeare saying that mercy cannot come into the real world except it be protected by disguise? One remembers. as well, that Jessica and Lorenzo. two of the symbols of love in this play, cannot live and love in Venice, but must also resort to disguise in order to escape the realties of the city. Apparently only in Belmont can love and mercy exist without false faces, like the candle's beams ("So shines a good deed in a naughty world" (V. i. 91]). but here. too. we recollect, is the lead casket which contains a golden treasure and here. too, are the "rins," symbols of physical love. So the total picture is mevitably complex. And the motto for all might well be the lines spoken by Bassanio as he gazes at the caskets: The world is still deceiv'd with ornament. In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt But. being season'd with a gracious voice, Obscures the show of evil? In religion, What damned error but some sober brow Will bless it, and approve it with a text. Hiding the grossness with fair ornament? [III. ii. 74-80]

There is another device which serves Shakespeare as a variation to his either/or presentation of comedy, a trinitarian concept. Superimposed upon the basic contrasts or duality, there are innumerable threesomes. There are three young women, two Christians and a Jew; consequently, three pairs of lovers. Antonio and Bassanio have three friends. the pair, Solanio and Salerio, and Gratiano. There are three Jews. Tubal and Chus. in addition to Shylock. Portia has three suitors, the Princes of Morocco and Arragon. who fall, and Bassanio, who succeeds. Further. the whole play is based on three plots: bond. Casket, rings. The bond is for three thousand ducats for three months. There are three caskets, of gold, silver and lead. Later, Bassanio has three reasons for giving away Portia.s ring ("to whom. . . for whom. . . for what. . :'), which arguments Portia parnes with three of her own. In addition. in the last act. Portia has three letters which bring knowledge and rewards. But this concept of trinity is most noticeable in the phrasing. Antonio. speaking of his sadness, knows not "how I caught it, found it, or came by it" (I. 1. 4]. Solan!o and Salerio, as has been pointed out. offer in turn three "causes," Portia. "thrice-fair lady" is, to Bassinio, a trinity: rich, fair. virtuous.

Just so, Jessica. according to Lorenzo, is "wise. fair, and true" (II. vi. 56]. Shylock hates Antonio for three reasons, because he is a Christian. because "he lends out money gratis" [I. iii. 44] and because "he hates our sacred nation" [I. iii. 48). Morocco has a scimitar which slew "a Persian prince / That won three fields," (II. i. 25-6], whereas Arragon enunciates the "three things" he and other suitors are "en joined by oath to observe" [II. ix. 9]. In a climactic scene Portia "commits" herself to Bassanio. "her lord, her governor, her king" [III. ii. 165]. Bassanio later offers a "forfeit of my hands, my head. my heart" (IV. i. 212] if Shylock will accept his offer to save Antonio. Even Launcelot refers to himself as "your boy that was, your son that is, your child that shall be" (II. if. 85]. This constant use of triads lends both a consistency and a rhythm to the play. As a result of the playing of triads against a basic pattern of one-for-one contrast a rich and varied counterpoint emerges. (pp. 99-102)

A few final words remain to be said about the overall plotting, for in this regard, too, *The Merchant of Venice* is an unusual play. For a comedy, the themes of this work are extraordinarily serious and profound; they plumb the depths of human behavior and human character. The enigmatic nature of Shylock, himself. to say nothing of, for example, Jessica or Gratiano, who frequently seems simply a loudmouthed oaf, has troubled many readers. The play's wonderful poetry, some of it among the best Shakespeare ever wrote, sets it apart from other early and middle comedies such as *The Taming of the Shrew* or *Much Ado about Nothing.* Yet after all its superiorities have been enumerated, *The Merchant of Venice* remains in some ways a crude effort. The over-all machinery consists of three obvious, somewhat vulgar plots: the bond plot, the casket plot, the ring plot. All have been much handled and Shakespeare manipu1ates them rather mechanically. The bond plot, resulting from Antonio's willing ness to help Bassanio but his inability to meet the practical need other than through Shylock, is established first. It can be said to begin in Act I, scene i, and yields precedence only to the theme of sadness. The bond plot is resolved in the court scene, Act IV, scene i, except that one of its by-products (the "deed of gift" [IV. i. 394] for Lorenzo and Jessica) carries over into the final act of the play. This plot concerns mostly Antonio and Shylock; the latter disappears from the action, unwell, at the conclusion of the courtroom scene: Antonio "hangs" around through Act V, not completely cured of his melancholic a figure of Venice, somewhat out of place in the festive world of Belmont. The casket plot begins, interestingly, in Act I, scene ii. Although Bassanio has, in scene i, approached Antonio with a request for three thousand ducats to enable him "to hold a rival place" [I. i. 174] among Portia's suitors, he does not mention that his success will hinge upon a "lott'ry," as Nerissa calls it. So not until we meet Portia and Nerissa in scene ii is the casket plot fully set forth. From that point on, until Act III, scene ii, when Bassanio, chooses correctly. the scenes developing this story, all set in Belmont, more or less alternate with those connected with the bond plot. In a technical sense, the casket plot could be considered the main plot since it is the one which terminates or is resolved in what is traditionally the climactic act, III. The casket plot has a number of interesting overtones. For one thing, the whole situation vis-à-vis the caskets is based upon the will of Portia's dead father.

Certainly she chafes a bit under its restraints: "so is the will of a living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father" [I. ii. 24-5], she remarks; one may even conjecture that her

sadness is the result of this confinement although Neriss_ probably more correctly, attributes her "sickness" to "sUrfeit:' One wonders, incidentally, why Portia suffers when it would seem reasonable to suggest that her legal acumen should enable her to get around the provisions; at any event, she doesn't suffer long; moreover, she balances whatever unpleasantness does exist with a degree of levity and a certain amount of vituperative cynicism at the expense of the suitors themselves. One particular requirement of the will carries a certain threat with it that is, the requirement that the suitor if he "choose wrong" must agree

Never to speak to lady afterward
In way of marriage.
[II. ii. 41-2]

The casket plot builds mechanically to its conclusion, from the scene when Portia reviews the demerits of the present group of aspirants, through the two unsuccessful attempts of Morocco [II. vii.] and Arragon [II. ix.] to the third trial, the success of Bassanio. To heighten the mechanistic aspects of this plot, Shakespeare uses at least one external device, sound effects. For Morocco and Arragon, there is a "Flourish of Comets" [II. vii. and II. ix.]:

for Bassanio, there is music, the lovely song, "Where is fancy bred?" [III. ii. 63ff.].

Bassanio's character and chances are presumably enhanced by this tribute. At one point, too, during the interview with the Prince of Arragon, the "three things. . . enjoin'd by oath" [cf. II. ix:. 9] upon all suitors are enumerated (as a possible parallel with the details of the bond?);

First. never to unfold to anyone
Which casket 'twas I chose; next, if I fail
Of the right casket, never in my life
To woo a maid in way of marriage;
Lastly,
If I do fail in fortune of my choice,
Immediately to leave you and be gone.
[II. ix. 10-16]

These requirements do, indeed, smack of the harsh commercial world of the Rialto; they certainly establish a kind of absolute mood over Belmont and its "golden fleece:' The ring plot takes up exactly where the casket one ends, for with Bassanio's success [III. ii.], Portia not only cedes to him herself and her fortune, but "I give them with this ring" [III. ii. 171] and then she adds three (again magic?) restrictions

Which when you part from, lose. or give
away
Let it presage the ruin of your love.
[III. ii. 174-75]

The working out of this story is accomplished in two subsequent actions: the first at court and immediately afterwards on "a street" in Venice, and the second at Belmont. The situation is not actual ly resolved until the final lines of the play itself. If the bond plot sets up the central contrast of the play (justice versus mercy) and if the casket plot establishes the quality of love necessary for a happy marriage, the ring plot certainly undermines some of the ideals of the play. It allows bawdyness, even on the part of Portia; it reduces the marriages and victory at court to a series of double entendres on the nature of chastity in marriage; it puts an extremely realistic, even cynical, conclusion onto a play in which many kinds of problems and many kinds of people have been exposed to searching poetic analysis. The mechanistic aspect of this plotting suggests that *The Merchant of Venice* might best be analyzed in light of the Bergsonian theory of comedy: the notion of men as puppets, manipulated by a higher power. This idea stresses that comedy results from our perception of the limitations placed upon mankind. Such an awareness seems to underlie Nerissa's couplet; The ancient saying is no heresy:

Hanging and Wiving goes by destiny.
[II. ix. 82-3]

This concept may also be found in the conclusion of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* where we find Ford's couplet:

In love, the heavens themselves do guide
the state;
Money buys lands,'and wives are sold by
fate.
[V. v. 219-20]

In *The Merchant of Venice* sacred things, such as marriage and justice, are turned into subjects for or causes of merriment, and human beings are seen as the victims of destiny. The mixture here is what, finally, seems to me significant. For the parts all add up to a complex comic vision in which the unifying theme (and method, too, as I've tried to demonstrate) is realism. Hence Shakespeare's willingness to see all the facets of life and to present them with honesty and understanding. The main thrust of the comic elements in these early plays seems to me to be substantially realistic; even the romantic qualities, as I see them, are a part of this larger concept. (pp. 105-07)

Marvin Felheim, "The Merchant of Venice, " in Shakespeare Studies: An Annual Gathering of Research, Criticism, and Reviews, *Vol. 4, 1968, pp. 94-108.*

Critical Essay #5

[Godshalk discusses the unity of the The *Merchant of Venice in terms of the Pound of Flesh story and the Story of the Three Caskets, emphasizing in particular the elements of "bond" and "choice." According to the critic, the characters are bound to each other and to different courses of action in many ways. Aspects of bondage in the play include: the legal bond between Antonio and Shylock; the provision in Portia's father's will that binds her fortune; the suitors' binding oath forsaking marriage if they fail the casket test; the spiritual bondage of Portia and Bassanio, Jessica and Lorenzo, and Nerissa and Gratiano to the institution of marriage; and the bonds of friendship and society. Godshalk also examines "choice" as an extension of the "bond" issues, noting that even though the characters are bound by legal constructs, religious vows, and social obligations, they are free to determine into which bonds they enter. Such elements of choice in the play include: the option of three caskets; Jessica's choosing to elope with Lorenzo; and Shylock's demand for a pound of flesh in the trial scene (Act IV; scene i). The critic maintains that both the Story of the Three Caskets and the Pound of Flesh story begin with a character legally bound and later released through the choice of another. The casket plot represents a suit of love, Godshalk continues, where Bassanio's faith in love is rewarded when he chooses the lead casket and wins Portia. The trial episode is a suit of revenge in which Shylock's merciless demand for justice only leads to his downfall. The critic concludes with a discussion of the ring scene (Act V; scene i) in which Shakespeare ironically dramatizes the issues of "choice" and "bond."]*

[Graham Midgley states in his *"The Merchant of Venice:* A Reconsideration," *Essays in Criticism* X (1960)]: "The problem of *The Merchant of Venice* has always been its unity, and most critical discussions take this as the centre of their argument asking what is the relative importance of its two plots and how Shakespeare contrives to interweave them into a unity." The two plots are, of course, the Pound of Flesh Story and the Story of the Three Caskets, and the successful critic must account for Shakespeare's success in molding the two divergent stories into one whole. The strategy of the present study will be to examine both plots to ascertain their basic elements-what these two stories at bottom involve-and then to show how these elements interpenetrate the playas a whole.

The Pound of Flesh Story is found in *The Merchant's* Italian source, *Il Pecorone,* and in outline it is the same in both. In the source and the play, an older man is bound to a Jew so that a younger can obtain enough money to seek an heiress. Shakespeare, however, emphasizes two points not found or emphasized in Ser Giovant's tale. First, Shylock and Antonio are known to each other, and their relationship as financial enemies seems to be an old one. Their enmity stems from an ideological conflict over the morality ofusury. Shylock, if you will, is a capitalist, Antonio a socialist; and both claim religious sanction for their economic positions. Second, the bond is emphasized. In the first minutes of his negotiations with Shylock, Bassanio says, "Antonio shall be bound" [I. iii. 4-5]. Throughout the scene, "bound" is used three times and "bond" seven. As Shylock prepares to exit, Antonio assures him, "I will seal unto this bond" [I. iii. 171]. Apparently Shakespeare is at pains to underline the concept of the bond here, and the words

"bound" and "bond" echo through the play. Thus, it may be suggested that the Pound of Flesh Story as it is presented in *The Merchant* embodies two basic ideas: personal relationship (enemy to enemy as well as friend to friend) and bondage. And further, uniting the two ideas, we may see that the story is, at very bottom, about the binding of one man to another, with a consequent limitation on complete freedom of action. "And Antonio bound." The Caskets are not found in *Il Pecorone* and may well have been taken from Robinson's translation of the *Gesta Romanorum.* Here the Emperor asks a young maiden to prove herself worthy of marrying his son by choosing among three caskets of gold, silver, and lead. The same procedure is, of course, used in *The Merchant,* where to prove himself worthy of Portia, the lover must make, under the influence of his love, the proper choice. Both in the source story and in the play, 'choice' is the basic idea in the Casket Story. If one would have that which one desires, one must choose, and in so choosing, one reveals something of one's true self.

In the two basic stories out of which the play grows, there are, then, two underlying ideas: bondage and choice. The theme of the bond in various manifestations proliferates throughout the play and even penetrates the Story of the Caskets. For the characters are bound to each other and to different courses of action in many ways. Most apparent in the play is the legal bond, the bond that gives Antonio to Shylock. But if Antonio is legally bound to the evil will of Shylock, Portia is also legally bound, bound by the last will and testament of a perceptive and loving father. She may complain that "the will of a living daughter" is "curb'd by the will of a dead father" [I. ii. 24-5], but Nerissa is quick to remind her that her "father was ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspirations" [I. ii. 27-8]. Later Portia's words, that her father "hed'd" her "by his wit" [II. i. 18], suggest that she acknowledges the protection implicit in her bondage. She is protected from her own fancy as well as from external coercion to marry.

Portia's suitors are also bound. She tells Morocco that he must
swear before you choose, if you
choose wrong
Never to speak to lady afterward
In way of marriage.
[II. i. 40-2]

And they go "forward to the temple" [II. i. 44] so that Morocco may take his oath, and later Arragon takes the same oath [II. ix. 2] before he too comes to make his choice of caskets. In the oaths of the suitors, the legal bond modulates into the religious bond. Again the bondage is formal and the terms are clearly set forth [II. ix. 9-16]. And moreover, the oaths of the suitors adumbrate the self-imposed religious oath of Shylock. He tells Antonio: "I have sworn an oath, that I will have my bond" [III. iii. 5]; and in the trial scene, when Portia asks him to accept "thrice thy money" [IV. 1. 227], he replies: "An oath, an oath, I have an oath in heaven,- *I* Shall I lay perjury upon my soul?" [IV. i. 228-29]. The juxtaposition and inversion of values is ironic, and the point is that Shylock has bound himself religiously to a course of irreligious action.

In contrast, the lovers are bound by their religion in the rites and oaths of marriage. Jessica and Lorenzo are presumably married sometime between their elopement [II. vi] and their arrival in Belmont with Salerio [III. ii]. After choosing the right casket, Bassanio marries Portia. Speaking of herself in the third person, she says to Bassanio: "her gentle spirit / Commits itself to yours to be directed, / As from her lord, her governor, her king" [III. ii. 16365]. "Go with me to church, and call me wife" [III. i. 303], and Gratiano and Nerissa accompany them. The bonds of marriage are symbolized by the rings which the ladies present to their respective spouses and of which we shall hear more later. For the moment, however, we may marvel how many people in the play are bound by law or by religion. At the same time, it should be realized that the bondage extends in *The Merchant* beyond the formal limits of oath and legal contract. With Cicero, the Renaissance playgoer would have felt that there are "the bonds of human society", a "principle which knits together human society and cements our common interests" *[De Officiis* I. 5, 7; Cicero was a first-century B.C. Roman orator, statesman, and philosopher]. The principle may be called the bond of humanity, and within the play it assumes many forms. On one level, it is the close bond of friendship between Antonio and Bassanio. In our post-Freudian, sexually-oriented era, this friendship becomes latently homosexual-and possibly in many minds, worse. But rather than invoking Sigmund Freud, we may better look at Sir Thomas Elyot, who, in his *Boke Named the Gouemour* discusses "amitie or frendeshyp". Elyot feels that "Sens frendeshyp cannot be but in good men, ne may not be without vertue, we may be assured, that therof none euyll may procede, or therwith anyeuyl thyng may participate". Purity or virtue rather than sexual attraction is the keynote of a Renaissance friendship. . . . It is because of this spiritual bond of friends that Antonio is willing to bind himself legally to his enemy Shylock for the sake of his friend Bassanio. Bondage begets bondage.

Metaphorically, from this bond between Antonio and Bassanio, the social bondage spreads and grows, and is emphasized in the pattern of allusions to eating. When Lorenzo and Gratiano leave Bassanio in the first scene, they promise three times to meet him again at "dinner-time" [I. 1. 70, 109, 105]. Trying to gain the financial services of Shylock, Bassanio naturally asks him "to dine with us" [I. iii. 32]. Later, Gratiano promises Bassanio that his friends will be with him "at suppertime" [II. ii. 206]. As Jessica prepares to leave her home, Lorenzo urges her to hurry, for they "are stay'd for at Bassanio's feast" [II. vi. 48]; and while they are the master and mistress of Belmont, they playfully "go to dinner" [III. v. 86]. Having saved Antonio's life at the trial, Portia is entreated by Gratiano to give Bassanio and Antonio the pleasure of her "company at dinner" [IV. ii. 8]. To survive, all men must eat, but the pattern seems to suggest more than common necessity. It points to a stronger bond of love and good fellowship- "for we have friends / That purpose merriment" [II. ii. 202-03]. On the social level, it is equivalent to the Communion Table.

In contrast, Shylock denies the social bond implied in the convivial dinner. . . . Answering Bassanio's request that he eat with the Venetians, Shylock replies:

Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into: 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.
[I. iii. 33-81

The denial seems absolute, and the linking of eating with praying is perhaps to be taken as an indication of the spiritual separation which Shylock feels. However, his denial is only apparent, for he later tells Jessica:

I am bid forth to supper Jessica, . . .
I am not bid for love, they flatter me, But yet I'll go in hate, to feed upon
The prodigal Christian.
[II. v. ll, 13-15]

Thus Shylock subverts the whole idea of social unity implicit in the supper and introduces the rather grotesque element of cannibalism, which again appears in his assurance to 8alerio that Antonio's flesh "will feed my revenge" [III. 1. 54]. In his outrageous hints at eating human flesh, in his disgust at dining with his neighbors, Shylock demonstrates his lack of the essential feeling of unity which ties one man to another. In effect, he refuses to take part in the communal aspect of the social feast; he does not recognize the social bond. And one may well think back to the denial of humanity underlying the cannibalistic feast which ends *Titus Andronicus.*

Nevertheless, in the same scene in which he prom ises to feed his revenge with a pound of human flesh, Shylock makes what has been interpreted as a meaningful plea to the Christians for the acknowledgement of his common humanity:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food. . . as a Christian is? . . if you poison us do we not die? and if you wrong us shall we not revenge?
[III. i. 58-67]

Shylock appeals to the bodily feelings and appendages which all normal humans have in common: but his final appeal, unfortunately, is not to a universal bond of mercy or justice, but to a universal inhumanity: revenge. His whole plea for inclusion is vitiated by the final, ironic twist. Through his own will and desire, he excludes himself from the general bond of brotherhood which holds society together. (pp. 89-94)

Discussing the bonds of human society, Cicero notes [in Nicholas Grimald's 1596 translation, *Marcus Tullius Ciceroes Three Bookes of Duties]* that the principle which knits us together has "two parts: Justice is one, in the which is the greatest brightnesse of vertue, whereof good men beare theyr name, and to this is ioyned bountyfulnesse, which same we may tearme eyther gentlenesse, or liberalytye." It may be suggested without straining the point unduly that theoonds in *The Merchant* follow the same dichotomy, though it is restated in basically Christian terms: Justice and Mercy, Law and Charity. The bondage of the play, broadly viewed, falls into these categories. Though the basic intentions are different, the bonds which tie Antonio and Portia to certain agreements are strictly legal. The bonds of marriage and of religious oath seem to form a middle ground in which legality and charity (or, at least, religious emotion) coexist. And

finally, there are the extra-legal bonds which hold society together, and these are firmly based on charity. Thus the pattern of bondage embodies the play's chief thematic dichotomy.

Of course, the bonds may be categorized in various ways, and possibly from the most general point of view, they may be seen as the bonds ofIove and the bonds of hate. Although most of the characters are bound together in what may be called 'love', the initial relationship between Antonio and Shylock must be described in different terms. It becomes immediately apparent that hate, dislike, and repugnance are as binding in their way as charity, though the negative bond is ultimately destructive, and must either be dissolved or replaced. One may compare Portia's initial reaction to her many suitors, or Jessica's reaction to her father's manners. Again, this broad categorization of the bonds fits neatly with what E. K. Chambers feels is central in the play. "The theme of *The Merchant of Venice",* he writes [in his *Shakespeare: A Survey],* " . . . is readily to be formulated as a conflict. It is a conflict in the moral order, between the opposing princi ples of Love and Hate." '

Opposition of principles in the moral world presupposes the element of moral choice; for the concept of moral action is closely related to the idea of free wiii. To be truly moral, one must have the opportunity of being otherwise. Thus, at this point in our discussion of *The Merchant,* it will be expedient to return to the basic element in the Casket Story: choice. If the characters of the play are bound and their actions are determined by certain legal contracts, religious vows, and social obligations, they are also free, as all moral beings must be, to determine the bonds into which they will enter.

It may be objected, of course, that all drama. to have any dramatic force, must be based on the idea that its protagonists have freedom of action, that choice is essential to drama. Without arguing against this possible objection, I would like to suggest that in *The Merchant* the element of choice is emphasized far beyond the point needed to maintain the requisite tension. It is doubly underlined in the Story of the Caskets.

Portia introduces the idea rather forcefully, "0 me the word 'choose'!" [I. ii. 22-3], and goes on to explain, in a passage we have examined before, that her choice has been curbed by her father's wiii. In turn, Nerissa explains that the suitor "who chooses" her father's meaning and thus the right casket "chooses" Portia also [I. ii. 30-1]. The word echoes throughout the scene. Later, as the several caskets are revealed to Morocco, Portia commands him: "Now make your choice" [II. vii. 3], and he and Portia discuss how he will know if his choice is correct. When Arragon stands facing the caskets, he notes that the word "many" may suggest "the fool multitude that choose by show" [II. ix. 26], and decides that he "will not choose what many men desire" [II. ix. 31]. After Bassanio arrives, Portia tells him that she could teach him "How to choose right" [III. ii. 11]. But to continue with illustrations at this point is a work of supererogation. By the mere repetition of the words "choose" and "choice", Shakespeare forces the idea on the playgoer's consciousness.

Out of this central myth of choosing, the idea of choice radiates through the play. Presented with Shylock's alternatives, either signing the note with a pound of flesh as

forfeiture or getting no money, Antonio chooses to "seal unto this bond" [I. iii.171], even though Bassanio is suspicious. More agonizing is the choice of Jessica:

Alack, what heinous sin is it in me
To be ashamed to be my father's child! But though I am a daughter to his blood 1 am not to his manners.
[II. iii. 16-19]

To end her inner strife, she chooses to elope with Lorenzo, becoming a Christian. Her situation and choice form an effective contrast to Portia's. Portia. bound by her father's will, freely chooses to abide by its rules. When Nerissa asks her if she will marry the drunken young German should he choose the correct casket. her answer-"I will do anything Nerissa ere I will be married to a sponge" [I. ii. 98-9]-seems to bar the natural solution of refusing to obey her father's wiii. Later, drawn by her love of Bassanio to show him the proper choice, she decides that she cannot betray her father's trust. Jessica, given a similar choice between father and lover, chooses Lorenzo. (pp. 94-6).

Although we have seen that 'the bond' and 'the choice' are basic elements in *The Merchant,* we must now examine how they fit into the play's larger patterns of action. There is a parallel, we have noted, between Antonio bound to the "will" of Shylock [IV. i. 83] and Portia bound to the will of her father: and from this starting point, we may distin guish two major movements in the play (move ments which have some correspondence to the source stories). We may call them the suit ofloveBassanio's winning of Portia-and the suit of revenge-Shylock's pursuit of Antonio. Both suits culminate in a trial centering upon a choice which is, indeed, a test of the moral fiber of the chooser.

The first movement, the suit of love, is the least complex of the two. The audience watches the wrong choice of Morocco, who, making an equation between human worth and physical wealth, takes the golden casket [II. vii. 59-60]. He is followed by Arragon whose choice is governed by his own price: "I will not jump with common spirits" [II. ix. 32], and he picks silver. Thus by the time Bassanio comes to choose, the playgoer is fully aware of the correct choice, and Bassanio, not "deceiv'd with ornament" [III. ii. 74], makes the proper choice of lead, and by hazarding all (as his friend Antonio has done for him), he gains his heart's desire. In the realm oflove and personal attachment, to gain everything one must hazard just as much. The second movement, which we have called the suit of revenge, and which actually runs concurrently with the first, grows out of the suit of love: for Antonio binds himself to Shylock so that Bassanio may have the necessary wealth to court Portia. And in the end, love dominates and destroys revenge, though the victory is not an easy one. Through a series of mishaps, Antonio's several fleets do not arrive in Venice, and the bond is for feit. Shylock thereupon demands that the pound of human flesh be paid, and a day of trial is set. Shylock, it appears, must have his will of Antonio, just as, in a wholly different context, Bassanio has won Portia.

The trial scene, at first, seems not to offer a direct parallel, since ostensibly the trial is not of the suitor, Shylock, but of Antonio, and therefore cannot mirror Bassanio's trial at the choice of caskets.

However, if we can take advantage of our knowledge of the outcome, we see that the trial of Antonio has, in one way, a foregone conclusion: for Portia is already armed with the quibble that will cause Shylock to break off the suit, and she already knows the forgotten law which will put Shylock in Antonio's place, in danger of his life. It is not then the trial of Antonio; he readily admits that the bond is forfeit; but it is the trial of Shylock, who is presented by Portia with a series of moral choices. First she comments:

Of a strange nature is the suit you follow, Yet in such rule, that the Venetian law Cannot impugn you as you do proceed,
[IV. i. 177-79]

suggesting that Shylock has complete freedom of will to act as he wishes. After finding that Antonio confesses the bond, however, she insists: "Then must the Jew be merciful" [IV. i. 182]. Mistaking the moral imperative for the physical Shylock asks, "On what compulsion must I?" [IV. 1. 183], and Portia launches into her eloquent speech on the quality of mercy. Shylock is given the free choice between Justice and Mercy-with a strong incentive in Portia's speech to be merciful-and the choice seems quickly and confidently made: "My deeds upon my head! I crave the law" [IV. i. 206J. Nevertheless, Portia does not give up her testing and shifts her examination to different grounds. The next choice Shylock must make is between "thrice thy money" [IV. i. 227] and the pound of flesh. But even material wealth will not divert his suit of revenge, and his choice suggests the quality of the man. Since his choices are not in accord with the play's scheme of values, he does not gain the object of his desires-which is, rather grotesquely, Antonio's heart. The latter part of the trial scene gives both Antonio and the Duke of Venice a chance to make the proper choice, and they are merciful. Thus both the suit of love and the suit of revenge follow the pattern of 'bond' and 'choice'.

Ironically and comically, both elements are used again at the play's end. The comedy of rings, which are begged from Bassanio and Gratiano by their disguised wives, runs through the end of Act IV and into Act V, recapitulating and mirroring Antonio's bondage to Shylock; for the rings, which the husbands swear so faithfully to wear, are the symbols of the marital bond. The point of the comedy lies beneath Antonio's words to Bassanio:

My Lord Bassanio, let him [i.e., Portia as
Balthazar] have the ring, Let his deservings and my love withal Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandement.
[IV. i. 449-51]

In different terms, Bassanio is presented with the same choice as Shylock: shall he follow the spirit of charity or the letter of the law? His choice is doubly hard because the ring is the physical symbol of the bond between Portia and himself, but charity wins, and Gratiano is sent after the disguised Portia with Bassanio's ring.

The comedy of Bassanio's aside: "Why I were best to cut my left hand off, / And swear I lost the ring defending it" (V. i. 177-78], at the discovery of his ring's loss sets the tone of the final trial: and the bawdy lightness of the accusation levelled against the recreant

husbands by their apparently indignant wives suggests that Portia and Nerissa have interpreted the loss in the proper spirit. The rings are merely physical signs of a bond which is, of necessity, spiritual. Perhaps the suggestion is that all bonds between man and man-or man and woman-are of this nature. But the final binding of the play is Antonio's:

I once did lend my body for his wealth. Which but for him that had your husband's ring Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound
again, My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord Will never more break faith advisedly.
[V. i. 249-53]

Portia accepts the new bond and seals her renewed faith by returning Bassanio's ring. The episode ends in laughter-with Gratiano's quip concerning Nerissa's ring-though the words of Antonio fall more seriously on the ear. Once more he binds himself for his friend, with his soul this time, not a pound of flesh, in the balance. The flesh has given way to the spirit, and, though in a higher key, the play ends on the same note upon which it began: 'I dare be bound again' IV. i. 251]. (pp. 97-100)

William Leigh Godshalk,'The Merchant of Venice': Bond or Free?" in his Patterning in Shakespearean Drama: Essays in Criticism, *Mouton, 1973, pp. 87-100.*

Critical Essay #6

[Hyman maintains that the primary action of The Merchant of Venice centers on the struggle between Portia and Antonio for Bassanio's affection, or the competition between friendship and marriage. Viewed in this manner, the critic continues, Antonio's bond with Shylock represents the merchant's attempt to retain Bassanio's love. Hyman then discusses the Elizabethan context of Antonio and Bassanio's relationship, asserting that it does not necessarily suggest homosexual yearnings on the merchant's part, rather, it reflects a close, platonic association that was quite common in Shakespeare's day. From this issue, the critic contends, Shakespeare creates dramatic ten sion in the' trial scene (Act IV, scene i) not merely between the adversarial relationship of Antonio and Shylock, but also through the rivalrous nature of Portia and Antonio's love for Bassanio. According to Hyman, Antonio's willingness to submit to Shylock's bond reflects his desperate attempts to maintain his relationship with his friend, even though he has already been partially displaced by Bassanio's marriage to Portia. The climax: of the play, the critic declares, is also the high point of Portia's victory over Antonio. Not only does she thwart Shylock's revenge, but by rescuing Antonio with a legal technicality, she also severs the bond which holds her husband emotionally accountable to the merchant Even though Antonio loses the contest for Bassanio's affections in the trial scene, Hyman concludes, he nevertheless makes onefinal attempt to retain his friend by urging Bassanio to give his ring to the disguised Portia. Portia demonstrates her supremacy over Antonio, however, when she presents the forfeited ring to her husband in the final act and forgives him for breaking his oath.]

Aside from the powerful impact which Shylock makes upon us, the readers and critics of this play have been most impressed by the remarkable way in which Shakespeare has woven together the stories of the caskets, the bond, and the ring. And, although interpretations naturally differ, the unit that the critics have found in the play is usually based on a contrast between Portia and Shylod Belmont and Venice, love and hatred, or mercy, strict justice. John Russell Brown [in his introduction to *The Merchant of Venice],* for example, a: though he notices quite clearly the similarity between usury and love (as well as the contrast), still finds a moral principle coming through at the em It is "that giving is the most important part giving prodigally, without thought for the taking.

More recently Sigurd Burckhardt [in his "The Me] chant of Venice: The Gentle Bond," *ELHXXIX]* has found greater unity in this play by emphasizing the interdependence between Venice and Belmon particularly between Shylock's insistence 0 maintaining the bond and Portia's loosening (this bond, Burckhardt's initial assumption that the bond is "the play's controlling metaphor" is a important advance in unifying this play. But no critic, as far as I am aware, has seen the full metaphoric meaning of the bond as a link between Antonio and Bassanio, rather than as merely a line between Antonio and Shylock. The very genius of Shakespeare, which was able to transform Shylock from a comic dupe into an almost "tragic figure, has prevented us from seeing that *in terms I the structure of the play* Shylock is a minor cha acter. We shall ignore him, for the most part, i order to focus our attention on Portia, Bassani, and Antonio. And once we make

this simple ste] we will see that the main action of the play is cel tered on the struggle between Portia and Antonio for Bassanio's love.

To arrive at such an interpretation in which the rivalry over Bassanio is dominant, rather than the struggle to overcome Shylock, it will be necessary to see the action more as a metaphor than as a literal rendition of human behavior. Such a reading will not only allow us to see a greater degree of unity in the play but also remove the need to justify the actions of this strange playas being credible in naturalistic terms. Since the metaphoric nature of the caskets is made explicit in the play, and the metaphoric nature of the ring is implicit. we need go only a little further in order to see that the forfeited bond, with its pound of flesh, is only incidentally a bond between the two merchants. Essentially, that is in terms of Antonio's intention and in relation to the main theme of the play, the bond represents Antonio's attempt to hold on to Bassanio's love.

To call Antonio a lover of Bassanio is not strange in Elizabethan language; nor need it be considered unusual even to a modem audience. Elizabethan scholars and modem psychologists could be quoted to help define this relationship; but for our purposes, which are strictly literary, and not historical or psychological, all we need assume is that Antonio feels rejected when he sees that his friend is de termined to marry. Some readers might insist that Antonio has some unconscious sexual feeling for Bassanio that he would never reveal even to himself. But such an assumption is neither necessary nor relevant to our understanding of his actions. All that we need assume is that Antonio knows that he should be happy in his friend's normal attempt to find a wife and is nevertheless unhappy at losing him. Because of this ambivalent feeling he is telling the truth when he opens the play with his complaint: "I know not why I am so sad" [I. i. 1]. This ambivalence in Antonio's feeling is made clear when Antonio offers to stretch his credit to supply the money for Bassanio's suit. Consciously, Antonio's intentions are genuine; he loves his friend enough to want Bassanio to win the lady who is described in such glowing terms. But in offering to put himself into debt for his friend (his credit will be "racked, even to the uttermost" [I. i. 181]), Antonio is also revealing the depth of his own feeling for Bassanio. In a purely literal sense there is no good reason for Bassanio's wanting a large sum of money to carry on his suit. It is not the pretense of being rich himself that enables him to win Portia. What is credible and what is essential to the development of the play is that from the very beginning-even before the bond literally turns to blood-Antonio's money is seen as a counterpart to the "golden fleece" that hangs on the temples of Portia. The emphasis on Portia's wealth can also be understood in the light of Antonio's rivalry. Taken literally, Bassanio's insistence on her fortune might jar somewhat the romantic atmosphere which envelops his courtship. But when we realize that Antonio's wealth which he puts at his friend's disposal is a means of holding on to Bassanio's love, we can see that Portia's wealth makes more emphatic her role in displacing Antonio. All this is made clear in Scene ill when Shylock demands, as security for his loan, "an equal pound / Of. . . fair flesh, to be cut off and taken / In what part of your body pleaseth me" [I. iii. 149-51]. The interconnections between Antonio's love repre sented by his offer of money, and the love of a woman which, naturally enough, is drawing Bassanio away from Antonio to Portia. is now given dramatic as well as symbolic force. We learn later that the bond, as actually written, calls specifically for the flesh "Nearest his heart" [IV. i. 254]. Although Shylock refers to

the forfeit of the pound of flesh as ajoke or "sport", Bassanio is shocked at this monstrous proposal. To him the friendship is best represented by a monetary loan which could be easily repaid with the money he would gain by marrying Portia. But to Antonio the link between the money that could be returned and the feeling "nearest his heart" (that unfortunately could not be returned by Bassanio) is not so clearly separated. And without hesitation Antonio consents: "Content, i' faith. I'll seal to such a bond / And say there is much kindness in the Jew" [I. iii. 152-53]. In the light of Shylock's motives the word "kindness" is ironic, and despite Shylock's use of the word "sport", Antonio's reply is barely credible. But in connection with Antonio's feelings at this point, as a rival lover, the eager acceptance of the bond is understandable. Antonio is offering his heart-figuratively but nevertheless with a vivid concreteness-as a means of counteracting the love which he fears Portia will soon offer to Bassanio. The bond legally and literally binds Antonio to Shylock but on a deeper level it binds Antonio to Bassanio. To break *this* bond, the bond between the lover and his friend, we need not only a clever judge, but Portia herself. The woman who is to receive the love which Antonio is about to lose is introduced to us in a phrase reminiscent of her rival: "By my troth, Nerissa. my little body is aweary of this great world" [I. ii. 1-2]. And like her rival, her sadness is also caused by Bassanio. She, of course, wins Bassanio, and the Casket Scene will be discussed later. But her victory is not complete. Before the marriage can be consummated, we learn of Antonio's losses and the forfeiture of the pound of flesh. The bond which binds Bassanio to his friend now severs his relationship to his wife. Antonio's letter, which "steals the color from Bassanio's cheeks" [cf. III. ii. 244], is described "as the body of my friend / And every word in it a gaping wound, / Issuing life blood" [III. ii. 264-66]. No dramatist who is also a poet could be expected to give a blunter indication of Antonio's role as a rival lover to Portia.

Shylock's action is brilliantly presented by Shakespeare in such a way that we can be both shocked at his cruelty and moved by the circumstances that provoke his monstrous revenge. But, without reference to the rival lovers, there is still something fantastic, even if it is dramatically effective, about the situation. Could such a bond really be enforced in a court of law which was created to facilitate the commercial life of a great city? Would not the fear of personal revenge combined with his greed serve to make Shylock relent? These questions can be answered negatively; and we are not arguing that the situation is literally impossible. But improbable possibilities are not the best material for great drama. The effectiveness of these scenes can be accounted for and their integral relationship to the rest of the play enhanced by seeing Antonio as a rival lover. The demand for the pound of flesh should be seen as the culmination not only of Shylock's hatred for all Christians (including Jessica), but of Antonio's desperate love for Bassanio.

Antonio's love, at this point, faces death in every sense. And at the Trial Scene [IV. i], his final speech (or what he believes will be his final speech) indicates that he is aware that he will undergo more than one kind of death beneath Shylock's knife:

Give me your hand. Bassanio, fare you
welll
Grieve not that I am fallen to this for

you.. . ..
Commend me to your honorable wife. Tell her the process of Antonio's end, Say how I loved you, speak me fair in
death,
And when the tale is told, bid her be judge Whether Bassanio had not once a love.
Repent but you that you shall lose your
friend.
And he repents not that he pays your debt. For if the Jew do cut but deep enough. I'll pay it presently with all my heart.
[IV. i. 265-81]

The bravery and devotion of Antonio which we feel as we see him submitting to the cruel demands of Shylock are not in question. Virtues are not, or need not be, explained away by rooting them in the needs and desires of men. Antonio's action is no less brave or sympathetic, but simply more understandable and more interesting, when it is seen as a desperate attempt to equal Portia's love for Bassanio. Nor is Portia any different in this respect. For she too tries to counteract her rival. Just as Antonio first tries to win Bassanio with money and later with his heart's blood, so Portia. naturally enough, wins Bassanio first as a woman and later, when she hears of Antonio's plight, with her money. Again her generosity is no more in question than is Antonio's bravery. But, metaphorically, she too is substituting her money for the sexuality which she (for very different reasons of course) cannot offer to Bassanio at this time. The juxtaposition of money and love, blood and gold, daughters and ducats, as many readers have noticed, runs throughout the play.

The climax of the play, Portia's turning the tables on Shylock, is also the high point of Portia's victory over Antonio. She not only saves his life but also prevents him from proving to Bassanio that his love could not be surpassed. The Biblical phrase about the "greater love" would certainly have applied to the man in this context. Nor does Antonio fail to recognize, even if many critics have, that Shylock's defeat is also his. For there now seems to be nothing to prevent Portia from giving her body to her husband in what maybe called another kind of death, one that is naturally enough much more welcome to Bassanio. Antonio, however, is not yet ready to give up entirely: and to see his rivalry we must now leave the bond and look at its successor, the ring.

It will be remembered that it is Portia. in her disguise as the clerk, who asks for the ring. And this seemingly perverse action on her part will be explained later when we deal with the caskets. But her entreaty is not sufficient to make Bassanio give up the ring. It is only when Antonio reminds him that this "clerk" saved the life of his friend that Bassanio consents to remove the pledge of his love for Portia. The ring, as Burckhardt has pointed out, is "like the bond. . . of a piece with the flesh. . . ," In this context it represents Antonio's final attempt to separate his friend from Portia.

Since we know that the clerk is really Portia, we know in advance that the attempt is futile. Dramatically the play moves to a lower key. Thematically, however, the final joke concerning the ring is a continuation of the rivalry between Antonio and Portia.

To read the final scene merely as a trick which is used to end the play on a light note is quite possible. We are always made aware by Portia's lines that Bassanio is in no danger. But such a reading would imply that Portia is not only very clever but also very cruel. What woman who could display the tenderness that Portia does in Act III, Scene ii, would be so cruel to her husband a few hours after he had witnessed the near death of his best friend? Only, it seems to me, a woman who is still fighting to break the last remaining bond that holds her husband to a former love. That this former love is another man, and is thus not a real rival, allows Portia to fight her battle in the form of a joke. Neither the woman she attributes to Bassanio nor the man she claims as her lover is real. But her jealousy is, and so is the pain suffered by Bassanio in this final scene.

Of course the term jealousy has to be qualified to fit this situation. It is not the jealousy of Othello or of Cleopatra. As we have mentioned earlier, Antonio never blames his friend for wanting to marry: nor could he in his own conscious thoughts blame Portia for anything that she did. In the same way, Portia could hardly blame Antonio for what is an almost passionate friendship. And in no sense could she blame her husband for responding to the greater love that would lay down life for a friend. What we are concerned with is not a matter of right or wrong conduct, but with the insistent but altogether natural desire of a woman to possess her lover completely coming into conflict with the desire of Antonio to hold on to the love of his friend. We need not concern ourselves with the question as to whether Antonio's desire is equally "natural". For our purposes all we need recognize is that his desire is equally strong.

Portia knows of course that Bassanio really gave the ring to her, and that her accusation is false. But the false appearance in Shakespearian comedy is seldom a mere trick. Just as Viola's disguise [in *Twelfth Night]* and Hero's "seduction" [in *Much Ado About Nothing]* serve not only to conceal but to reveal certain truths, so in this play Portia's pre tense that she has been wronged (and that she has in turn betrayed Bassanio) reveals a truth that could not be expressed in any other way. The love between Antonio and Bassanio which caused her ring to be removed was just as strong, and was consequently just as much of a threat to her complete possession of her husband, as a rival mistress. There is an obvious truth in her remark that no man would be "so much unreasonable" [V. 1. 203] as to desire the ring, since she was the man. But there is a more significant truth in that phrase insofar as the love of Antonio, which was the real cause of Bassanio's action, is comparable to the love of a woman. That she treats Antonio's feelings for her husband as being equivalent to a woman's is made more explicit a few lines later when she plays with the word ring or "jewel" so as to suggest her own sexuality.

The trick has its effect not only on her husband but more importantly on her rival as well. Antonio, seeing that he is "the unhappy subject of these quarrels" (V. 1. 238], finally recognizes that his love for Bassanio is, under the circumstances, too strong, and that the love for a woman must inevitably displace all but the memory of the love between the two friends. Antonio acknowledges that if it were not for Portia he himself would not be alive. And, as if to make explicit in action the complete victory that Portia has won, he himself hands over the ring to Bassanio. Antonio is now, as the play ends, no longer a rival but a willing accomplice in his friend's marriage.

But the placing of Portias ring on Bassanio's finger is more than the conclusion of the rivalry. The ring was first put on Bassanio's finger in the Casket Scene, and its recurrence should bring to a con clusion not only the story of the bond but also the story of the three caskets. Coming as it does from another source, the choice of a casket is not so explicitly related to the rival lovers as are the bond and the ring. But since the metaphoric meaning of the caskets is explicit. there is no difficulty in reading the whole scene metaphorically. and so relating it to the main action of the play.

The inscriptions on the caskets make clear to us from the beginning that Bassanio's actions are not a matter of chance but a reflection of the nature of love. And Bassanio's love is generous. he would "give and hazard all he hath" [II. vii. 9]. It is interesting to note, however, that this inscription is on the *outside* of the leaden casket. and that when Bassanio opens this casket, some scenes later. the motto reads quite simply: "You that choose not by the view, / Choose as fair, and choose as true"' [iii. ii. 132]. A relationship can be established between the two moral maxims. But the first and more significant statement links this scene with the pre ceding action of Antonlo. For it is he, not Bassanio the fortune hunter. who has shown his love by giving all that he has; Indeed he has hazarded his fortune to the sea and the wind, while hazarding his heart to his enemy.

Bassanio. in one sense. has done the opposite. He has looked for and found a "lady richly left" [I. 1. 161], and a friend who is willing to put his entire fortune at his disposal. Portia. too, gives herself to him by wishing herself "A thousand times more fair. ten thousand times / More rich . . . " [cf. iii. ii. 154] for his sake. So far it is only Antonio and Portia who give and hazard; Bassanio has only taken.

When. immediately after the marriage, we learn that Antonio is about to lose his life for his friend. the irony of the slogan becomes sharper, and as so often in Shakespeare, the action makes a mockery of morality. By giving and hazarding Antonio seems to have lost everything: whereas by taking all that he can get. his friend is on the verge of get ting as much beauty, wealth, generosity (and as he soon learns), intelligence, as could be found in any woman. But we must emphasize the words "seems" and "is on the verge of". Shakespeare does not replace moral maxims with cynicism. Bassanio must give up this beautiful wife in order to go to Venice, and Is prepared to give up Portia's wealth in order to ransom his friend from imminent death. Conversely, by giving all he has. Antonio has succeeded in displacing Portia. for the mo ment at least. as the chief interest for Bassanio. Just as Antonio will eventually place Portia's ring on Bassanio's finger In the conclusion. so here his rival must step aside:

First go with me to church and call me
wife,
And then away to Venice to your friend, For never shall you lie by Portia's Side With an unquiet soul.
[III. iii. 304-06]

The statement on the leaden casket thus becomes more than either a copybook maxim or a cynical reminder that the world does not usually reward generosity. It is a warning

to Bassanio that if the leaden casket contained gold, the golden world that he gained can quickly turn again into the harsh world represented by Shylock. But it is the ring, rather than the caskets and the bond, which brings out the true significance of what Is implied by giving and hazardin,g all that one has. We have seen both Antonio and Portia risk all that they have because of their love for Bassanio. It now remains for Bassanio to carry out the maxim.

His opportunity to give and hazard all that he has comes about when his friend and his wife, from dif ferent motives, both act to make him give up the ring. It is appropriate that Bassanlo, who has so far been accustomed only to taking. has to be urged to part with the symbol of "all that he hath". And It is also appropriate that in giving all, he is really giving nothing, since Portia's ring is received by Portia. But Bassanio does not know this, and the pain which he suffers makes him feel what his friend had experienced earlier in the play-that a moral maxim may be much better as an inscription than it is in practice. For if Antonio's greater love almost results in laying down his life for his friend, Bassanio's "greater love". . . almost results in his laying down his wife for his friend. The conclusion of the play parallels and develops earlier scenes; yet, as so often in Shakespeare with no sense of repetition but of continual development in action. character and theme.

A sense of the thematic unity, amidst the bewildering actions, can also help us account for the miraculous return of Antonio's fleet, which Portia announces to him after he has given her ring back to Bassanio. On a litera1level this restoration of his ships is both incredible and unnecessary. (Antonio is not concerned with his wealth.) But to Portia the return of the ships is important in removing the last sacrifice that Antonio has suffered for Bassanio. And it brings us back to the Casket Scene in that it fulfills the prophecy implied in the leaden casket, that he who lives and hazards will eventually receive what he desires and perhaps even what he deserves. Or, to use Shakespeare's own images, the lead turns to gold for Antonio as well as for his friend,

But as even Shakespeare and his contemporaries suspected alchemy is, at least in part, a trick and an illusion. And the happy ending here as in most of Shakespeare's comedy, depends on our accepting the illusion. Under the surface of the golden world as Portia's unsuccessful suitors learned, there is often a harsher reality. It is therefore quite in keeping with the ironic current of the play, as well as the tragic undertone, that the conclusion should see Bassanio come so close to the precipice at the very moment when he too gives and hazards all that he has.

Many readers have found a golden world in Bel mont in contrast to the cruel business world of Venice. But those critics who have examined the play more closely have usually seen how interdependent the two worlds are. Lorenzo's beautiful description of the harmony of the spheres is interrupted by Jessica's remark that she is never merry when she hears music. Nor should we forget how intimately this love affair is bound up with a more earthy gold than is found in the heavenly spheres. To see the playas a unified action is to realize that there is no clear separation between generous love and selfish love between those who take and those who give. between the lead and the gold, Bassanio, it is true. is neither a jealous nor a possessive lover, like Antonio and

Portia. But then he never has to be. And with all their possessiveness and jealousy, Antonio and Portia can never be accused of refusing to give all for love.

None of the leading characters have to be justified or condemned, only understood And when we do so we will see not what ought to be by our own standards or by some hypothetical construction of what the "Elizabethan audience" expected, but what human beings actually do when driven by their loves, hates, hopes. and fears. It is not that mercy, generosity, justice, and pity are unreal, or that they are only masks to conceal emotions. On the contrary, the analysis presented here should indicate that these high-sounding virtues are given greater reality when they are grounded in the desires, both conscious and unconscious, of passionate men and women. To see *The Merchant of Venice* as a play about rival lovers is not only to unify the diverse actions but also to give depth and complexity to what is often seen as a clever dramatization of a faiIy-tale morality. (pp. 109-16)

Lawrence W. Hyman, "The Rival Lovers in 'The Merchant of Venice_" in Shakespeare Quarterly, *VoL XXI. No.2, Spring, 1970, pp. 109-16.*

Critical Essay #7

[Pettigrew argues that Shakespeare portrays Bassanio as an ideal Elizabethan lover, a character whose "apparentfaults were to the Elizabethans mere conventional common places arlsingfrom the economic conditions of the age." Marryingfor money was not unusual during Sha/cespeare's time, the critic asserts, and often expected due to the rising cost of living during the Reno.issance and thefallingfortunes of the aristocracy. Nevertheless. Pettigrew states that the playwright went to great pains to make clear that not only Portia's wealth, but also her intelligence and beauty attract Bassanio. Furthermore, Portia reveals a typical Elizabethan attitude toward marriage in her remarks about suitors and husbands, and once she and Bassanio are wed, she shows no concern when he immediately assumes the right to use her fortune, ultimately, the critic determines that based on traditional Elizabethan courtship and marriage practices, Bassanio is a romantic hero, not a scheming opportunist]

In spite of the "absurdities" of its plot, The *Merchant of Venice* is sometimes called the best of Shakespeare's comedies: love is one of its primary themes: and the somewhat ambiguous Bassanio is unquestionably the chief lover. Some commentators give him a qualified praise; and a few. indeed, eulogize him as a "romantic lover," even the "ideal" lover such as [Baldassare] Castiglione celebrated Many more scholars. on the contrary, form a sort of accusatory chorus against Bassanio: he is, they say, the intellectual interior of Portia, even "dull in capacity": he is a peevish, weak spendthrift, both selfish and prodigal-a very "profligate": he is a mercenary, predatory creature, only the "seeming lover" of Portia, a man "imprudent, impudent and mean": he is, indeed, a "downright fortune hunter,"_ tolerable to the reader only because, in a romance, we accept a character at the author's evaluation.-And yet Shakespeare clearly intended Bassanio for a hero. If these charges be true, the playwright must have bungled-more, indeed, than some commentators would believe he bungled in the character of Proteus [in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona]-for* to this same Bassanio he gives that pearl of great price, the "radiant" Portia, called by many readers Shakespeare's loveliest woman. In truth, Bassanio's behavior, for a hero, does seem rather odd: though expressing distrust of Shylock, he accepts Antonio's offer to jeopardize himself for friendship's sake: he uses the borrowed money to give a Gargantuan bachelor feast, and to provide himself with a richly appointed *entourage,* so as to arrive impressively in Belmont; he frankly admits that he hopes to retrieve his lost fortunes by a rich marriage: he chooses among the caskets wisely, to be sure, but, in the song, "Tell me where is Fancie bred" [III. ii. 63-72], Portia may have warned him how to choose. When Antonio's difficulties reach a climax, Bassanio hastens back to Venice; but after he has arrived, he does nothing but stand by ineffectually, while Portia rescues his friend. As a husband, Bassanio's only acts are to use Portia's money as freely as his own, and later to break his word to her, and then to lie about the ring. All in all, Bassanio seems to be but a poor thing; and Shakespeare, in his delineation of these two lovers, would appear to have disregarded the cardinal principle of dramatic justice. This is a serious indictment against the world's greatest dramatist, in one of his greatest plays; and surely every effort should be made to examine the indictment. (pp. 296-97)

Not only does Shakespeare's revision of the story , from his sources show [a] tendency toward realism, but so also does the detail of the action and dialogue of both Portia and Bassanio, in their miscellaneous social relationships. Portia's pleading of the case before the Duke, according to Lord Camp bell [in his *Shakespeare's Legal Acquirements),* shows a considerable realism: her use of legal phrases and her court procedure are Elizabethan. Her relationship with Nerissa, moreover, foreshadowed by that of Julia and Lucetta in *The Two Gentlemen,* and looking forward to that of Olivia and Maria in *Twelfth Night,* reflects a very common status in Elizabethan England,-the friendship between a noblewoman and her lady-in-waiting, who is also of gentle birth. In Portia's dialogue, too, outside the love scenes, occur incidental realistic touches. In discussing with Nerissa her various suitors, she reflects actual customs, opinions, and events of Shakespeare's time: the French Lord, she maintains, "will fence with his own shadow" [I. ii. 61-2], the young Englishman, though lamentably ignorant of for_ign languages, incongruously combines in his dress various Continental fashions: the Scotchman has "borrowed a boxe of the ear of the *Englishman* and swore he would pay him againe when hee was able" [ef. I. ii. 80-1]-a debt for which "the *Frenchman* became his suretie" [cf. I. ii. 82]; and the German nobleman is a drunken sot. She later makes fun of the braggart, a common English type: and she alludes to her coach-an innovation that occasioned much discussion in Eliz abethan London. Bassanio's actions also show a realistic coloring: although his indebtedness to Antonio is not Shakespeare's but belongs to the sources, his essential relationship to Antonio, as changed from the originals, illustrates the Renaissance ideal of the excellence of friendship between men: for Bassanio is willing to sacrifice even his new wife, if need be, in discharge of the obligation to his friend. His relationship to Shylock is, again, governed by the sources, but Shakespeare, by making him distrust the Jew at once, gives him a greater realism than in these sources-greater, indeed, than Antonio's. Bassanio's relations with Gratiano and the other young wits is also realistic, for they are typical Elizabethan men-about-town, gay, clever, somewhat cynical; enjoying themselves in the accepted Renaissance way, with a procession accompanied by torch-bearers, a bachelor dinner, and much merriment. Bassanio's long speech in the Casket Scene, furthermore, shows touches of contemporary realism: he comments upon the "many cowards, whose hearts are all as false as stayers of sand" [cf. III. ii. 83-4], who go about wearing "the beards of *Hercules* and frowning

Mars" [cf. III. ii. 85], but who have "lyuers white as milk" [cf. III. ii. 86]; and he thrusts, in passing, at the Elizabethan fashion of wearing wigs: "So are those crisped snakie locks. . . Vpon supposed faireness, often knowne To be the dowrie of a second head" [cf. III. ii. 92-5]. lf, then, Shakespeare made Bassanio and Portia realistic in their general social relationships and dialogue, surely in the wooing, which is the main substance ofBassanio's part in the action, one might reasonably expect to find important elements of realism.

Indeed, Bassanio, as Portia's accepted suitor, surely must have been more satisfactory to the Elizabethans than he is to us: perhaps his apparent faults may have their root in the fact that his courtship and marriage exemplify the peculiar creeds and customs of Shakespeare's age, and are therefore, in spite of all they owe to the sources, realistic. Although some readers find Bassanio lacking in friendship toward Antonio, the greater

charge against him grows out of his conduct as lover and husband. As a lover, he has suffered in the opinion of critics because he is mercenary, for one of his chief motives in seeking Portia is, indubitably, a desire for a large dowry; and he has suffered further because, as critics declare on the basis of mere inference, he is supposed to have wasted his patrimony in riotous living. An Elizabethan gentleman, however, had to live well: generous spending was a social obligation: and if, as one may suppose, Bassanio's family fortunes had largely diminished with the rising prices of the Renaissance, he might, indeed, have become bankrupt merely through the needful expenditures of a young man of good birth. Elizabethan England, furthermore, did not condemn a mercenary marriage: in fact, a dowry was the chief, if not the only, inducement for a young gentleman to marry. The double standard of morals, regularly accepted in that day, encouraged a young man to delay marriage, economic pressure, on the other hand, operated otherwise. A gentleman forced to live in the luxury of Elizabeth's court, on a private income or small family allowance, and almost completely debarred from the now overcrowded and rapidly deteriorating professions of serying-man and soldier, usually regarded a marriage for wealth as the only honorable means of recouping his fortunes and of maintaining himself in the social and economic *status quo.* Bassanio's situation seems to be of this unenviable sort:

Bas. Tis not unknowne to you
Anthonio How much I have disabled mine estate, By something showing a more swelling
port
Then my faint meanes would grant continuance.
[cf. I. 1. 122-25]

Not only in his motives, but in the conduct of the wooing, Bassanio is thoroughly Elizabethan. He suggests to Antonio that, had he "but the meanes to hold a riuall place" [ef. I. i 174] with the other suitors of the "Lady richly left" [I. i 161], he "should questionless be fortunate" [I, i 176]. Finally, the betrothal is solemnized in the proper contemporary fashion, by means of a ring, with which, as Portia says, she gives herself and all her goods, a ring

Which when you part from, loose or give
away,
Let it presage the ruine of your lou_
And be my vantage to exclaime on you.
[cf. III. if. 172-74]

Bassanio, too, recognizes the importance of this ring:

Bas . . . but when this ring
Parts from this finger, then parts life from
hence.
0 then be bold to say *Bassanio's* dead
[III. ii. 183-85]

The significance of the ring, out of which grows the action of the fifth act, would be instantly plain to an Elizabethan audience, accustomed to the almost invariable exchange of rings in both betrothal and marriage ceremonies. Portia. too, reflects in her attitude the typical Renaissance courtship. She expresses to Nerissa what was doubtless the average Elizabethan gentlewoman's plaint in re gard to the prearranged marriage;

Portia. . . 0 mee, . . . I may neither choose whom I would nor refuse whom I dislike, so is the wi! of a liuing daughter curb'd by the will of a dead father.
[cf. I. ii. 23-5]

In the Casket Scene, she reiterates the same sentiment, and bemoans "these naughtie times" [cf. III. ii. 18] that "Puts bars betweene the owners and their rights" [ef. III. ii. 19]. She conforms, on the other hand, with Elizabethan theory in her speech to Bassanio on feminine subservience:

Por. Happiest of all, is that her gentle spirit Commits it selfe to yours to be directed
As from her Lord, her Govemour, her
King.
[cf.III. ii. 163-651

She further illustrates an Elizabethan attitude, when she refers to a husband's social responsibility for his wife:

por. Let me giue light, but let me not be
light.
For a light wife doth make a heauie hus
band.
And *neuer* be Bassanio so for me.
[cf. V. i. 129-31]

Apparently, then, the courtship of these two lovers contains some definite elements of contemporary realism which might well reconcile Shakespeare's audience to a situation distasteful to the modem reader. The playwright carefully makes clear, moreover, that Portia's money is not her only attraction for Bassanio; for the "faire speechlesse messages" [ef. I, i. 164] ex_ed between them before the opening of the playinCIicate a mutual interest dating from a time perhaps before Bassanio's financial stringency arose, and the reciprocal emotions shown in the Casket Scene should satisfy the devotee of high romance. Bassanio as a lover, thus conforms with Elizabethan conditions and customs, and even with the more practical Elizabethan ideals. As a husband, he has scarcely time to show his mettle, except that he assumes the right, immediately, to use his wife's money. . . . Elizabethans, however, would expect him to do that very thing: indeed, the fortune became automatically his through the act of marriage-perhaps Shakespeare's audience would even assume that, before his frantic departure to Antonio, the marriag_was hastily performed chiefly to make that money legally his to offer for his friend. Bassanio's other act as a husband, the giving away of Portia's ring, has never been seriously held against him: the incident, taken almost wholly from

Shakespeare's source, is usually regarded as the dramatist's means for lightening and softening the bitterly tragic mood of the Court Scene: and Bassanio's part in it is clearly involuntary and unavoidable, ifhe is to remain a generous-spirited Renaissance gentleman; for liberality was, perhaps, the prime characteristic which, during the Renaissance, distinguished the nobility. Portia. moreover, seems to represent the marriageable Elizabethan gentlewoman, like Olivia [in *Twelfth Night],* in unusual circumstances, created through the death of her parents. OrdInarily, a young woman of good family was betrothed by her father, although by the reign of Elizabeth, more or less importance had come to be attached to the girl's own preference; in theory, however, it still was thought a shocking thing for a girl to take matters into her own hands and elope: Elizabethan conduct books are full of admonitions to children to obey their parents, and. to fathers to provide suitable early marriages for" their daughters, who mi_t otherwise Wow impa tient and marry themsefves off. Portia s being an orph_ might be supposed to give her more freedom than most Renaissance English girls would enjoy; but her father, like a conscientious Elizabethan gentleman, has left for her protection and guidance, in lieu of himself, a last testament that enjoins her from marrying as she pleases, and attempts to exercise a wise choice among her, prospective suitors. No Shakespearean playgoer would consider, as some modem critics do, that Portia was ill-used in her father's will, or that, having educated her highly, he has wronged her by depriving her offree choice in matrimony. As a matter of fact, the present writer finds in the play no evidence that Portia had received an unusual education for an Elizabethan lady of quality. To be sure, when talking to Bassanio in the Casket Scene-and, perhaps, naturally enou_, attemptingto impress him-sherefers'to GreeKmythological history: but only as any quick-witted, keenly perceptive person might pick up such allusions while listening to the learned: even Chaucer's Partlet could muster up a little classical lore. Indeed, Portia's description of herself to Bassanio as "an vnlessonrd girle, vnschool'd, vnpractiz'd [cf. III. ii. 159), may well be. not a mere exhibition of the humility of love, but the almost literal truth: despite a few notable exceptions, Elizabethan women were not given a liberal education; they were, however, taught practical household management, and Portia's "unusual" education may have been merely an extraordinarily thorough preparation for handling her extensive fortune. Her whole bearing toward Bassanio, moreover, much as it irks some critics in this _e of feminism, is typically Elizabethan: her desire to abase and to immolate herself in his interests would seem to Shakespeare's audience only the natural duty of an ideal wife-as various contemporary books on conduct stipulate-to sink her personality in that of her husband; and the very fact that. . . women sometimes disregarded the conduct-books and became unpleasantly independent, would stimulate this preponderantly masculine audience to a 1!reater admiration for the gentle Portia. That lady, foreshadowing a Beatrice, a Viola, and a Rosalind [in *Much Ado About Nothing, Twelfth Night, andAs You Like It],* is perhaps more sprightly in speech and more resourceful in action than the ideal Elizabethan wife: but her fundamental relationship to Bassanio is, first and last, an exemplification of the Elizabethan theory of the "weaker vessel." Indeed, the dramatist's departure from his source, in giving the power to choose among the caskets to the man lover rather than to the _oman, would seem to bespeak in Shakespeare a belief in the man's greater importance and responsibility in courtship. The poet evidently saw no incongruity in Portia's subservience to the "wastrel" Bassanio; the author, indeed,

seems to admire both lovers equally: apparently, therefore, . Bassanio's unlovely qualities have been largely read into his character by modern interpreters unfamiliar with the courtship and marriage customs of the time; and a study of these customs would seem to establish Bassanio as a realistic Elizabethan gentleman in love-a high-spirited, noblehearted gentleman, quite worthy of the incomparable Portia.

On the basis of two, or possibly more, Romantic stories, Shakespeare develops in *The Merchant of Venice* a realism to contemporary economic and social life: Bassanio must have money for his wooing and for his future livelihood, and Portiarejoices to supply his needs. Thus the playwright gives his diverse and disunified originals the significant coherence of great drama. This realism appears in the action and dialogue of the two lovers, not only in their miscellaneous relationships to the other characters. but also most significantly in relation to each other as lovers and as man and wife. Bassanto's apparent faults were to the Elizabethans mere conventional commonplaces arising from the economic conditions of the age. As far as the peculiar circumstances allow, he conducts his courtship according to Elizabethan propriety and custom: thus he is not a mere mercenary wooer but a typical Elizabethan entirely worthy of Portia's hand. Such an interpretation of Bassanio should be significant to an understanding of the playas a whole: the Shylock motif presents one aspect of Elizabethan economics-money lending: If, then. Bassanio chiefly exemplifies the economics of marriage, *The Merchant of Venice* is, in its entirety, a drama of economic theme-perhaps the first in English literature. This economic problem arises from the social necessity that Bassanio must have ample funds to court with proper circumstance and pomp: and the love-plot, therefore, is the motivating force and is the alpha and omega to the piece. The play would seem to be Shakespeare's first significant and realistic treatment of the theme of love; and one need not wonder that, from his own experience, the economic side of the problem was the first aspect to engage his serious attention. *The Merchant of Venice,* therefore, is not only a great comedy, but also a crucial step in Shakespeare's career as a dramatist; for it is probably the first in which he attempts any serious working-out of those causes and effects, economic, social, and political, that governed contemporary Elizabethan life (pp. 298-306).

Helen Purinton Pettigrew, "Bassanio, the Elizabethan Lover. " in Philological Quarterly, *VoL xv.z; No.3, July, 1937, pp. 296-306.*

Critical Essay #8

[Wilson examines three key scenes in The Merchant of Venice: the casket scene (Act Ill. scene ii), the trial scene (Act IV, scene i), and the Belmont scene (Act V, scene i). The critic maintains that the casket scene was probably treated as humorous entertainment by Elizabethan audiences, who enjoyed folk tales focusing on the difference between appearance and reality. Wilson then discusses various aspects of the casket plot; particularly the meaning of the mottoes, the dramatic setting for Bassanio's choice, and the possible implications of the song that is played while Bassanio considers his selection. As a result of the trial scene, the critic continues, Shylock should be regarded as a tragic not comical, figure. In Wilson's opinion while Shylock is "the inevitable product of centuries of racial persecution. " Shakespeare did not necessarily mean to present the Jew as a moral example. Although the playwright never takes sides in his dramas, the critic asserts, surely he would advocate the mercy Portia offers as "the only possible solu tion of our racial hatreds and enmities. " Since the trial scene is unusually serious for a comedy, the critic continues, Shakespeare added the Belmont episode to send his audience home in a happy mood. Wilson concludes that the music and moon qifer twin themes of reassuring harmony in Portia's domain, mediating Elizabethan concerns about the impending dissolution of the verse by reaffirming their world view with the vision of Belmont]

In sooth I know not why I am so sad
[I. i. 1]

The very first line of *[The Merchant if Venice]* is ominous-a line uttered by Antonio, a figure of great dignity, much graciousness, and an air quite different from that usually breathed in the world of comedy. So alien is he to that world that when he has to move therein, as he does in the last Act, and not till then. we feel he is quite out of his element. And Shakespeare clearly feels so too, for he keeps him in the background as much as possible and gives him little to say. And in the opening scene he is deliberately contrasted with shallow-pates like Salerio, Solanio, and Gratiano, so that we may have no excuse for doubting his seriousness right from the outset. 'Gratiano', we are told, 'speaks an infinite deal of nothing, more than any man in all Venice. His reasons are as two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff; you shall seek all day ere you find them, and when you have them they are not worth the search' [I. i. 114-18J. Thus Shakespeare dismisses the la_ wit-mongers who had formed the staple of his *eomedyinLove's Labour's Lost* In *The Merchant* he is going to try a new dramatic experiment-to discover how near he can come to the true note and authentic thrill of tragedy without allowing the tragic wave to break and swamp the comic finale. In 1580 or thereabouts. . . Sir Philip Sidney was condemning 'mungrel tragycomedies'. Some fifteen years later Sllakespeare set himself to produce the finest specimen of the kind in our language. perhaps in any language. For *The Merchant of Venice* is a great play, let us make no mistake about that. Alas, that it has been staled and hackneyed for so many readers by the treadmill methods of the cIass-room where the dull brain of the pedagogue perplexes and retards. (pp. 94-5)

[Let] us glance at the plot of the play and consider in particular the casket-plot,. . . of which Portia is the central figure, For there are . . , two main plots: the casket-plot and the bond-plot. It is known that two stories 'representing the greedi ness of worldly choosers and the bloody minds of usurers' had already been combined in one play long before Shakespeare handled them. But as this old play is lost, we cannot tell how much Shakespeare invented himself and how much he simply tookoverfrom his unknown predecessor, Anyhow, whoever was responsible for it, the master-stroke was the combination of the two plots by means of the device of disguise; and there is no happier or more striking example of the serviceability of this Elizabethan dramatic convention than the impersonation by the Lady of Belmont of the lawyer called in to give judgment between the merchant and the usurer. That impersonation is the pivot of Shakespeare's play: the only occasion on which his two principal characters, Portia and Shylock, confront each other. Moreover, as everyone knows, in addition to these main plots there is a comic under plot, that of an exchange of rings which follows on the trial-scene and is the occasion of much laughter at the end of the play.

From the point of view of plot technique, the *Merchant if Venice* is a masterly production. It is a play, too, of wonderful poetry. most wonderful perhaps in the finale, though reaching greater heights of intensity in the mouth of Shylock. And it contains three magnificent scenes: the casket-scene, the trial-scene, and the last and loveliest of all, at Belmont. (p, 96)

The Casket-scene

To speak of 'the casket-scene' is to betray a modem standpoint and to wrong Shakespeare: for no less than five scenes are concerned with the caskets and four are almost entirely devoted to them. Spectators are inclined to find the whole business just a little silly, and modern producers cut freely into this part of the play, huddling what remains into a couple of brief episodes introducing the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Arragon, without which the scene when Bassanio makes his choice becomes hardly intelligible. But the casket theme was of a kind well calculated to suit the Elizabethan palate, and I do not doubt that all five scenes were popular in Shakespeare's day. . . . But the story of the great lady, mistress of much wealth, whom the world sought in marriage: of the strange will devised by her father so as to test the character of successive suitors: the speeches of these suitors, speeches sententious after the true Renaissance fashion: and finally the eloquent discourse of Bassanto himself on the favourite topic of the day, the problem of Judgement by Appearances, and the difference between Seeming and Reality, a topic of which the whole casket-plot is itself an exposition-all this would be very much to men's taste at that period. (p. 97)

We can be sure, too, that the mottoes that stood upon the three caskets, mottoes which seem to pass almost unnoticed by modern readers and commentators, meant much to the proverb-loving Elizabethans. Morocco thus declares them:

The first, of gold, who this inscription
bears,
'Who chooseth me shall gain what many

men desire'
The second, silver, which this promise
carries,
'Who chooseth me shall get as much as he
deserves'
This third, dull lead, with warning all as
blunt,
'Who chooseth me must give and hazard
all he hath'
[II. vii. 4-9]

The meaning of the first motto is patent enough, since it has direct reference to the metal of which the casket is composed namely what Romeo calls 'saint-seducing gold' *[Romeo and Juliet* I. 1. 214] and later speaks of to the apothecary from whom he purchases his poison,

There is thy gold, worse poison to men's
souls
Doing more murders in this loathsome
world
Than these poor compounds that thou
mayst not sell.
I sell thee poison; thou hast sold me none.
[Romeo and Juliet. I. 80-3]

As to the second, 'Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves', we may go to *Hamlet* for comment. Says the Prince to Polonius: 'Good my lord, will you see the players well bestowed: do you hear, let them be well used,' et_ *[Hamlet* II. ii. 522 If,]. To which Polonius replies, 'My lord, I will use them according to their desert', and Hamlet rejoins, 'God's bodkin, man. much betterl use every man after his desert and who shall 'scape whipping?' [II. ii. 528-30].

The third motto brings us to the last of the casket scenes, in which Bassanio makes his choice. It is a scene still fresh and full of delight for us, both on account of all that happens within it and because of the noble verse in which it is written. Yet I think we miss much that Shakespeare intended us to see there.

What, for example, is the *dramatic* setting for Bassanio's choice? His success, to be effective, must seem at once *(a)* natural, i.e. not just the result of chance, and *(b*) morally satisfying to the audience. Notice. then, the following points: (I) Shakespeare lets us hear the other two suitors argue the matter out, and their arguments reveal some flaw of character or imperfect sense of values which shows them to be undesirable mates for the Lady of Belmont. (2) But when he comes to Bassanio, the scene is arranged differently. We are allowed to hear only the conclusion of his reasoning. The great speech which begins

So may the outward shows be least themselves
[III. ii. 73]

tells us that the speaker has already made his choice before he opens his mouth. (3) In place of the reasoning itself we are given. a song, sung at Portia's command, 'the whilst Bassanio comments on the caskets to himself' [s.d., III. ii. 62]-as the Quarto, that is Shakespeare's, stage-direction has it. And have you, my reader, ever examined this song closely? If so, you may have noticed some interesting things about it. Here it is:

Tell me where is Fancy bred
Or in the heart, or in the head?
How begot, how nourished?
ALL. Reply, reply.
It is engend'red In the eyes,
With gazing fed, and Fancy dies
In the cra.d1e where it lies.
Let us all ring Fancy's knell. . .
I'll begin it-Ding, dong, bell.
ALL. Ding, dong, bell.
[III. ii. 63-72]

Mark the rhymes first of all: *bred, head, nourished-and* then medially, *engend'red* and *fed.* Can one think of any apter rhyme than *lead?* And if the rhymes of the first half of the song almost cry out the word *lead,* what about the second halfwith its talk of Fancy dying 'in the cradle where it lies' and of the tolling of the funeral bell? Would not that, to an Elizabethan, suggest lead also seeing that in those days corpses were commonly wrapped in lead before interment? Mind you. I am not proposing, as some have done, that in her desire for Bassanio's success Portia is playing a trick upon her dead father and had the song sung in order that her lover might learn the secret before he makes his choice. 'I could teach you', she had said to him,

How to choose right, but then I am for
sworn,
So will I never be
[III. ii. 11-12]

and Portia was a woman of her word. To imagine that she *was* forsworn would so detract from her moral stature as seriously to impair the beauty of the play. What then? The song, I take it, though sung at Portia's command (because she is the lady of the house, and all the music therein) is intended to represent, in distillation, so to speak, the thoughts that are passing through Bassanio's mind as he 'comments on the caskets to himself' [s.d., III. ii. 63]. In other words, it is symbolical rather than dramatic, a function which Shakespeare's sops very often perform as a matter of fact, and perform far more delightfully than the symbolical Dumbshows and Presenters' Expositions with which his rival dramatists commonly sprinkled their plays. And if it be granted that the song gives us the clue to Bassanio's thoughts, the meaning of its words at once becomes plain. The theme is Fancy, by which Shakespeare and his contemporaries understood both

what we now call sentimentality and, as the word still signifies, a passing inclination or whim. Originally a contraction of *fantasy,* the meaning of 'illusion', 'error', or 'unreality' yet clung to it, especially when the word was used in connection with Love. . . . Fancy, then, is not true love: it springs from the head, that is, from calculation, not from the heart. It is engendered in the eyes; it feeds upon mere appearances: it has no roots in reality, but dies almost as soon as it is born. And what applies in the sphere of love is equally relevant to inclination and choice in other respects-for example in the choice between the caskets, two of them glittering in gold and silver, the third plain lead with no attractions for the eye whatever but bearing the motto

Who chooseth me must give and hazard
all he hath
[II. vii. 9]

Thus Bassanio quite naturally, as if the song had expressed his own thought, continues that thought in the opening words of his speech:

So may the outward shows be least themselves
The world is still deceived with ornament
[III. ii. 73-4]

and then, after further elaboration of the same topic, unhesitatingly selects the right casket. His choice is guided not by any trick of Portia's, but by the genuineness of his own nature and (which is part of the same thing) by his very real love for Portia. a love ready to give and hazard all, which comes out in the plainness (which moves us more than el oquence) of his simple but direct reply to Portia's lovely speech of self-surrender:

Madam. you have bereft me of all words,
Only my blood speaks to you in my veins.
[III. ii. 175-76]

Yes, the final casket-scene merits far more attention than it has hitherto received. Its workmanship is more delicate and its implications deeper than most people realize in these crude modern times in which we live; for I have little doubt that 'the judicious' among Shakespeare's own audience took his points readily enough.

But if Bassanio is Portia's true love-the one genuine suitor among the throng of self-seeking egoists who prate of their own worth or claims, as they make their choice at Belmont-which it was surely Shakespeare's business as a popular dramatist to represent him, how does this reading of his character agree with what we learn about him elsewhere in the play? Here we come upon a strange misconception on the part of some critics. Let me quote two of my own masters. To begin with Herbert Grierson [in his *Cross-Currents in English Literature of /the XVIth Century]:*

Of all the suitors who come to Belmont, Bassanio best deserves the title of a 'worldly chooser'. The others have apparently as much to give as to receive: but Bassanio, like Lord Byron when he proposed to many Miss Milbanks was a suitor in order to be able to pay his debts and generally settle h1mself: . . .

Here he echoes [Arthur] Quiller-Couch, who writes [in his *Shakespeare's Workmanship]:*

If one thing is more certain than another, it is that a predatory young gentleman like Bassanio would *not* have chosen the leaden casket.

Finally, he quotes from Bassanio's soliloquy the well-known passage:

The world is still deceived with ornament.
In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt,
But, being seasoned with a gracious voice Obscures the show of evil in religion,
What damned editor, but some sober brow Will bless it, and approve it with a text?
(III. ii 74-9)

and is moved to interrupt:

'Yes, yes-and what about yourself, my little fellow? What has altered *you* that you of all men start talking as though you addressed a Young Men's Christian Association?
As Mistress Quickly says to Pistol. 'By my truth, these are very bitter words' [cf. 2 *Henry IV,* II. iv. 171]

Yet they are quoted by Grierson, who finds 'a strange moral confusion' in *The Merchant of Venice.* In truth, the only confusion in this matter of Bassanio is acritical one in the mind ofhis modem interpreters. Forwhat are the grounds upon which they condemn him-or rather condemn Shakespeare for making him so badly? Q's [QuillerCouch's] exposition of them is too long to meet point by point. But the burden of it is just this: That Bassanio is an extravagant youngster, that he hopes to payoff his debts by marrying Portia, that in order to make the necessary show at Belmont he is forced to borrow still more money from his friend Antonio, and finally that in order to persuade Antonio to put his hand once again into his pocket, he represents his suit to the wealthy Lady of Belmont as more or less of a safe investment, wilfully concealing the fact that his success stood upon the hazard of being lucky enough to choose the right casket It is this last point which gives the whole case away. For consider: in order to get his double plot to work at all. Shakespeare has to make Bassanio borrow money from Antonio to pursue his courtship, since that is the reason why Antonio in his turn borrows money from Shylock. And when one man does to borrow money from another, even his best friend, he likes to be able to offer him *some* hope of repayment. Bassanio therefore speaks of Portia's wealth and of her obvious interest in himself, saying however (as a young man would) less of his own love for her. All this is surely very natural and it would seem even more natural in Elizabethan days, when most matches were what Q calls 'predatory': i.e. for business reasons. That Bassanio should stress Portia's wealth, then, so far from reflecting on his character, merely shows him to be acting on principles of common caution; and that he should speak of their mutual attraction shows that, unlike most suitors of the age, he intends a love-match. But what about his deception? What excuse has he for concealing the casket lottery from his friend? One might answer that the deception is not his but Shakespeare's: that the dramatist is careful to tell the audience nothing about the caskets until the second scene of the play. Bassanio's

petition to Antonio and the latter's consent provide enough interest for Scene i. To have introduced the casket theme into that conversation would have distracted attention from the main point of the borrowing incident and would have raised an awkward issue-the very issue indeed that Q raises. No spectator would notice its absence: and when it is referred to in Scene ii no spectator would remember that it should have been mentioned by Bassanio in Scene i. As a matter of fact I do not believe that anyone before Q has seen that the story involves a small difficulty here. In short, *dramatically* speaking:-and Shakespeare was a dramatist, not a novelist or a historian-the difficulty is not there.

So one could argue and the reply to him would be valid enough. But no such reply is needed in fact at all, since if one follows the text it becomes clear that Shakespeare intended us to realize that when Bassanio speaks with Antonio in Scene i, he himself knows nothing whatever of the casket lottery or even of the will of Portia's father, for the simple reason that when he last visited Belmont the father was still alive. This is made clear in Scene ii at the first mention ofBassanio. From Portia's complaint that owing to her father's strange will she is allowed no fi:eedom of choice in marriage, from the description of all the suitors who have so far come to Belmont and from the news Nerissa gives that hearing of the caskets they were all packing up to return home unless they can win her 'by some other sort' [I. ii. 102], we gather that Portia's father is only recently deceased; and the contents of his will become known. Thus when Nerissa goes on to ask. 'Do you not remember, Lady, *in your fathers time,* a Venetian, a scholar and a soldier, that came hither in company of the Marquis of Montferrat?' [I. ii. 112-14]. Shakespeare leaves no doubt in the mind of those who attend to what he writes that Bassanio had not yet come as a suitor and could have known nothing of the wiii. And what is true of this matter holds good also for the whole question of Bassanio's character. What ever he may seem to modem eyes poring over a book, on the *stage* he is always as he was meant to be, an honest young lover. Shakespeare does not develop him very much: he is in the main a lay figure, whose dramatic function is to choose the right casket and to bring out the more important characters with whom he has to do, namely Antonio and Portia. But the references to him by others leave no doubt ofhis attractiveness. He is announced at his first entry as 'most noble'; and though sly Nerissa in the second Scene knows of course that praise of him will sound welcome in Portia's ears, when she declares that he 'of all men that ever my foolish eyes looked upon, was the best deserving a fair lady' [I. if. 117-19], the audience is assuredlyexpected to accept her words as the truth.

The Trial-Scene

But 'this flaw in characterization' which he discovers in Bassanio goes, he says [in his introduction to the New Shakespeare edition of the play], right down through the workmanship of the play, for the evil opposed against these courteous Christians is specific: it is Cruelty; and, yet again specifically, the peculiar cruelty of a Jew. To this cruelty an artist at the top of his art would surely have opposed mansuetude, clemency, charity, and specifically Christian charity. Shakespeare misses more than half the point when he makes the intended victims as a class and by habit just as heartless as Shylock without any of Shylock's passionate excuse.

This passage Sir Herbert Grierson again quotes and endorses, generalizing it in one of his own which begins:

What puzzles one in Shakespeare's plays is that not infrequently while presenting the story and characters so faithfully and vividly that it is difficult for the reader to avoid passing moral judgment on it, Shakespeare himself seems willing not only to omit comment, but to acquiesce in a view that is to us repellent, to accept standards of which his own vivid telling of the story affords the most effective condemnation.

With these statements of the strange case of Shylock and his creator we may turn now to the trial scene and to the most baffling character-problem, after that of Hamlet, in Shakespeare.

First of all, then, there is no doubt that modem audiences and readers-I stress the word modern-tend to be left at the end of the play with a feeling of frustration or discomfort. The classical expression of this, as will be remembered, is the story told by [Heinrich] Heine [in his *Sammtliche Werke],* himself a Jew, which runs:

When I saw this Play at Drury Lane, there stood behind me a pale, fair Briton, who at the end of the Fourth Act, fell to weeping passionately, several times exclaiming, 'The poor man is wronged!'

She was referring, of course, to the judgment of the court. But the wrong, be it noted, comes in reality not from Portia or the Duke; for despite Q's words, Shylock, a would-be murderer, is let off remarkably lightly. And though the compulsory conversion is repugnant to our notions, it would have ap peared an enforced benefit to the Elizabethan and medieval mind. Some however have argued that Portia's invalidation of the bond on the grounds that while speaking of a pound of flesh it mentions no blood, is a mere quibble: that she does in fact what Bassanio implores her to do, namely

Wrest once the law to your authority To do a great right, do a little wrong.
[IV. i. 215-16]

Yet her conduct of the case, though it may appear strange in the eyes of modem law, is quite in the manner of Elizabethan trials, and in all likelihood excited no comment whatever from an audience which consisted partly at least of law students. For example, the quasi-legal quibbling of the grave digger in *Hamlet* on the subject of suicide by drowning-'If the man go to this water and drown himself, it is, will he nill he, he goes, mark you that. But if the water come to him, and drown him, he drowns not himself' (V. i. 16-19]-and the rest of it, is an almost exact reproduction of real arguments used at a well-known case of 1554 and probably repeated regularly by counsel on similar occasions later. Portia's law seems reason itself by comparison. No, the wrong to Shylock that we are conscious of is done by Shakespeare and not the court that tries him. The dramatist seems to have excited our interest in and our sympathy for this Jew to such a degree that we find the levity after his exit intolerable and the happiness of the last Act heartless.

It is the fashion among some critics today to say that this feeling is based upon a misunderstanding: that Shakespeare really intended Shylock as a ridiculous villain: that he was so played up to the end of the eighteenth century; and that first [Edmund] Kean and then [Henry) Irving sentimentalized him: in a word, that our interest and sympathy spring from a humanitarianism which is quite modem and of which Shakespeare himself was totally unconscious.

It is possible, I admit, to sentimentalize Shylock; and I think it has been done. Certainly, if (W. C.) Macready and Irving raised him, in the words of Edmund Booth [quoted in E. E. Stoll's *Shakespeare Studies],* 'out of the darkness of his native element of revengeful selfishness into the light of the venerable Hebrew, the martyr, the avenger' they did something which Shakespeare never intended. But a 'comic Jew'? 'a comical villain'? Is not that label equally misguiding? No doubt he was got up to look grotesque: a typical old Jew would be p;rotesque to an Elizabethan audience, while Shakespeare makes Gratiano the mouth piece of the ordinary citizen's attitude. There are, however, good reasons, I think, why we ought to regard Shylock as a tragic and not a comical figure:

(i) If he is merely comical, the play assuredly loses a great deal dramatically, and it is a sound principle to view with suspicion any critical interpretation which involves dramatic loss-Shakespeare may generally be relied upon to make the greatest possible capital out of his material.

(ii) *The Merchant of Venice* is not the only play of the period containing a detailed study of Jewish character. [Christopher) Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* preceded it, had been (and still was) an exceedingly popular play on the London stage, and belonged to the Admiral's Men, the rival company to Shakespeare's. Shakespeare's Jew would, therefore, inevitably be compared with Marlowe's, and Shakespeare would have striven to the utmost to excel his predecessor. What kind of character, then, was the Barabas of Marlowe? He was, like all Marlowe's heroes, 'conceived of on a gi.gantic scale. . . a very terrible and powerful alien, endowed with all the resources of wealth and unencumbered by any Christian scruples' [H. S. Bennett in his introduction to *The Jew of Malta].* Is it likely that Shakespeare would have set up a ludicrous Shylock to outbid this Barabas? Surely he would have desired, especially with [Richard] Burbadge at his elbow also desiring to outdo Edward Alleyn, to create a figure equally terrible, but human and convincing at the same time, which Marlowe's Jew never succeeds in being?

(iii) And my third reason is that a ridiculous villain is unShakespearian. Can you find such a villain in any other of his plays? Is Iago, or Macbeth, or Edmund [in King Lear], or even Richard III in this sense comical? But these, it may be said, come from the tragedies. and therefore do not count, Very well. where in the comedies is he to be seen? There are plenty of such villains in Ben Jonson, The Jonsonian comedies are full of them: they are his chief stock-in-trade. Indeed, that is one of the main differences between his conception of comedyand Shakespeare's. Villainy is never comic with Shakespeare; and Shylock is not to be fitted into the formulae of Bergson or George Meredith. He does not belong to what is called 'pure comedy' at all, yet, if he is not comical, he is not a mere villain of melodrama like Barabas either. He is a 'tragic' villain, i.e. he is so represented that we feel him to be a man. a terrible and gigantic man

enough, but with 'hands, organs, O1mensions, senses, affections, passions-fed with the same food, hurt by 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' Ill. i. 59-64]. Shylock is a far greater character than Barabas, not because he is less blood-thIrsty-his lust for blood is *more* awful because *more* convincing-but because he is one of ourselves. And, as he goes out, what we ought *to* exclaim is not (with Heine's fair Briton), 'The man is wronged', but 'There, but for the grace of God. go r. . . . (pp. 971-08) It is, of course, just this common humanity, which Shakespeare brings out and insists upon in stroke after stroke, that the Christians of Venice deny (like the Nazis of *modem* Germany). And if Shylock is a villain, an awful and appalling human being, who made him such? People like Antonio. Antonio, we are told by one of his friends, is the perfect Christian gentleman,

The kindest man.
The best-conditioned and unwearied spir
it
In doing courtesies;
[III. ii. 292-94)

yet, when the Jew reminds him

You call me misbeliever. cut-throat dog, And spit upon *my* Jewish gaberdine. . . You that did void your rheum upon *my*
beard.
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur.
[I. iii. 111-12, 117-18]

he raps out:

I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee *too.*
[I. iii. 130-31]

But Shakespeare, we are told, shared the prejudices of his age against Jews: he would himself have applauded Antonio's action, might even have imitated it. Shylock excites our modern sympathies because Shakespeare allowed his imagination to run away with him. The humanity of the Jew was an unconscious by-product of his dramatic genius.

For myself, I think we have heard more than enough of the vegetable Shakespeare of the impersonal, almost witless, imaginative growth exfoliating plays and poems without premeditation or reflection, as a gourd-vine produces pumpkins. No doubt, as with all the great novelists and poets, once the theme seized upon him, it was liable to take him in charge so that he could never tell at the beginning exactly how a play might work out, yet as he fell under the spell, he must have retained consciousness of his direction, and when all was done, he surely, if he had a mind at all saw his achievement as a whole and assessed it at its proper worth. Shylock may have taken him *to some* extent by surprise, but Shylock was the child of his imagination and his intellect. and it seems to

me absurd to suppose that the sympathies of such a father can have been wholly on the side of the spitting Antonio. (pp. 108-10)

The Jew is allowed no defendant in the court to plead for him as a fellow human being and a defenceless allen. There is no one to speak for him except himself. . . . I have no doubt at all that Shylock was intended by Shakespeare to be a comment upon the treatment of Jewrythroughout the Christian dispensation.

Why does he not say *so?* Why did he not even, as Q says he should, oppose to the cruelty of Shylock, clemency, charity, and specifically Christian charity? , . Would he not depict the ferocious as sassin in all his dire ferocity, and yet contrive to imply, for those who had ears to hear, that there was another side to the question?

This is no rhetorical flourish. The actual position of Shakespeare when he wrote The *Merchant* was not unlike that I depict in imagination. Shortly before the play was first staged the London crowds. from whom he drew his audience had watched in their thousands, and with howls of gleeful execration, a venerable old Hebrew, Dr. Lopez, falsely accused of attempting *to* poison the Queen, done *to* death with the hideous ritual of hanging and disembowelling before their blood-lustful eyes. There is even I believe an allusion to the event in the play itself. *You* remember that strange image which Shakespeare places in the railing mouth of Gratiano:

thy currish spirit
Governed a wolf. who hanged for human
slau_ter,
Even nom the gallows did his fell soul
fleet,
And whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed
dam,
Infused itself In thee.
[IV. i. 133-37)

What does it mean? A wolf hanged for human slaughter, who ever heard of such a thing This woI1was no quadruped, it was a Jewish animal, in other words it was Lopez himself, who is commonly called Lopus or Lupus in the literature of the time.

And there was still more involved. Not only would the groundlings in the audience at the play be inflamed with anti-Semitism at the time, the great ones who might be found among the Judicious spectators were in a like mood. Lopez had unhap pily incurred the hatred of the all-powerful Earl of Essex. who was the main instrument in bringing him to the gallows: and the earl's bosom friend was another young lord. the Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare's own patron and in all likelihood his intimate.

Such were the perilous circumstances in which the compassionate Shakespeare was compelled to write his Jew play I say compelled, for the rival company to his own had revived Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* for the occasion and were drawing large houses, while his friends at court would doubtless look to him for a Jew-baiting spectacle in the

theatre. Well, he gave them what they asked; he gave them an appa11ing Shylock and the coarse-grained storm-trooper Gratlano to express their sentiments about him; he even represents the best man in the story splitting him like a dog and bespitting him-would not his friends the earls have done the same?

But he did more, by making Shylock a suffering human being, he revealed 'the momtanish inhumanity' of the behaviour of Christians towards the Hebrew race. and in the speech on Mercy, at the very centre and climax of the play, he revealed his own standpoint. Portia's speech is one of the greatest sermons in all literature, an expression 01 religious thought worthy to set beside St. Paul's hymn in praise of Love, is of course addressed to the Jew. But I find it incredible that Shakespeare intended it for Jews alone. The very fact that it is based , throughout upon the Lord's Prayer, which would mean nothing to a Hebrew, suggests that it was composed to knock at Christian hearts.

When Q accuses Shakespeare of not setting up the ideal of 'clemency, charity and specifically Christian charity', to oppose that of Cruelty and Revenge, he strangely forgets 'the quality of Mercy' [IV. i. 184]. And Shylock, as I have said, is let off very lightly. He loses the money he had made by usury-that was only right and proper. He is compelled to become a Christian-that was only an enfO_f:ed benefit. But he was not hanged, drawn and quartered as Dr. Lopez was-much to Gratiano's disgust. Shylock is a terrible old man. But he is the inevitable product of centuries of racial persecution. Shakespeare does not draw this moral. He merely exposes the situation. He is neither for nor against Shylock. Shakespeare never takes sides. Yet surely if he were alive today he would see in Mercy, mercy in the widest sense, which embraces understand ing and forgiveness, the only possible solution of our racial hatreds and enmities.

Belmont

But the exit of Shylock is not the end of the play. The cloud which had been gathering since the opening scene and looked so black for Antonio, instead of breaking, passes over, leaving him un harmed and even the villain himself with only a light punishment. And so the tension is relaxed for the audience. The trial is followed by an amusing interview between the disguised women and their lovers, together with the surrender of the rings, which promises further fun to come. Is the incident. . . too trivial, too light to counterbalance the stress of emotion from which we have just emerged? Only if our sympathies have been with Shylock the man, rather than Jewry: and as I said, we misapprehend Shakespeare the dramatist if they are. Certainly, Shakespeare knew that the audience for which he wrote would have no sympathy with Shylock: and it is just because he knew that, that he could afford to exhibit his humanity.

Yet the crisis of the trial scene was unusually serious for a comedy. That he knew also; and realized that all his efforts would be needed to send his spectators home in the mood he wished to leave with them. And so, we have the scene at Belmont, the gayest, happiest, most blessed scene in all Shakespeare. Suddenly we are caught away from Venice, from its scorns, its hatreds and revenges, and transported to a world of magic in which men and women live like gods, without care, without toil, without folly, and without strife-except such folly and strife as lovers use one with another. Belmont is not neaven,

because there is much talk of marrying and giving in marriage, and withal a roguish touch of [Giovanni] Boccaccio now and again. Rather it is Elysium, a Renaissance Elysium, a garden full of music under the soft Italian night, with a gracious and stately mansion in the background. Shakespeare paints the scene with all his wonder ful artistry. Observe, for instance, the part the moon plays in it, how she rides in and out of the shifting clouds as the action goes forward-at one moment it is bright as day, at the next

The moon sleeps with Endymion
[V. i. 109]

so that Lorenzo cannot see Portia's face.

Music and the moon are the twin themes of this final movement:
Sweet soul, let's in, and there expect their
coming.
And yet no matter: why should we go in?
My friend Stephano, signify, I pray you, Within the house, your mistress is at
hand,
And bring your music forth into the
air....
How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this
bank!
Here will we sit, and let the sounds of
music
Creep in our ears-soft stillness and the
night
Become the touches of sweet
harmony. . . .
Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold. There's not the smallest orb which thou
behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls!
But while this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear
it. .. .
[cf. V. 1. 49-65]
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. . . . Mark the
music.

[cf. V. i. 83-7]
After Mercy-Harmony!

Grossly closed in by our muddy vesture of decay, it is difficult-perhaps impossible-for us poor mortals to hear it, and missing it we, Jew or Christian, grow 'fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils', and our 'affections dark as Erebus', the Erebus which Shylock and Jew-baiter alike inherit; but the music is there all the while.

Some day, one blessed day we shall not live to see, perhaps the world may come to Belmont and be moved not with internecine hatred and racial scorn, but 'with concord of sweet sounds'.

And if there be any reader to ask what connexion there can be between music and politics, between our woeful discords and the 'touches of sweet harmony', I do not need to refer him to the *Republic* of Plato, but to a disciple of Plato who had never read his book. I mean Shakespeare himself, who in *Henry V* [I. ii. 180-83] tells us that

government, though high and
low, and lower,
Put into parts, doth keep in one consent, Congreeing in a full and natural close,
Like music.

Is the world capable of such music? That is *the* political problem of our time and, if we cannot solve it, he prophesies in *Troilus and Cressida,* I. iii. 110-24:

Hark, what discord follows! . . .
Force should be right; or rather right and
wrong.
Between whose endless jar justice resides, Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
Thus everything includes itself in power, Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself
(pp.112-17)

The prophecy seems nearer fulfillment in 1962 than it did in 1938.

The impending dissolution of the universe. . . was never far from the mind of Shakespeare and his contemporaries: and Prospero supplies a calmer because more contemplative account of it in his famous epilogue after the masque in *The Tempest.* The Prospero however who gave us the vision he called *The Merchant of Venice* had no wish to trouble us at Belmont with thoughts of doomsday or any apocalyptic imaginings. And even our memories of cruel Venice begin to fade when we hear Lancelot winding his mock postman's horn in and out among the trees to announce to Lorenzo and Jessica and to us, the audience, that the travellers are about to return home. And presently, when we return home, or shut our books, the characters themselves begin to

fade and melt into thin air, as we realize that Bassanio the young lover, his bosom friend Antonio, Portia the great lady and learned judge, yes, even the fierce Jew himself, rushing with uplifted knife upon his victim-all are spirits, the creatures of dramatic art. Yet if we are to go home happy, the characters all but Shylock must first of all be given happiness. How was this to be accomplished for Antonio, who though saved from the knife was still a ruined mer chant? It was Portia who saved him; it was given to her to restore his fortune. But mark how she does it.

Antonio, you are welcome,
And I have better news in store for you
Than you expect; unseal this letter soon,
There you shall find three of your argosies
Are richly come to harbour suddenly.
You shall not know by what strange accident
I chanced on this letter.
[V. i. 273-78]

That three of Antonio's argosies should be 'richly come to harbour suddenly' would be unbelievable if Shakespeare had allowed us a moment to ponder it, yet not more difficult of credence than the 'strange accident' by which Portia chanced upon the letter that told it. It is all a little piece of Shakespearian legerdemain. . . . (pp. 117-18) And while all this has been passing, the moon has sunk and every thicket around Belmont has begun to thrill and sing of dawn. Portia lifts a hand:

It is almost morning,
Let us go in.
[ef. V. 1. 295-97]
And so the comedy comes home. 'Pack, clouds away! and welcome, day!' [Thomas Heywood, *Pack, Clouds, Away].* (p. 118)

John Dover Wilson,'The Merchant of Venice' in 1937," *in his* Shakespeare's Happy Comedies, *Northwestern University Press,* 1962, *pp.* 94-119.

Critical Essay #9

[Grebanier examines the five scenes in which appears in The Merchant of Venice *in an attempt to determine the nature of his character. In essence, the critic finds Shylock's desire for vengeance against Antonio motivated by the merchant's lending money interest free, lessening Shylock's customers, and hence, his profits. Further, Shylock hates Antonio be cause, according to the Jew, the merchant has repeatedly denigrated his race and religion. Grebanier points out, however, that in keeping with his virtuous character Antonio probably did not belittle Judaism rather Shylock himself, an issue the usurer confused with racial discrimination. For further commentary on Shylock's character, see the excerpts by Frank Kermode, E. F. C. Ludowyk, John Jilt Draper, Marvin Felheim, William Leigh Godshalk, John Dover Wilson, Watten D. Smith, and Lawrence Danson.]*

These are the forces at work in *The Merchant of Venice:* the bountiful grace and liberality of Anto nio, Bassanio, Portia, and their friends, who are determined that money shall be a prop to those enrichments of life, not the death of them: and the suppression of all grace and liberality on the part of Shylock, who is convinced that money by itself is the only measurement of joy in life. (p. 184)

But Shakespeare could not know that the world would choose, of the two paths open to it, the one in which money became the destroyer of love and friendship. Only Shylock, in his play, prefers that road. Shylock is isolated from love and friendship, and insulated against them, because he has nothing of himself to spare for them. Whatever affections he owns are expended upon the accumulation of money and the making of money from money. He bullies his daughter and starves his servant. Shakespeare, never the creator to put the case weakly, makes this greed for money all the more deplorable in that Shylock is a man of no mediocre qualities. He has dignity, strength, purposefulness, tenacity, courage, an excellent mind, a cuttingly wry sense of humor. It is a great injustice to the man Shakespeare has depicted to imagine him "servile and repulsive," "fawning" or "sneaking' and underhanded"-as many commentators and actors have depicted him. It is an equally grave in justice to him to conceive him, as so many others have done, as suffering from racial persecution. He is too strong-minded, too conscious of personal dignity for that. It is he who looks down upon the Christians, not they on him. He stands on too much of an eminence to feel persecuted, and he who does not feel persecuted, is not persecuted.

Shakespeare has so presented him that we are bound to feel the great waste that such a man, framed for noble ends, should be debased by his ruling greed. Without the disease of greed, it is easy to imagine Shylock as walking like a king among men. But this one, terrible obsession channels all his best traits into the service of villainy. And for that he comes to grief in the end. The gods are just, Shakespeare always feels, and of our vices make instruments to plague us.

I am aware that to assert so unconventional an interpretation of Shylock entitles me to no more credence than is to be accorded the time-honored views of him as a pathetic, comic, or conventionally villainous Hebrew, without the proof. The proof is in the play.

Shylock appears in but five scenes of *The Merchant of Venice.* Let us trace what Shakespeare shows us of him, step by step, from the beginning. One of the chief causes of confusion concerning his character comes from the failure of commentators to consider Shylock's speeches in the order in which they occur. If I commence by seizing upon the "Many a time and oft" [I. iii. 106] and "Hath not a Jew eyes?" [III. 1. 59] passages, I might convincingly enough make out Shylock to be a tragic representative of his race. On the other hand, if I choose to commence with Gratiano's slurs in the trial scene [IV. 1. 364, 379, 398], I might convincingly enough make out Shakespeare's purposes to be anti-Semitic. But if I honestly wish to discover Shakespeare's intentions, I will begin with no pre conceptions concerning Shylock's character, and start gauging him from the moment we first meet him in the play. If we are to understand him, we must be patient: we shall be wise to take the advice of the King in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland:* "Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end: then stop."

We first meet Shylock in I. iii. (His name has been said, variously, to be a transliteration of Shalach or Shelach *(Genesis* X, 24), "cormorant," or of Shiloh, the sanctuary of Jehovah. . . .) Bassanio has already broached the subject of the loan. From 'the very outset we see the moneylender standing firm and as unyielding as solid rock. Bassanio is edgy, Shylock absolutely noncommittal: he may lend the money and then again he may not. In these lines which open the scene, it is Shylock who is in control of the situation:

SHYLOCK. Three thousand ducats. Well.
BASSANIO. Ay, sir, for three months.
SHYLOCK. For three months. Well.
BASSANIO. For the which, as I told you,
Antonio shall be bound.
SHYLOCK. Antonio shall become bound.
Well.
BASSANIO. May you stead me? Will you
pleasure me? Shall I know your answer?
SHYLOCK. Three thousand ducats for
three months, and Antonio bound.
[I. iii. l-10]

Shakespeare, as ever, is remarkable in his ability to cause us to hear the very tone in which his characters speak: the calm, deliberately unemotional voice of Shylock. giving not the slightest intimation of his intentions, and the nervous, high-strung anxiety of Bassanio. Nor does Shylock do anything to make Bassanio more comfortable, he is enjoying too much keeping him dangling:

BASSANIO. Your answer to that.
SHYLOCK. Antonio is a good man.
[I. iii. 11-12]

There is something in his voice so arrogant that Bassanio hotly demands:

Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?
[I. iii. 13]

To which Shylock rejoins, with the loftiness of an adult quieting a child:

Ho, no, no, no, no! My meaning in saying
he is a good man is to have you under
stand me that he is sufficient.
[I. iii. 15-17]

And then he begins to enumerate the risks, with the precision and carefulness of the man who is used to counting every penny-the risks of ships, seas, human fallibility, pirates, winds, rocks; and ends, once more without in any way hinting that he will oblige: The man is, notwithstanding, sufficient. Three thousand ducats; I think I *may* take his bond. [I. iii. 25-7]

That he deliberately stresses the "may" to embarrass Bassanio further is proved by the latter's next line:

Be assured you may.
[I. iii. 28]

Which only calls forth a further piece of haughtiness from Shylock:

I *will* be assured I may, and that I may be
assured. I will bethink me.
[I. iii. 29-30]

In other words, Don't try to rush me; I mean to think this over.

We have progressed only 30 lines from his first appearance, and it is already too late for us ever to expect a cringing, fawning, imposed-upon Shylock. Whatever we hear him say later, we are bound to interpret in terms of the Shylock we already know.

It is now that Bassanio invites him to meet Antonio over dinner, and that he replies haughtily in words that have been so much and so blindly over interpreted; he will not go to smell pork.

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.
[I. iii. 35-8]

These certainly sound like the words of a pious Jew. But how seriously are we to take them? Presently we shall learn that he does indeed go to eat and 'drink with the Christians, and for reasons which do him no credit. Since he has no intention of refusing the invitation, how are we to take his words? In the same spirit as everything else he has thus far said: to make Bassanio unconfortable.

Antonio now appears, and while Bassanio is greeting him, Shylock has his first soliloquy (pp. 18588) Here Shylock expresses his burning hatred for Antonio for the first time. He would like to pretend to himself that that hatred is based upon lofty, religious grounds. But the truth will out in spite of him:

I hate him for he is a Christian,
But *more for that in low simplicity*
He lends out money gratis and brings
down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice. If I can catch him once upon the hip,
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear
him.
[I. iii. 42-7]

(How, after these words. is it possible to construe, as some critics have amiably done, the bond later proposed as really offered in the spirit of friendship?)

He hates our sacred nation. and he rails *Even there where merchants most do congregate,*
On me, *my bargains, and my well-won*
thrift.
Which he calls interest. Cursed be my
tribe
If I forgive him!
[I. iii. 48-52]

I have italicized the pertinent passages to show that underneath all his pretenses to himself, it is only Antonio's disdain of interest which rankles. Shakespeare is here, as always, fascinating in his psychological presentation. (pp. 188-89).

See how Shylock twists and turns, trying to posture to himself as indignant on grounds purely impersonal and larger. Antonio, according to him, hates the Jews. How does he show it? Not by rail (ing against them but by railing against Shylock. What does he rail against Shylock for? His religion? No. For his taking of exorbitant interestand, at that, *where other merchants can hear.* All this Shylock chooses to construe as an insult to all the Jews, and on those grounds he vows vengeance. But for all that, the real basis for his fury has revealed itself. A perfect example of an all-too-human self-justification.

It is part of Shakespeare's profundity that Shylock should not accurately know himself. What miser ever faced the truth about himself, or failed to call his penuriousness by some better-sounding name like thrift or self-restraint? That is why the greed of a

Jonsonian miser is not really credible, and Shylock's is. This inability to face what he really is will make itself dramatically vocal when we meet him for the last time, in the trial scene. Now Shylock forces Bassanio to press him again for an answer, pretends still to be mulling over the loan, and then feigns seeing Antonio for the first time-Ah, how do you do? We were just talking about you. ("Your worship was the last man in our mouths" [I. iii. 60].) Still the condescending Shylock. Up to this point in the play Antonio, when we have met him, has had nothing to say about Shylock. It is in this scene that we are first given to know how he feels about the moneylender. He speaks to him coldly; this is merely a business matter, and he is quite prepared to pay the interest he disapproves of, since Shylock, of course, will ask for it. His voice is neither friendly nor hostile; Shylock, in responding, lines his words with irony:

ANTONIO. Shylock, albeit I neither lend nor borrow
By taking nor by giving of excess,
Yet to supply the ripe wants of my friend,
I'll break a custom. *(to Bass.)* Is he yet possess'd
How much ye would?
SHYLOCK. Ay, ay. three thousand
ducats. ANTONIO. And for three months.
SHYLOCK. I had forgot; three months; you
told me so.
[I. iii. 61-5)

But he still refuses to indicate whether or not he will lend the money. Moreover, this is too good an opportunity to miss. I thought, says he, you make it a practice never to ask or give interest on a loan? I never do, Antonio replies.

Now that he has Antonio at a disadvantage, Shylock cannot let slip the occasion to justify the taking of interest. By citing the enterprise of Jacob while serving Laban, he attempts to confute the Aristotelian argument that money, being inanimate, is put to unnatural uses when it is employed only to multiply itself. Again Shylock demonstrates the characteristic precision of his mind: This Jacob was the third in line from Abraham-let's see, wasn't he? Yes, he was the third. Antonio, knowing his man. cuts in: Did Jacob take interest? Shylock does not like such a forthright question:

No. not take Interest not as you would
say,
Directly interest.
[I. iii. 76-7]

But Jacob was not above a little trickery to insure his own welfare; it was a way to profit, and profit is a blessing when it isn't stolen. Antonio blasts through the sophistry: was the Scriptural passage written to justify the taking of interest,

Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?
(I. iii. 95)

Shylock answers him and Aristotle wryly:

I cannot tell; I make it breed as fast.
[I. iii. 96)

Antonio seems well aware that Shylock is a religious hypocrite; in disgust he observes that the Devil knows how to cite Scripture for his purpose:

O. what a goodly outside falsehood hath!
[I. iii. 102]

Unperturbed, Shylock goes back to considering the loan. No hint from him whether it is to be granted. No, not yet-let them wait. Thus, Antonio is compelled to ask again: Will you lend this money? It is here that Shylock delivers one of his celebrated speeches. It is odd that despite its fame, it has never been seen to reveal Shakespeare's psy chological cunning.

Shylock has intimated nothing of his intentions concerning the ducats asked for. First he must make Antonio-him who condemns interest smart, now that he comes asking for a loan. So, for the hated one's benefit, Shylock cloaks himself in the dignity of race. But again, in despite of himself, he reveals that he is not complaining of persecution. only justifying his taking of interest. Many a time and oft Antonio has berated him on the Rialto (where merchants most do congregate)-about what? His religion? No:

About my moneys and my usances.
[I. iii. 108)

But this Shylock deliberately confuses as though it were an insult to all Jews:

Still have I borne it with a patient shrug, For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.
[cf. I. iii. 109-10]

We may well imagine that Antonio, no fool, is experiencing a queasiness at this smug sanctimorupusness. Shylock, thoroughly enjoying himself at the others' discomfort, now accuses Antonio of having spat upon his "Jewish" gaberdine. For what? His religion? No, despite his intention of capitalizing on the persecution of the Jews, ShylocK finds himself saying:

And all for use of that which is mine own.
. [I. iii. 113]

It is the need of justifying his greed which rankles in him. And having a first-rate intelligence and great p owers of expression, he hurls at his enemy one of the loftiest pieces of sarcasm ever penned:

Well, then. it now appears you need my
help.
Go to, then! You come to m_ and you say, "Shylock, we would have moneys;" you
say so
You, that did void your rheum upon my
beard
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur Over your threshold; moneys is your suit. What
should I say to you? Should I not
say,
"Hath a dog money? Is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats?"
Or
Shall I bend low and in a bondman's key. With bated breath and whispering hum
bleness,
Say this:
"Fair sir, you spat on me on Wednesday
last:
You spurn'd me such a day; another time You call'd me dog; and for these courtesies I'll
lend you thus much moneys"?
[I. iii. 114-29]

The indignation is superb, and it is a callous audience that will fail to be overwhelmed by it. But coming after what has preceded it. it can have but one purpose in Shylock's mind. He has been doing his best to make Bassanio and Antonio squirm. This speech is his crowning effort to humiliate them. But at this point we have a difficulty. He has charged Antonio with spitting upon him because of his taking interest. Scholars have hastened to ascribe to that contemptuous and contemptible behavior of Antonio the cause of Shylock's hatred. Yet, when we shall presently consider Antonio's character traits, we shall find nothing in his behavior which could possibly be consonant with such conduct. He is at every point a gentle, mild, loving, and modest man. Nowhere up to the very trial scene (Act IV) does he ever say a single thing that is vaguely anti-Semitic about Shylock-not even after he has been taken into custody and his life is in peril. It will not do to say that Antonio's spitting upon Shylock would in that age have been no blot upon his character. That explanation would do very well for a rather vulgar man like Gratiano.

Shakespeare proves himself in the play totally alien to bigotry: why should he not have made his hero above it? (pp. 189-93)

Of the world's dramatists, no one believed more firmly than Shakespeare in having characters reveal themselves by what they *do.* For instance, in the scene we have been examining, the salient fact about Shylock is that he has kept Antonio and Bassanio in suspense, has done all he could to aggravate their embarrassment in having to come to him for a loan, and has refused to alleviate their discomfort by even a hint that he might lend the money. This, as far as we have progressed in it. is the basic action of the scene. Now Shylock has *said* that Antonio has spit upon him. But if we were asked to believe that this is the truth, it would be Shakespeare's practice to show us Antonio

conducting himself elsewhere in the play *in a manner consistent with such an act* (p. 194)

Now, since we nowhere see Antonio behaving in a way that would make it possible for us to think of him as spitting on anyone, is it not possible that Shylock is making the charge against him-just as Iago makes his charge against Othello-without really believing a word of it, only to erect a false justification for himself, and, most of all, because he gauges that Antonio's pride will not permit the merchant to defend himself?

If, for the sake of argument, we grant that this is indeed the case-if Antonio is aware of what Shylock is up to, trying further to annoy him-should we expect Antonio to deny hotly, "When did I ever spit on you?" If your enemy approached you and accused you of committing incest with your sister, and you were, moreover, an only child, would you be behaving with any dignity to exclaim, outraged, "Why I haven't got a sister!" Would it not be more consonant with manly pride to answer coolly, "With which sister do you mean?" It is in a similar spirit that I understand Antonio's making response to the charge. At the moment he is revolted at Shylock's attempts to ennoble the taking of interest: he is disgusted at being kept dangling-after all, he and Bassanio have not come to ask a favor but to engage in a distasteful commercial transaction. We may be sure that if this loan were for his own needs, not his friend's, he would have turned on his heel before this. Instead, he, masters his ire, and answers coldly and with unconcealed contempt for Shylock's brazen hy pocrisy: Very well, I'll do the same things all over again; for we are not talking as friends; we ask for a loan at your usual rates: when did a friend ever ask interest for a loan?

I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too. If thou wilt lend this money. lend it not As to thy friends; for *when did friendship*
take
A breedfor barren metal if his friend?
[I. iii. 130-34]

There is no point, Antonio is implying, in your talking to me as though we were meeting as intimates. Your attitude toward taking interest makes this purely a matter of business: let's keep it on that level.

But lend it rather to thine enemy,
Who, if he break, thou mayst with better
face
Exact the penalty.
[I. iii. 135-37]

Shylock is satisfied that he has pushed Antonio to the limits of annoyance, and so his tone swiftly changes: But why do you take on so? I'm perfectly willing to be your friend, lend you the money, and not take a cent of interest. My offer is kind. (Up to this moment he has made no offer!)

Bassanio who, though silent, has necessarily been more upset by the talk than Antonio could be, since he is the cause ofit all, with relief cries, "This were kindness" [I. iii. 143].

And now Shakespeare comes to the knottiest problem in the plot. . . . Stipulating for the illusion of flesh-and-blood reality in his plays, how was he to make it credible that Antonio would sign a bond which places his life injeopardy? His solution was brilliant. Some sort of consideration will be neces sary to make the contract legal. Shylock refuses any financial security, since he is acting as a friend. Well then, let us mention as the consideration something absolutely absurd, just to show my complete confidence in your word. Let us make it something as ludicrous as, say, a pound of your flesh. What is important in this speech is that the bond is framed "in a merry sport" [I. iii. 145], as he puts it. (pp. 194-96).

Innocently Antonio accepts the terms as framed in a merry sport, and is ready to believe that Shylock desires to be friendly. He considers the offer very decent of Shylock ("there is much kindness in the Jew" [I. iii. 153]). Naturally, Bassanio, oversensitive because of his role in this affair, expresses alarm. But Antonio reassures him: No need for alarm; my ships come back laden a good month before the money is due. Shylock, gleeful at the success of his ruse, feigns shock at Bassanio's suspicions in a tone wfiich is anything but humble: What creatures these Christians are, who judge others by their own unfeeling waysl Tell me, what should I do with a pound of his flesh, if I seriously hoped to have it? (With mixed insolence and everpresent greed) he says further: a pound of man's flesh

Is not so estimable, *profitable* neither, As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats.
[I. iii. 166-67]

I'm willing to act like his friend: let him take the offer or leave it. But in all fairness, don't do me the injustice of ascribing sordid motives to what I am willing to do generously.

Antonio is unworried. and Shylock more emphasizes that this is to be a "merry bond" Antonio's farewell acknowledges that Shylock's behavior is princely:

Hie thee, gentle Jew.
[I. iii. 177]

Before we meet Shylock again, we learn interesting things about him. His household is a joyless one, and he wishes it to be so. Launcelot Gobbo, his poor idiot of a servant, is becoming skin and bones from starvation. This amiable halfwit is the only companion Shylock's daughter is permitted to have; at the prospect of his leaving Shylock's employ she is unhappy:

I am sorry thou wilt leave my father so. *Our house is hell,* and thou, a merry devil, Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness.
[II. iii. 1-3]

That she does not exaggerate will be evident enough in a scene which shortly follows. But apparently the little pleasure she can have in talking to Launcelot must be snatched in secret too, She cuts short their conversation with:

And so farewell. I would not have my father
See me in talk with thee.
[II. iii, 8-9]

In a handful of lines Shakespeare has vividly sketched the gloomy and prison like atmosphere of Shylock's home.

Jessica turns out to be something less than an ideal daughter, satisfactory as she is in her devotion to Lorenzo. But there is no reason why she should love her father. It is clear from the outset that she has never known tenderness or love from him (pp. 196-97).

The next time we meet Shylock [II. v] he is before his house. He assures poor Launcelot, him whose ribs are showing from hunger, that he will not be able to gobble up everything in sight at Bassanio's, as he has done at Shylock's household. (In Shylock's diseased mind every scrap of bread is begrudged his servant.) Shylock is about to go to Bassanio's for dinner. The very invitation shows that Antonio and Bassanio are ready to accept his proffered friendship. And Shylock means to go, despite his earlier high-sounding talk about not eating with Christians, His reason for going? The more he eats of Bassanio's feast, the less Bassanio will have. ("I'll go in hate to feed upon the prodigal Christian" [II. v. 14-15].) How well Shakespeare understood every aberration of human naturel Though extreme, Shylock's point of view is of one piece with his embracing the philosophy of cutthroat competition: the less others have, the richer he himself can feel.

But he has a premonition of something unpleasant in the stars: he dreamt last night of money-bags, and is "right loath to go" [II. v. 16]. Launcelot, appropriating the lofty airs that he feels are owing to his new Uniform. says gradually, misusing "reproach" for "approach":

I beseech you, sir, go. My young master
doth expect your reproach.
[II. v. 19-20)

Shylock seizes upon the malapropism, and retorts with concentrated malice masked as WIY humor:

So do I his.
[II. v. 21]

This quibble is like a sword-thrust: it should be enough to raise goose flesh. It means only one thing: Shylock has every intention of collecting the pound of flesh, and has a plan for making sure he will have it.

Now foolish Launcelot emits what is meant to be a hint to Jessica, but might easily have prevented her intended elopement if Shylock had had any notion of it: there's going to be a masque tonight. At the very mention of purposed merriment, Shylock's hatred of all that is delightful and gay is aroused:

What, are there masques? Hear you me,
Jessica.
Lock up my doors: and when you hear the
drum
And the vile squealing of the wry-neck'd
fife,
Clamber not you up to the casements
then, Nor thrust your head into the public street To gaze on Christian fools with varnish'd faces,
But stop my house's ears, I mean my casements. Let not the sound of shallow foppery enter My sober house.
[II. v. 28-36]

He has no use for music. He does not want even the echo of it to penetrate his house. Obviously Shakespeare will later mean us to take quite seriously L0orenzo's dictum:

The man that hath no music in himself, Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and
spoils....
Let no such man be trusted.
IV. i. 83-8]

It certainly applies to Shylock. And luckless Jessi ca! She is not to dare watch the fun in the streets by looking out the window or even from behind it. Her eyes and ears are to be sealed against the most innocent pleasure. Small wonder that she will leave her father's house without regret.

Launcelot goes off, and Shylock reflects that he is glad to be rid of such a huge feeder (poor, starved Launcelot!): he is, moreover, delighted to think of how he will now help to waste Bassanio's substance. Then, before he himself departs, he threatens Jessica: she had better obey every article of his commands:

Perhaps I will return immediately.
[II.v.52]

Clearly her life under her father's roof is an endless series of commands and warnings against disobedience not the sort of existence to evoke love or even duty.

This scene demonstrates how far from the point those stray who insist that it is only Jessica's elopement which turns a benevolent Shylock into a hating one. She has not yet eloped, and we have seen him full of malevolence against Bassanio and Antonio. most of all in that blood-chilling "So do I his." (pp. 199-201) Before we meet Shylock

again. . . ,the elopement has taken place. I suspect that neither the dramatist nor his audience understood her taking money and jewels with her to be conduct as heinous as modem interpreters have construed it. Her life with Shylock has been a stunted one: what she has appropriated has not left him impoverished. Even today Europeans generally expect that when a girl of means is married, her father will provide a suitable dowry. It is more than likely that we were intended to feel that Jessica has done little more than take with her the marriage-portion that ought to have been hers. (In the probable source for the Jessica-Lorenzo story. . . the girl in that tale also helps herself to her father's possessions when she elopes.)

After the elopement we hear Salarino and Salanio discussing the effects of it upon Shylock. Their picture of his running through the streets shrieking

My daughter! 0 my ducats! 0 my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! 0 my Christian duc ats!
Justice! the law! my ducats, and my
daughter! A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats, Of double ducats, stolen from me by my
daughter!
And jewels, two stones, two rich and pre
cious stones.
Stolen by my daughter! Justice! find the
girl;
She hath the stones upon her, and the
ducats,
[II. viii. 15-22]

is deliberately grotesque. But it has some of the ring of truth in it too. The emphasis upon the ducats and the stones sounds like the Shylock we know. Likewise does his wish, not so much to have his daughter back for herself, but to find her so that he can retrieve his ducats and his jewels.

In the scene in which we next meet Shylock [III, i], there is more talk of ships wrecked at sea and the possibility that they could be Antonio's (the talk began in n. viii. 25-32). Shylock comes in, and he is in a terrible rage:

You knew, none so well, none so well as you, of my daughter's flight,
[III. i. 24-5]

he storms at Salanio and Salarino. The latter tries to moderate Shylock's fury: Shylock must have been aware that Jessica was of an age to think of marriage. But he will not be mollified:

My own flesh and blood to rebel!
[III. i. 34]

Salarino denies that Jessica is a replica of her fa ther, and does so in language that exonerates him from any charge of anti-Semitism:

There is more difi'erence between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory; more between your bloods than there is between red wine and rhenish.
[III. 1. 39-42]

He changes the subject to ask whether Shylock has heard anything of Antonio's ships. The question but adds fuel to Shylock's passion:

There I have another bad match. A bankrupt, a prodigal, who dare scarce show his head on the Rialto: a beggar, that was us'd to come so smug upon the mart; let him look to his bond. . . He was wont to lend money for a Christian courtesy: let him look to his bond
[III. 1. 44-50]

In wine and in wrath the truth will out. Shylock's list of Antonio's offenses this time significantly omits any reference to spitting on Jewish gabardines or to insults against the Jews. No, in his fury it does not occur to him to mask the real sources of his fury: Antonio's elegant appearance. Antonio's wasting of money, Antonio's lending money without interest. These are the crimes for which he hates the merchant.

When Salarino asks of what use the forfeiture could be to Shylock, Shylock responds in a way that again is a tribute to Shakespeare's psychological insight. Now that he has been called on to state his grievances, Shylock once more tries to pass off the reasons for his thirst for revenge as better than they are. But, in spite of his tone of injured innocence, he reveals that it is only matters of money which cause his hatred:

He hath disgrac'd me, and *hind'red me half a million;* laugh'd at *my losses.* mock'd at *my gains,* scom'd my nation, thwarted *my bargains.* . .
[III. i. 54ff.)

The reference to his "nation" is almost parenthetical-as though he had thought of something that must be slipped in to justify the rest. Again, despite himself, Shylock makes it plain that the only Antonio has done to injure him has been to lend out money gratis.

From the indictment he soars into one of the most movingly written orations ever penned:

And what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jewhands, 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 notlatW1? 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. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.
[III. i. 58-73)

As we have already said, the author who composed these lines must of necessity have stood far above all possibility of nurturing anti-Semitic feelings else how could he have conceived the passage? It is noble. manly, superbly convincing. But when we have recovered from the power of its appeal (which Shylock fully intended to be powerful) and ask ourselves why Shylock has said all this and why just now, we are forced to realize that it is all an elaborate piece of self-justification for villainy intended. His accusations of injustices visited upon the Jews by Christians in general are meant by implication to apply to Antonio in particular, even though we have not seen Antonio wronging anyone or revenging himself on anyone. By the very force of his eloquence Shylock is convincing himself (and has convinced many critics!) that he proposes to take reprisals for the persecutions of his people.

Antonio's friends leave, Tubal comes in, and we are witnesses to a wonderfully written scene. Tubal has just arrived from Genoa; he has often heard of Jessica but did not encounter her. Shakespeare now fortifies our previous knowledge of Shylock's inner drive. Shylock is talking to an intimate (we cannot think of his having a true, friend, nor does Tubal behave like one), and he speaks without pretense:

Why, there, there, there, there! A diamond gone, cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfort! *The curse never fell upon our nation till now. I never felt it till now.*
[III. i. 83-6]

At last the whole truth. Shylock has never felt hurt before. But any wrong to him is a wrong to all Jews. What are the injustices meted out to his coreligionists compared with the loss of two thousand ducats by him? He goes on, and his diseased passion for accumulation vents itself with increasing violence:

Two thousand ducats in that; and other precious, precious jewels. *I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the*
jewels in her ear! Would she were hears'd
at myfoot, and the ducats in her coffin!
[III. i. 86-90]

These shocking sentiments are scarcely in harmony with the long-suffering and loving paterfamilias of the sentimental school of critics. They are among the most horrifying sentences in literature. Confronted with them even the critic who finds Shylock *molto simpatico [very* likable] would be compelled to admit that it is not that he loved Jessica less but loves his ducats more. And he continues to lament his losses-though surely the bulk of his vast hoard has remained untouched:

No news of them? Why so? *And I know not what's spent in the search. Why, thou loss upon loss! the thief gone with* so *much, and* so *much to find the thief.* . . .
[III. i. 90ff]

Not a word about missing his beloved daughter, but much on the subject of missing his ducats. And why is it, he cries, that I am the only man to have all this misfortune? Tubal raises his spirits by beginning to say that he has heard in Genoa of Antonio's ill luck.

Eagerly Shylock demands to know more. Yes, Tubal says, Antonio is said to have lost a fleet coming from Tripolis. "1 thank God, I thank God!" Shyfock cries with exaltation. He laughs with delight;

Good news, good news! Ha, ha! Here in
Genoa!
(III. i. 105-07]
(pp, 201-05)

Unless we are willingto conceive that Shylock orig inally suggested taking a pound of Antonio's flesh purely as a gesture of friendship-an interpretation in violence with his first soilloquy and everything he had been thinking before Jessica ever eloped-we must surely feel that a man ofhis particular purposefulness would never have stipulated for such terms ifhe had merely hoped or had left it to chance to bring Antonio within his power. At the time the bond was signed, there was not even a wisp of doubt that Antonio could comfortably repay the money long before it was due. . . . [There] is something terribly ominous about Shylock's turning Launceiot's malapropism. "My young master doth expect your reproach" [II. v. 1920]. with a wry. "So do I his" [II, v. 21]. Nobody ever depended less than Shakespeare upon accident for dramatic effect. His leading characters are always people either of strong will or wilfullness: and his strongest strokes as a storyteller are always closely related to character-traits of the persons involved, not to external, accidental influences. (Even Morocco and Arragon make a Choice of the wrong caskets and Bassanio of the right one, because of their own temperaments.) It would be most unlike Shakespearean practice that Shylock once he has proposed a contract with such terms in it, win power of death over Antonio through the operation of fate. At the end of the play (V. 1. 276-77] it turns out that Antonio's ships have come safely to port richly laden after all. What has happened to Antonio, then, in the interval between his signing of the bond and Shylock's bringing him to trial? Obviously, it chanced that nearly all of Antonio's ready money at the time Bassanio asked for a loan was invested in his ventures abroad, else there had been no need of borrowing the money from Shylock. What could Shylock do, under these circumstances to insure his collecting the forfeiture? Only one thing: ruin Antonio's credit. In II. viii, Salarino reported talking with a Frenchman. who had told him of an Italian ship wrecked in the English Channel. Shylock has seized upon this piece of gossip, attributed the loss to Antonio, and broad ened it to include the rest of Antonio's ships. . , . I therefore take his exulting cry, "Good news. Good news! Ha. hal Here in Genoal" to mean, "So at last! These rumors have at last reached Italy, near home!" To continue with the scene: Tubal, apparently unable to allow Shylock his moment of joy, cuts in with the information that

Your daughter spent in Genoa. as I heard,
in one night four-score ducats.
[III. i. 108-09]

The very thought of which brings Shylock back to his misery over his losses:

Thou stick'st a dagger in me, I shall never
see my gold again. Fourscore ducats at a sitting! Fourscore ducats!
[III. i. 111-12]

This amusingly inscrutable Tubal continues to play on Shylock as on an instrument: Antonio, he learns from the creditors, is sure to become bankrupt. Once more Shylock rejoices: he is very glad of it; he will plague and torture Antonio. Once more Tubal turns aside Shylock's pleasure:

One of them showed me a ring that he had of your daughter for a monkey.
[III. 1. 118-19]

Shakespeare does not deal in monsters, and he here gives Shylock the one softening touch allotted him in the whole play:

It was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when
I was a bachelor. 1 would not have given it
for a wilderness of monkeys.
[cf. III. 1. 121-23]

It is a wonderfully simple human touch, and it reminds us that Shylock, before he gave in to his passion for accumulating money, was once a human being too. Tubal goes back to Antonio's losses, and Shylock eagerly looks forward to his pound of flesh: to be sure of it he arranges a fortnight in advance that an officer arrest Antonio on the day the bond is due. In the next scene [III. ii] we are in Belmont, and rejoice to watch Bassanio's choosing the right casket. But he and Portia have barely time to revel in the happy fulfillment of their wishes when news comes from Venice that Antonio's ships have been lost and his credit has been ruined. His friends have managed to get together the money owing, but Shylock refuses to accept it, now that the day of repayment is past. Twenty merchants, the Duke of Venice, and leading citizens have pleaded with him in vain; Shylock refuses to accept anything but his pound of flesh. No one can drive him from his malicious stand that he will have only the forfeiture-which he calls demanding justice.

It takes a little time to get a large sum of money together. No one has seriously expected that Shylock would insist upon the terms of the bond. On but one day after the contract's expiration, we are to suppose, Antonio's friends have approached Shy lock with the money, and he has refused them on the technicality of the date. No one, naturally, was prepared that he take such a position, particularly when he is notorious for his love of gold. But Jessica tells the others that she has often heard her father say That he would rather have Antonio's flesh Than twenty times the value 'of the sum That he did owe him. [III. ii. 286-88]

(We do not like Jessica for saying this. On the other hand, we should like her less if she approved of her father's murderous intentions: she has chosen to be human rather than dutiful.)

In the next scene [III. ill] we are back in a street of Venice. Antonio, in the custody of the Gaoler, and Salarino are pleading with Shylock to be merciful. But he will allow them to speak hardly a syllable. He is absolutely intransigent. Now that he has Antonio completely in his power, now would be the time, if there were any truth in his allegations that he has endured indignities at Antonio's hands, to speak them out. With what crushing force could he now hurl at Antonio that business of spitting upon him and kicking him out of doors-if that had been the truth. But it was not the truth; he seems even to have forgotten his inventions. In his adamantine sense of power he does not try to conceal his motives as other than they are:

Gaoler, look to him; tell not me of mercy, *This is the fool that lent out money gratis!*
[III. iii. 1-2]

After a few words of scornful abuse, he leaves. Antonio is well aware that Shylock hates him only because he has often rescued people who were in debt to Shylock. He is also fairly convinced that the bond is legally unassailable.

We come now to the great scene of the play, the Trial Scene [IV. i], the last in which Shylock appears. Before Shylock's entry, the point is made again that the Duke has done all he could to urge Shylock to accept the sum of money he advanced and renounce the forfeiture, but without success. The Duke now realizes that the moneylender is

A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch Uncapable of pity, void and empty From any dram of mercy.
[IV. i. 4-6]

Shylock comes into court, and the Duke goes out of his way to speak gently and without animosity to him, in the hope of softening his cruelty. We all really believe, he says, that you are only pretending to claim the forfeiture so that at the last minute your mercy and pity will appear all the greater; we expect you not only to renounce the stipulation but also to overlook a portion of the sum due you, considering Antonio's losses; surely you will not be have as only Turks and Tartars do; we all expect a civilized answer to what I ask. But the Duke has underestimated his man. Shylock is like rock, and challenges the city to deny its legal processes.

You'll ask me why I rather choose to have
A weight of carrion flesh than to receive
Three thousand ducats.
[IV. i. 40-2]

This sounds like a prologue (an arrogant and insulting one, to be sure) to a rehearsal of wrongs suffered as Antonio's victim. Now is the time, if ever there was time, for him to justify what he wishes to do, to tell the whole world of his injuries and persecutions. What a triumphant moment for him to do himself justice! But he has nothing to say of the old charges of anti-Semitism. He has nothing to say because they were false.

Moreover, no one has asked him why he chooses a pound of flesh rather than accept three thousand ducats. It is his own intelligence which makes him realize the enormity of his choice in the world's eyes. Perhaps this is the first time he has asked himself the question. Well, and what is his explanation? He has none.

I'll not answer that;
But say it is my humour. Is it answer'd? What if my house be troubled with a rat And I be pleas'd to give ten thousand ducats
To have it ban'd? What, are you answer'd
yet?
[IV. i. 42-6]

His insolence to the Duke would be astonishing in anyone other than this proud, strong, powerful man, who has never in his life known what it is to fawn or cringe. There is not even a hint of respect for the Duke's authority in what he says, as he continues; Some men can't stand roasted pig, some can't tolerate cats, some can't listen to the sound of bagpipes without becoming ill,

So can I give no reason, nor 1 *will not,* More than a lodg'd hate and a certain loathing
1 bear Antonio. that I follow thus
A losing suit against him. Are you answer'd?
[IV. 1. 59-62]

His last line adds sarcasm to his insolence. But again, despite himself, Shylock declares the truth; he can give no reason and therefore will give no reason for wishing to kill Antonio.

Now, it might be asked: If indeed Shylock has so overpowering a greed for money as has been thus far depicted, why has he not accepted the offer of Antonio's friends to pay him a liberal amount in addition to the money he has loaned the merchant? Why will he refuse Portia's offer of thrice the amount of the loan? Why would he rather have, as Jessica has reported, Antonio's flesh than "twenty times" the sum?

The answer to these questions lies in the very nature of hate. The genesis of Shylock's hatred for Antonio was money. But hate is a cancer that grows and feeds on a man until it devours all of him.

When hate becomes an obsession, its origin
becomes forgotten, and only the hate itself oe
comes real. (pp. 206-11)

Shylock, eaten up with hate, can really give no reason for desiring Antonio's death. This cancerous hatred, nourished by greed, is all that is left of him.

And here we shall leave Shylock. . . . Presently he, creature of cold hate and greed, bolstering that hate and greed with a demand for the strict letter of the law, will have to confront his great opponent, Portia, the personification of all he despises in life-

generosity, warmth, compassion, and lovePortia, with whom mercy is to be preferred far above mere justice.

In Shakespeare's play generosity, compassion, love, and mercy will triumph, as Shakespeare was convinced that they could and should triumph in life.

They could have triumphed, no doubt. Money need not have poisoned the wellsprings of human existence if Christ's teachings had meant anything to Christians.

Alas! in the course of time it is not Portia and Shakespeare, but Shylock who has won out. Nowadays if a man, pillar of his church, synagogue, or mosque, lends his brother a hundred dollars, he will probably expect him to pay him six per cent interest. "Why shouldn't he pay it to me?" he will say in self-justification, "since he will have to pay as much if he goes to a bank? Business is business."

Yes, most of the world has adopted Shylock's philosophy, which is the philosophy of banks. No one expects compassion from a bank. (pp. 212-13)

Bernard Grebanier, "Shylock Himself," in his The Truth about Shylock, *Random House, 1962, pp. 146-213* .

Critical Essay #10

[Smith considers Shylock a villain based on his profession as a usurer rather than on his race. He examines Elizabethan beliefs concerning both Jews and usury, maintaining that Shylock is branded a villain because of two important historical facts: first, as a Jew he is an unbeliever in the Christian faith; second, as a usurer he practices an unpopular vocation. Modem anti-Semitism is not present in The Merchant of Venice, Smith continues, and Shylock's evil is inherent by nature of his humanity rather than by his Jewishness. Shylock is merely a miserly evildoer, the critic contends, who uses his faith not only as a veil for his nefarious schemes, but also as an expression of his indignation at being discriminated against Based on this observation, Smith disputes the conventional reading of Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech in Act III, scene i, maintaining that it reflects Shylock's "use of religion as a cloak of villainy." For further commentary on Shylock's character, see the excerpts by Frank Kermode, E. F. C. Ludowyk, John W. Draper, Marvin Felheim, William Leigh Godshalk, John Dover Wilson, Bernard Grebanier, and Lawrence Danson.]

The common assumption that Shakespeare's Shylock was created to compete with Marlowe's play, *The Jew of Malta,* in pandering to a wave of antiSemitism greeting the arraignment and execution for treason in 1594 of Elizabeth's Jewish physician, Roderigo Lopez, becomes untenable upon examination. The evidence seems to indicate that through Shylock Shakespeare is really not satirizing Jews as such but is attempting to depict a usurer, by vocation a villain, who hypocritically conceals his evil designs behind the mask of a religion he himself does not believe in. (p. 193)

Then why did Shakespeare decide to make Shylock a Jew as well as a usurer? Either that the usurer in the source is Jewish or that Shylock as a Jew would be more of a villain is, I believe, only part of the answer. For though [Philip] Stubbes [in his *Anatomy]* and Thomas Wilson [see J. L. Cardozo's *The Contemporary Jew in the Elizabethan Drama]* have the grace to condemn usurers as worse than Jews, early in the Middle Ages the Jew became closely associated with the wicked profession of usury in the public mind. And little wonder since usury for Jews was encouraged by both the Church and the State. Accordirig to [Joshua] Trachtenberg [in his *The Devil and the Jews],* in the twelfth century the words *Jew* and *usurer* had become almost synonymous. So that a reappraisal of what Shakespeare was attempting to accomplish in his portrayal of Shylock demands that three historical factors be kept in view: (1) that there were no practising Jews in England to be satirized at the time of the composition of *The Merchant of Venice* and that "New" Christians were as acceptable to Elizabethans as other Christians; (2) that nonetheless a kind of anti-Semitism, purely religious rather than ethnic, based on condemning the Jew as an unbeliever and the slayer of Christ, was an active bias; and (3) that the usurer was by definition a villain in the public mind and the term *Jew* was frequently made equivalent to *usurer.* Most pertinent is what ties all three factors together: the interesting fact that in 1290 the Jews were expelled from England, as some Elizabethans should have recallea, on two counts-as unbelievers and as usurers.

Thus on two historical condemnations, as both an unbeliever and a usurer, Shylock is branded a villain upon his first appearance in the play. The pound of flesh episode is merely a demonstration of the innate evil in the man, or, possibly more important, the trap with which to ensnare the inven tor. But anti-Semitism as we know it today, prejudice against personal traits called "Jewishness", is not present in *The Merchant ofVenice.* Shylock, in contrast to his daughter (who willingly turns Christian for Lorenzo), is a stubborn infidel; Shylock, again in contrast to his daughter (who on her first appearance gives Launcelot a ducat and is lavish in bestowing her dowry on Lorenzo as well as in giving away a valuable ring for a monkey), is a miser. It is only poetic justice, then, fitting the spirit of comedy, that at the end of his performance the Jew is made to undergo two transformations for the good of his soul: he is converted to Christianity and is forced to give up usury when his wealth is taken from him. Small wonder his name is not mentioned in Act V: since he is no longer a villain, no longer either an unbeliever or a usurer, there is no reason to express animus against him. But it should be emphasized that though the fact that Shylock is a Jew may have been held against him by the Elizabethan audience, throughout the first four acts he is never made the victim of anti-Semitic prejudice by the other major characters in the play. He claims he hates Antonio "for he is a Christian" [I. iii. 42], but his assertion that Antonio mistreats him because "I am a Jew" [III. 1. 59] has no foundation in the text. What Shakespeare is really trying to do through Shylock is to depict a character who rationalizes his villainy, as a usurer, by projecting his own ethnic group prejudice onto the shoulders of his innocent opponents. As Romeo and Juliet condemn the stars for what is actually the evil emanating from the family feud, as Hamlet mistakenly blames his difficulties on the fact that "the time is out of joint" *[Hamlet,* I. v. 188], as Lear excuses his own inordinate pride by attacking the pride of Cordelia and Kent, so Shylock, though not so innocently, attempts to excuse his own villainy by emphasizing what the Christians in the play do not emphasize, the fact that he is a Jew. But being a villain, Shylock is not nearly so blind to reality as are the tragic protagonists. On his first entrance he offers the obtrusively weak rationalization ofusury as "well-won thrift" [I. iii. 50], calling on what he must have realized was a completely irrelevant analogy from the Bible of Jacob's behavior towards Laban to defend his own nefarious profession. "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose" [I. iii. 98] is the appropriate remark of Antonio. But though Antonio and Bassanio reveal their awareness of Shylock's real deficiencies in this scene, there is no indication of anti-Semitism. In addressing Shylock Antonio uses a term of respect, "sir" [I. iii. 91] instead of "sirrah". Bassanio gives Shylock an earnest invitation to supper, which the latter refuses on the spurious ground that he is a devout Jew and therefore will not eat pork. Later he is perfectly willing to "feed upon the prodigal Christian" [II. v. 14-15] despite the ominous dream of money-bags he has experienced the previous night. In the lengthy aside delivered on the entrance of Antonio, Shylock gives the audience what he later refuses to confess to the Duke and Portia in Act IV, the real reasons why he hates Antonio: "for he is a Christian" [I. iii. 42]-"But more for that in low simplicity / He lends out money gratis and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice" [I. iii. 43-5]. In the court scene we hear of neither of these reasons from Shylock. Instead we are treated to a barrage of rationalizations about the pound of flesh which he seeks from the heart of Antonio: it is Shylock's "humour", nothing more than a "lodg'd hate and a cer tain loathing / I bear

Antonio" [IV. 1. 60-1]: what if his house is troubled with a rat and he chooses to give ten thousand ducats to have it banned: if the Venetians will not free their slaves and marry them to their heirs, then Shylock cannot be expected to free Antonio: he has taken an oath in "heaven" to have the pound of flesh; and so on. Not a word is spoken about Antonio's being a Christian nor about the merchant's discouraging habit of lending money without interest.

After the Jacob-Laban controversy between Shylock and Antonio, which is an argument purely about usury with no anti-Semitism entering into it, Shylock again uses his religion as a guise for his villainy. He complains that the Christian merchant has often berated him upon the Rialto and "spet upon my Jewish gaberdine" [I. iii. 112], calling him "misbeliever, cutthroat dog" [I. iii. 111], which leads the Jew to ask defiantly, "Hath a dog money? Is it possible / A cur can lend three thousand ducats?" [I. iii. 123]. Antonio's rejoinder-"I am as like to call thee so again, / To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too" [I. iii. 130-31]-has frequently been criticized as jarring in its anti-Semitism. But as a representative hero of the times, who himself lends out money gratis, Antonio would be expected by the audience to mistreat a usurer, whether he was also an unbeliever or not. Again, with the plaintive-"For suff'rance is the badge of all our tribe" [I. iii. 110]-Shylock uses his religion as a mask, for though sufferance may be typical of the oppressed Jewish people as a whole, it is not a characteristic of the speaker, who at the very moment is plotting vengeance against Antonio. That the vengeance is not really against Antonio's alleged expressions of anti-Semitism but his enmity to usury Shylock slips into admitting, when he says that the merchant has berated him "All for use of that which is mine own" [I. iii. 113], the "All" being a dead giveaway. Antonio is fully alive to the real issue because he says, "If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not / As to thy friends-for when did friendship take / A breed for barren metal of his friend?" [I. iii. 131-33] That Antonio's animus against Shylock has all along been based upon his dislike of usury is demonstrated in the merchant's favorable reaction to the Jew's offer of a loan without interest. The next time we see Shylock we have already been introduced to his daughter. Though in all previous discussions the dramatic function of Jessica has been hurriedly glossed over, to me a reminder of it is necessary to a clear understanding of what the dramatist is attempting to accomplish. Like another Jew in the play, she is very evidently a foil character to her villainous father. As he is covetous, she is generous; as he is anti-Christian, she is pro-Christian: as he blames his suffering on being a Jew, she blames hers, much more honestly, on Shylock's having made their house a hell. No one in the play holds her being a Jewess against Jessica. Yet commentators have taken Jessica severely to task for stealing her father's ducats and jewels (actually the dowry owed to her) and for eloping with a Christian against her father's wiii. Surely to an audience who had everything against usurers and nothing against New Christians, her giving the ducats and jewels to her future husband would be, in contrast to the behavior of her miserly father, an act of commendable generosity, and her turning Christian for Lorenzo would be a saving grace. The same audience doubtless experienced keen satisfaction later in the play when her father is forced, under penalty of death, himself to give away all his wealth and to turn Christian. The Christians in Venice treat Jessica as an equal, and Portia and Nerissa in Belmont welcome her as a sister. The dramatist gives her a beautiful poetic scene with Lorenzo to open the final act, and she is treated as one of three heroines at the end of the play. Her presence in the play is ample proof

that the plot is not aimed at Jews as such (there were none in En gland to satirize) but rather at a villainous usurer who hides behind what he calls his religion to carry out his nefarious schemes.

For though Shylock is perfectly willing to use the Jewish faith as a cloak, he is not presented by the dramatist as a truly religious Jew. Not only does he willingly go to sup with the Christians after having told Bassanio he would not "smell pork" nor "eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into" [I. iii. 33-5], but on one or two other occasions he reveals how little he really reveres the Jewish religion. When he learns from Tubal that Antonio has lost all his argosies, Shylock names the synagogue as the place to plot his vengeance on the undone merchant. He tells his compatriot the truth about why he wants the life of Antonio: "I will have the heart of him if he forfeit; for, were he out of Venice, I can make what merchandise I will" [III. i. 127-30]. In short, the synagogue, the place reserved for holy worship, is to be misused as headquarters for a scheme of vengeful murder concocted to eliminate the chief impediment to Shylock's sinful usury. Later, in the court scene, the Jew blasphemes that "by our holy Sabbath" [cf. IV. i. 36] he has sworn to have Antonio's life though he is more than willing to discard the oath made "in heaven" as soon as he realizes he is in danger ofIosing his property and his life. Finally, after the elopment of Jessica. Shylock has the nerve to cry out to Tubal: "Why, there, there, there, there! A diamond gone cost me two thousand ducats in Frankford The curse never fell upon our nation till now; I never felt it till now" [III. 1. 83-6]. He rates the centuries of suffering by the Jews below the personal loss of two thousand ducats.

Yet much sympathy has been expended on Shylock for the famous "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech which he delivers in the first scene of Act III [III. 1. 59ff.]. Though a few unsentimental commentators have declared the passage to be nothing more than an avowal of vengeance, the majority opinion has sentimentalized it to the exalted plane of an impassioned appeal to humanity, an example of magnificent martyrdom, a moment of tragic pathos, a defense of a whole race, a trenchant appeal for tolerance. If the speech had originally been intended to scale such heights, then surely Shakespeare, in accord with his usual custom, would have cast it in poetic verse rather than in prose. Taking all the other evidence into consideration, I think it evident the passage is meant to be a specious piece of rationalizing on the part of the speaker, possibly the most obtrusive example in the play of the use of religion as a cloak for villainy. That Shylock himself is perfectly aware of the real reason for Antonio's hatred is revealed in the wording of his own introduction to the speech: "He hath disgrac'd me, and hind'red me half a million: laugh'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, ... thwarted my bargains,. . . "[III. 1. 54-7], yet he has the temerity to add, "and what's his reason? I am a Jew" [III. 1. 58]. As Shylock proceeds to point out, of course a Jew has eyes, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions-but, more pertinent, so does a villainous usurer. Certainly a Jew 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 summer and winter as a Christian is-but, again, so is a villainous usurer. The passage is irrelevant to the real issue and specious in essence: it proves nothing beyond the obvious fact that evil men are human. Based on the false premise-"(because) I am a Jew" [cf. III. 1. 58]-it must have been greeted with ridicule by the Elizabethan audience for the patent

rationalization it really is. For both Shylock and Antonio are vividly aware of the real issue between them throughout the play. In the first scene in which he appears, as we have noted above, the Jew had said, "I hate him. . . more for that in low simplicity / He lends out money gratis and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice" [I. iii. 42-5]. In the same scene he had addressed Antonio with the complaint: "In the Rialto you have rated me / About my moneys and myusances" [I. iii. 107-08].

In the first scene of Act III he says to Solanio and Salerio, after hearing of Antonio's losses, "Let him look to his bond. He was wont to call me usurer. Let him look to his bond. He was wont to lend money for a Christian cursy. Let him look to his bond" [III. 1. 47-50]. In the third scene Shylock admonishes Antonio's jailer with the words: "Jailer, look to him. Tell not me of mercy. / This is the fool that lent out money gratis. / Jailer, look to him" [III. iii. 1-3]. And after the exit of Shylock, Antonio himself reiterates to the jailer the real reason the Jew seeks his life: "loft deliver'd from his forfeitures / Many that have at times made moan to me. / Therefore he hates me" [III. iii. 21-4].

I think it can safely be concluded that Shakespeare's Shylock is a villain throughout the four acts in which he appears. To the Elizabethan audience, with their traditional religious bias against Jews, his birth may have been enough to arouse suspicion of his motives. But to the dramatist, surely, he was above all a hypocrite who concealed his innate evil behind the mask of a religion he himself did not believe in. (pp. 195-99)

Watten D. Smith, "Shakespeare's Shylock," in Shakespeare Quarterly, *Vol. XV, No.3, Summer, 1964, pp. 193-99.*

Critical Essay #11

[Parten discusses Portia's character in relation to the ring scene (Act V, scene 0. According to the critic, the ring episode "acts as a focus for the unresolved-and potentially explosive issue of the heroine's power. " In essence, the ring scene signifies the resolution of Portia's threat to the comic world of The Merchant of Venice. Parten maintains that Portia is a discordant element in the comic resolution of the play by virtue of her superiority over all the male characters. Such a situation is unacceptable in Shakespeare's comic world, the critic contends, where the proper hierarchy of men dominating women must be affirmed Further, Shakespeare uses the cuckoldry theme in the ring episode to initially depict Portia as a strong character capable of dominating Bassanio, the critic continues, but then eliminates it, thus removing "the prospect of permanent female rule from this comedy of temporary fe male ascendency. " Literally, a "cuckold" is a man whose wife is unfaithful; here, Parten uses the term to represent a social act which symbolizes "women's ultimate weapon and ultimate assertion over men. " For further commentary on Portia's character, see the excerpts by Frank Kermode, E. F. C. Ludowyk, William Leigh Godshalk, Lawrence tv. Hyman, John Dover Wilson. and Helen Purinton Pettigrew.]

The ring episode, the last and least of the three interlocking movements of *The Merchant of Venice,* has generally, with some justification, been considered too slight a business to be given the critical attention accorded the earlier phases of the play. The matter of the troth-plight rings and the migrations they make among the various characters is overshadowed by the actions involving the three caskets and the pound of flesh. The established view seems to be that Portia's gift of a "new" ring in the fifth act restates the theme of mercy set out in the fourth, echoing playfully both the usurer's implacability and the generosity of the triumphant Christians. This is certainly true, as is even the somewhat reductive view that the controversy about the rings is designed merely to provide laughter. . . . The business of the rings, however, has a dramatic function beyond mirroring the main action or providing comic counterpoint. It also serves as an important element of the play in its own right, in that it acts as focus for the unresolved-and potentially explosive-issue of the heroine's power. The ring episode of *The Merchant of Venice* represents Shakespeare's resolution of the threat to the comic world that Portia herself embodies. In supporting this argument, I will be covering three main points: first, my reasons for seeing Portia as a discordant element in the comic resolution: secondly, the traditional connotations of cuckoldry that account for Shakespeare's choice of it as the central theme of the scenes that deal with achieving that resolution; and finally, the way in which the rings themselves serve as highly significant tokens and emblems in the dramatic commentary on the relationship between the sexes.

It is a donne [known fact] in Shakespearean comedy, and in Elizabethan comedy in general, that the final scenes of the play will present a society to which order and harmony have been restored after a revitalizing interval of saturnalia. The basis for this new and healthy stability is the reestablishment of the ordered social hierarchy: during the earlier stages of the comedy, the normal pattern of relationships between masters

and servants, men and women, and parents and children can go wildly askew, but the conclusion of the play sees each figure restored to his or her proper role. If children are not brought back into the position of subordination to their parents that they held at the beginning of the play, it is only in order to allow them the freedom to move on into the properly ordered marriages that will provide the future generations that will in turn endorse and preserve the same social forms.

The triumphant Portia of the courtroom scene. . . is not a piece that can easily be made to fit this conservative pattern, particularly the aspect of it that makes a concluding harmony contingent upon feminine submission. Her conquest of Shylock does eliminate one evil that threatens the comic society, but, from another perspective, she herself is almost as much of a threat to the re-establishment of order. The comic world will remain in its unresolved and inverted state for as long as she stands in such easy and conspicuous superiority to all the men around her, including her husband. Portia, after all, represents Shakespeare's first effort to create a comic heroine capable of controlling and directing the action that develops around her, and it is arguable that-at least from the Elizabethan point of view-he overplayed his hand, producing a figure too powerful to be credible as a future Wife. In constantly demonstrating her ability to beat men at their own games, Shakespeare allows Portia to emerge as a more potent character than any of her masculine companions. (pp. 146-47)

If one considers the particular focus of the Venetian milieu in which the action of the comedy takes place, the aspect of Portia that is potentially most intimidating is her financial power: she is fabulously wealthy in a society in which wealth is the *summum bonum* [highest good). Bassanio, on the other hand, comes to her penniless. Though the conventions of the fairy-tale present the pauper princess alliance in the most positive light, it was not a variety of marriage that the Elizabethans regarded complacently. Contemporary treatises on domestic relations warned constantly against the dangers of financial misalliances, especially those in which the wife was wealthier than her husband. One such tract, *The Flower of Friendshippe,* phrases that warning in terms that seem especially relevant to the threatened inversion of roles in *The Merchant of Venice:*

a riche woman. that marieth a poor man, seldome, or never, shake off the pride from hir shoulders. Yea *Menander* sayth, that suche a man hath gotten in steed of a wyfe, a husband, and she of him a wyfe. a straunge alteration, a wonderfull metamorphosis.

Nor is the allusion to metamorphosis in this case necessarily mere rhetoric: influential older literary traditions may have supplied an element of justification for taking such a fear seriously. Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* for example, contains the story of a young woman whose success in passing in disguise as a man is divinely rewarded with true and permanent masculinity [Ovid was a first-century AD. Roman poet. His *Metamorphoses* was a primary source for Greek and Roman myth and legend.]. The particulars of Portia's case-showing, as they do, her triumph over the masculine world, rather than the mere capacity to be assimilated by it-link her with yet another tradition that dealt with the possibility of the metamorphosis of female into male. Medieval authorities on science and medicine had expressed the opinion that a female's

vanquishing her mate could actually lead to somatic change of sex. Vestiges of those beliefs may still have been available to an Elizabethan consciousness, adding to a general underlying anxiety about the problem of reconciling Portia's past actions and accomplishments with her projected assumption of the feminine role of wife. It is within this context that the function of the ring episode in *The Merchant of Venice* becomes clear. Shakespeare, rather than ignoring that anxiety-provoking element or declaring a happy ending by fiat, creates a dramatic situation in which the imbalance of power between the sexes is exaggerated, and drawn to the audience's conscious attention. For the theme of the last dramatic business before the final harmony of the play is restored, he chooses the social act traditionally seen as women's ultimate weapon and ultimate assertion of power over men: cuckoldry. By making the threat of a breach in the sexual order explicit, and then by dispelling that threat, he eases a dangerous underlying tension in the play.

In order to examine the technique Shakespeare uses to allay anxiety that his competent woman will turn into a dominant wife, it is necessary to review briefly the literary tradition that deals with the domestic horrors that result when women fight their way out of their subordinate position in the marital hierarchy. Alice of Bath [in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales],* whose use of psychological warfare and physical violence in her struggles for "maistrie" suggests the standard policies of these wives, alleges that she intimidated her fourth husband merely with the suggestion that she was cuckolding him. Other shrews of her sect exhibit no such restraint. The fifteenth-century carol that contains in its refrain the first recorded use of the idiom "to wear the breeches" is part of a genre that celebrates the two principal ways a dominant wife signifies her power over her husband: by beating him, and by making him a cuckold. The literature of the period suggests that the three-domination, husband-beating, and cuckoldry-are intimately related, and that the practice of the one implies 1:h.e practice of the others.

The frightening prospects that are associated with cuckoldry-loss of one's manhood, one's chattels, and one's place in the familial hierarchy-are capable of arousing very deep-rooted, almost atavistic fears in men. The traditions that treat cuckoldry as comic provide a means by which these fears can be assuaged: the cuckold of the Tudor farce, for example, is made into a grotesque and pitiful figure, one whom an audience of men can reject with its laughter. This laughter at cuckoldry evolves into a social reflex, an automatic and unconscious exorcism of a particularly disturbing specter. Shakespeare, in his introduction of the theme of cuckoldry into *The Merchant of Venice,* is tapping an established source of both deep anxiety and ready laughter. The laughter, of course, is a boon to any comic author, but Shakespeare is able to make an even more significant use of the fear. Since the idea of cuckoldry is so intimately bound to the idea of feminine ascendancy, Shakespeare is able to adopt that anxiety-provoking image as a compact symbol of all the vicissitudes associated with female domination. By introducing the threat of cuckoldry and then eliminating it, he is able to exorcise the prospect of permanent female rule from this comedy of temporary female ascendancy. Shakespeare's demonstration that Portia will not become a dominant wife is worked out with almost mathematical logic. A mannish, aggressive shrew jr; a woman who makes her husband a cuckold; briefly, this is precisely what Portia pretends to have done. But when the cuckoldry is shown to be unreal, the other side of the equation loses its force

as well. Portia's game is shown to be *only* a game; the episode gives her, in effect, an opportunity to tell the audience explicitly that she would never really cuckold her husband. The rest of the triad follows: she will not beat him, and-more importantly-she will not dominate him.

In order to appreciate the serious side of the final comic clash between the wives and husbands, it is necessary to examine the way in which the emblematic force of the rings is put to use in the play. Portia's ring, in particular, is associated with two separate but constantly interacting issues, her independent power and her sexual identity. The shifting ownership of the ring reflects corresponding shifts in characters' control over these two factors.

The link between the ring and her autonomy is one that Portia herself makes explicit in the speech in which she acknowledges Bassanio as her husband:

Myself and what is mine to you and yours Is now converted. But now I was the lord of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now, This house. these servants, and this same myself
Are yours, my lord's. I give them with this
ring. . .
[III. if. 166-71]

She specifically makes the ring a token of her submission to her new husband. Above all, it symbolizes her agreement to submerge her identity in Bassanio's, in accordance with the principle that man and wife are one flesh. . . . Portia warns Bassanio that his loss of the ring will occasion her reproach, but in practice the penalty threatens to be far greater. The ring itself is seen almost as the embodiment of the right to control Portia's actions: to forfeit the one is to forfeit the other, and as the gift of jewelry is transferred, so is the gift of self. It is not necessary to turn to the works of the psychoanalytic commentators on *The Merchant of Venice* to document the association between Portia's and Nerissa's rings and their sexuality. The connection is one that can be established by reference to the bawdy quibble in the final couplet of the play itself. . . . [Any] man who possesses a married woman's ring controls her sexuality. When Bassanio breaks his vow to Portia that he will not part with the ring, it might of course be argued that in delivering the token to his "other self," he has no more broken faith than Portia has in sleeping with the doctor of laws. But ultimately, it is this rather paradoxical matter of variably fusing and separating identities that is at the center of the major statements that the play makes about the relationship between the *sexes.* In order to understand them it is necessary to explore somewhat more fully the role played by the epicene figure of the young lawyer Balthasar in the action of the comedy as a whole.

Unlike Shakespeare's other disguised heroines, who adopt boys' clothing chiefly as a measure of self-protection, Portia disguises herself as Balthasar for the express purpose of gaining an entree to the man's world. In this world she intends to perform a single, specific action; when the action is complete, one might assume, the masculine character that she has conjured up for the purpose would cease to exist. But Bassanio's

failure to keep his word disrupts this pattern. It seems almost as though Bassanio's rejection of the token that makes him one with Portia causes, in addition to the break with her, a secondary fission, enabling the figure of the lawyer to assume a shadowy life of his own. In returning his wife's ring, Bassanio is in effect surrendering the talisman that Portia's own words have invested with power over her and hers. But the Portia who stands in front of him is a double entity: the disguised woman whom the audience sees co-exists with the capable young man seen by Bassanio. It is to this two-sexed figure that Bassanio yields the token of Portia's independent power and physical love. One could predict the logical result of such a transfer even without *refer* ence to the remainder of the play: the woman whose autonomy had been restored would assert her independence, both personal and sexual: the masculine figure who had been given the woman's ring would emerge as a sexual rival to the husband. The events of the fifth act bear this predic tion out: Portia browbeats Bassanio, and the doctor oflaws "cuckolds" him. In a very abstract way, Portia's request of the ring from Bassanio represents a comic re-enactment of the casket trial, but this time it is a trial that Bassanio fails: he chooses saving face and preserving his masculine honor over keeping his vow to Portia. In this trial, as in the first. the penalty for failure is enforced celibacy. But where there it was faIry-tale, here it is farce: "By heaven, I will ne'er come in your bed / Until I see the ring!" (V. i. 19091]. Bassanio, sensing the impending storm offemale wrath, murmurs, "Why, I were best to cut my left hand off / And swear I lost the ring defending it" (V. i. 177-78). It is a marvelous aside, and it does much to humanize the elegant Bassanio. but it also savors somewhat of incipient cowardice in the face of henpecking. The meaning-charged rings in their possession, women are quick to press their advantage: the declaration of female independence, and independent female sexuality, is brought to a more and more higWy menacing pitch. From the promise of withholding their sexual favors, they move to threatening to cuckold their husbands:

Portia Now by mine honor which is yet
mine own
I'll have that doctor for my bedfel
low.
Nerissa And I his clerk.
[V. i. 232-34]

And from there they go on to present the cuckoldry as *afait accompli* [accomplished fact]:

Portia Pardon me, Bassanio.
For by this ring the doctor lay
with me.
Nerissa And pardon me. my gentle Gratiano.
For that same scrubbed boy. the
doctor's clerk,
In lieu of this last night did lie
with me.
[V. i. 258-62]

It is only for a moment that the men are allowed to taste the full farcical horror of their situation: the return to wifely duty that the new gift of the rings implies lags only an instant behind the actual redelivery. In that moment, however, as Portia and Nerissa lay down their high cards, they stand in absolute mastery of the situation, Bassanio is stunned into silence, but Gratiano yelps in indignation, "What, are we cuckolds e'er we have deserved it?" (V. i. 265]. The word is allowed to resonate with its full set of unpleasant connotations; the prospect of masculine subjugation and female ascendancy is set before the eyes of characters and audience alike.

If, as one critic suggests, bawdiness in Shakespeare is associated with anarchic and dissident impulses, Portia's sudden rejection of the topic in hand is illuminating. She meets Gratiano's outburst with curt propriety: "Speak not so grossly" (V. i. 266]. In the one short phrase she rejects both the bawdy language and the anarchic image of female rebellion that inspired it. her reassertion of womanly modesty signaling her return to unthreatening femininity. She suddenly reveals herself to be not a horn-giving shrew, but rather the embodiment of the Elizabethan ideal virtuous wife. . . . (pp. 147-53)

In summary, I would say that although *The Merchant of Venice* may be the best of Shakespeare's early comedies, it is nonetheless one with a central figure that an Elizabethan audience might have found faintly disturbing. Portia is strong and self-sufficient in both the feminine and masculine roles: she seems neither to need nor, perhaps, to be likely to submit to a husband's guidance. Traditionally, a wife who is stronger than her husband makes him a cuckold: no less traditionally, an outside male who is more clever or more powerful than a husband-again-makes him a cuckold. Portia of the double identity seems more than capable of fulfilling both roles. Unless she is determined to be loyal to the bond of marriage. Bassanio is doomed. The sharp focus on this potential cuckoldry gives Portia (and behind her, Shakespeare) a chance to demonstrate that the future the comedy points to is in no way threatened by Portia's superhuman and super feminine gifts. The ring episode at the end of *The Merchant of Venice* is indeed intro duced to provoke the audience's laughter, but a context is created in which this can be laughter at the mere thought that such an action as cuckoldry should be performed. Because the threat can be laughed away, it is no longer a threat. One can laugh at danger only from a position of security: laughter at the thought that order could be broken is a sure sign that order has been restored. Bassanio . . . finishes his story with the all-important ring back on his finger. . . . [He) and the audience have Portia's promise and Shakespeare's dramatic proof that that promise will be kept. (pp. 153-54)

Anne Parten. "Re-establishing Sexual Order: The Ring Episode in 'The Merchant of Venice : " *in* Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal, *Vol. 9. No. 2, 1982. pp. 145-55.*

Critical Essay #12

[Danson examines Antonio's character and discusses his melancholy. He notes that Shakespeare's audience probably would have attributed Antonio's sadness to his economic activities. The critic also compares the merchant's profession with Shylock's, observing that to Elizabethans, who were generally suspicious of mercantile fortunes, moneylender and merchant were "not entirely separate. " Antonio is a perfect Christian, the critic argues. in his charitable and unworldly nature, although his treatment of Shylock conforms to that of his fellow Christians rather than scripture. Danson also comments on the homosexual interpretation of Antonio's melancholy, noting that while this explanation may account for the character's verisimilitude. it is inconsistent with the structure and thematics of Shakespeare's play. For further commentary on Antonio's character, see the excerpts by Frank Kermode, E. F. C. Ludowyk, John W. Draper. Marvin Felheim, William Leigh Godshalk, Lawrence W. Hyman, Bernard Grebanier, and Walten D. Smith]

The opening dialogue of *The Merchant if Venice* takes us simultaneously inward and outward. In, to a psychologically troubled world ("In sooth 1 know not why I am so sad" [1.1. 1]), out, to a busy and dangerous world where great trading ships, "Like signiors and rich burghers on the flood." "do over peer the petty traffickers" [1.1. 10,12]. The two movements-the inward and psychological, the outward and public-are closely related: "Your mind is tossing on the ocean" [1.1. 8]. By his imagistic Joining or the world's ocean with the ocean of the mind, Salerio (whose explanation this is for the merchant Antonio's mysterious sadness) creates at least a provisional reconciliation of opposing principles. And this reconciliation is delicately premonitory of other achieved harmonies with which *The Merchant of Venice* abounds. (p. 19)

The play's opening lines pose something of a riddle. Antonio's sadness, wearisome though he claims it is to all involved, immediately offers an in vitation to begin searching for answers:

In sooth I know not why I am so sad, It wearies me you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it. found it, or came by
it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born, I am to learn:
And such a want-wit sadness makes of
me,
That I have much ado to know myself.
II. 1. 1-7]

What follows, however-the attempt by Salerio and Solanio to solve the apparent riddle-should warn us to proceed with caution. Salerio and Solanio have not fared well at the hands of critics: "the two bland little gentlemen," C. L. Barber calls them [in his *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy]:* and the first item in any bill of indictment ought to be their easy confidence that they can clear up the mystery of Antonio's sadness. (pp. 21-2) There is one further attempt within the scene to explain away Antonio's sadness:

Gratiano's "You have too much respect upon the world" [I. i. 74]. Or perhaps this is not so much a third explanation as a summary of the previous two: both the mercantile and the amorous explanations in effect accuse Antonio of having too much concern for the things of this world. They are the thoughts of "worldly choosers," The reproof sounds especially ironic coming from Gratiano, whose babbling levity, while it places him at an opposite extreme from Antonio, is not the sort of joyful noise unto the Lord commended by the Psalmist. Solanio, Salerio, and Gratiano, with their confident and curiously repetitive explanations for Antonio's sad state, begin to sound like Job's three comforters. Antonio. at any rate, rejects Gratiano's more comprehensive explanation as decisively as he has the previous ones:

I hold the world but as the world Gratiano, A stage, where every man must play a part. '
And mine a sad one.
[I. i. 77-9]

The terms of Antonio's response here are especially interesting. The idea that all the world's a stage was a poetic commonplace long before Shake speare began to realize its lively potential. And generally the effect of the trope is to open out flesh imaginative prospects. Here, however, the effect might seem to be the reverse: since Antonio *is* a character in a play, his world indeed merely a stage and his part a sad one, his self-conscious admission of a fictive status appears to rule out any more guessing about his melancholy's motives. His sadness, he seems to be saying, is merely a *donnee* [known fact], and there will be no use searching anywhere for its roots except, perhaps, in the literary and dramatic history of the convention of the Melancholy Man.

Or so it might seem. In fact this commonsensical, literary-historical approach-the sort of approach once used (for instance) by E. E. Stoll to explain away any ambiguities in Shylock's character [in his *Shakespeare Studies]-is* no more valid than the psychologizing guesswork indulged in by the play's own characters, Salerio, Solanio, and Gratiano. The world may be a s_e where every man must playa part, but the worla of *The Merchant of Venice* is a very special world, governed by laws (dramatic and judicial) as curious as, but not identical with, the laws that govern "the great globe itself" *[The Tempest,* IV. i. 153]. The way to understand the problems raised by Antonio's sadness is to understand the special laws that govern the conditions of dramatic life in *The Merchant of Venice,* and therefore to understand such thoroughly interdependent factors as the play's modes of characterization, the disposition of its fable, and what matters are relevant and what irrelevant to its interpretation.

Of the two explanations offered for Antonio's psychological state, the mercantile would no doubt have seemed to many in Shakespeare's audience an especially plausible one. (Modem audiences have been more attracted to the amorous explanation.) Living at a time when previously unimaginable fortunes were to be made, or suddenly lost, in overseas trade, the Elizabethan audience would easily understand how a man might be sorely weighed down by business worries; and when that man was a *Venetian* merchant-the most splendid embodiment of that boundless wealth available to one who would dare the hazards of such tradingthe audience might well be suspicious of his

disclaimers. How could such a man, to whom the wealth of the world indeed lay as perilously open as did the golden fleece to the venturesome Jason, *not* be made "sad to think upon his merchandise" [I. i. 40]? There were further reasons to be suspicious of Antonio. Elizabethan attitudes towards the idea of a "merchant of Venice" were complex, compounded in part of admiration, in part of jealousy, but also in part of moral disapproval. . . . A deep suspicion still attached to these merchants, Italian or English, whose fortunes were made less through the sweat of their brow than through the manipulation of money itself. The ambiguity sometimes felt to reside in Shakespeare's title is no mere undergraduate misunderstanding. The Venetian moneylender and the Venetian merchant were not entirely separate in the Elizabethan mind. (pp. 23-6) Our first glimpse of Antonio, however, may convince us that he, of all men, is least in danger from the moral precariousness of the mercantile life. We have not only Antonio's own disclaimers: more importantly we are quickly granted an extravagant demonstration of Antonio's unmerchantlike charity or love. (pp. 29-30)

Antonio has said that he counts the world as nothing more than it is, "A stage where everyman must playa part, / And mine a sad one" [I. i. 78-9] . . . ; but in his response to Bassanio's need we see Antonio's conception of his role more extensively displayed His use of the world, and all the things of the world, appears to be all unblameworthy; everything he has or can get (for he must borrow in order to meet Bassanio's needs) is at the service of his friend. And as the action of the play progresses, that original phrase, "My purse, my person, *my extremest means* /Lie all unlock'd to your occasions" [I. i 138-39J, gathers to itself deeper resonance. until the doomed Antonio's plight may bring to mind the words of Christ, "Greater loue then this hathe no man, when any man bestoweth his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Thus Shakespeare plays with his audience's expectations, giving them a merchant who is (apparently) so far from being guilty of a lack of charity that he comes perilously close to completing literally an *imitation Christi* [imitation of Christ]. But although a man of sorrow, Antonio is in fact no more a "Christ-figure" than is any man who acts with charity. And indeed in this first reversal of ordinary expectations Shakespeare has prepared the way for a further and more subtle reversal. In one extraordinary, vital instance. the imputation of uncharitableness will still come back upon Antonio, but in a way far different from what the comfortable audience would initially have expected. , . . Antonio's un-Christlike but quite merchantlike failure involves his fellow merchant, that insidious doppelganger, Shylock.

Antonio's self-righteously unrepentant answer to Shylock at their first appearance together, that "I am as like to call thee [dog] again, / To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too" [I. iii. 130-31]. is shocking to modem ears. No doubt it would have shocked some in Shakespeare's audience; others, familiar with a literature which treated Jews in such a way as to make Shakespeare's creation of Shylock seem remarkably forbearing, mU! h.t have applauded Antonio's openly expressea hatred. Shakespeare's own judgment on the matter is suggested at the start by Antonio's melancholy arid confirmed by the lesson of the trial, Critics who search along a naturalistic bias to find the reason for An tonio's sadness genera1lycondemnAntonio's treatment' of Shylock without seeing that the two facts-his sadness and his treatment of Shylockare intimately related. Antonio's

melancholy, I suggest, is his emotional response to a moral failure. Elizabethan ideas about the usury Shylock practices complicate the issue but do not alter the fundamental point: that the Christian is obliged equally to hate the sin but *not* the sinner. The purposeful ambiguity in the play's title, and the numerous felt similarities between Shylock and Antonio-each one, as the play opens, an oddman-out-help to make the point. The *maUcewith* which Antonio has, in the past and now, publicly reproved and humiliated Shylock, convicts him of being, in this instance. himself spiritually a "Jew.", . . In treating Shylock as he has done, Antonio violates-and has, apparently, repeatedly violated-one of the more difficult spiritual directives given in The Sermon on the Mount: 'hidre not, that ye be not judged" (Matt. 7:1). Later in the play, in Portia's curious courtroom-a place as much for moral instruction as for legal judgment-Antonio and the audience will have an opportunity to render another kind of judgment, one which rejects the flesh desired by the inner "Jew" and accepts instead the spiritual circumcision of the heart.

By the end of the fifth act, characters and audience have been granted intimations of that music of the heavenly spheres which is too fine for our crude mortal perception. The idea of musical harmony has by then become a dominant metaphor for the play's actions, and the attitudes of the characters to music has become an important means of knowing them. Jessica. a newcomer to the courtly Belmontese society, is uneasy about her own esthetic response: "I am never merry when I hear sweet music" (V. i. 69], she confesses to her Christian husband But Lorenzo, more native to the musical place, takes it upon himself to instruct Jessica: "The reason is your spirits are attentive" (V. i. 70]. Farfrom showing alack of responsiveness, the fact that Jessica is not "merry" when she hears the music shows that she has an appropriate listening attitude: she is prepared to "mark the music" [V. i 88], and to hear in it faint echoes of the spiritual music of divine harmony. Jessica's is a norm of appropriate attentiveness against which we can measure the attitudes of other characters-of Bassanio, for instance, who so carefully marks the music when it accompanies his choice of Portia's leaden casket.

At an opposite extreme is the capering Gratiano, whose delight in "mirth and laughter" [I. 1. 80J overflows into an ugly sort of joy at Shylock's defeat. And Shylock. 01 Course, is clearly identified as an untrustworthy man who "hath no music in himself. / Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds" (V. i. 83-4]. At the trial, Shylock, whose rigid adherence to a litera1law rules out the mollifying effects of music, and Gratiano, with his excessive levity, will produce between them a cacophony of lovelessness.

The musical metaphor tells us about Antonio, too. Antonio's melancholy shows that he is out of tune; that despite his spontaneous charity to his beloved Bassanio, his malice towards Shylock-his enemy but therefore, because of his malice. a spiritual kinsman-keeps him from being fully a part of the ideal harmony. But to Portia's challenge at the trial, "What mercy can you render him Antonio" [IV. i. 378], Antonio responds differently than either Gratiano or Shylock. In his response, which goes beyond love of a neighbor to reach as well the love of an enemy, Antonio shows himself to be at last in tune. In his melancholy, Antonio was incapable of fulfilling the Psalmist's injunction to "Singvnto the Lord anew song" (pg. 98): but when he extends his love beyond the circle that includes

Portia and Bassanio, reaching outwards with charity for Shylock as well, his gesture makes the "new song" of spiritual love. (pp. 30-4)

I want to consider the other explanation beside the mercantile one that has been advanced for Antonio's melancholy. For the opinion that Antonio is in love continues to be widely held, all his "fie, fies" notwithstanding. Not cranks, but some of the play's most eminent interpreters, both academic and theatrical, perceive a homoerotic disturbance as the basis of Antonio's sadness. (p. 34)

For instance, E. M. W. Tillyard writes [in his *Shakespeare's Early Comedies]* that "Antonio suffers from a self-abnegating passion that quenches the springs of vitality in him and makes him the self-chosen outcast from society. . . . Antonio now sees himself as useless. Before Bassanio left him for Portia. his life had some direction; now it has none." . . . [Of] even greater interest is the rhetoric of Tillyard's conclusion: "I do not think Antonio a study of homosexuality: *but* Shakespeare presented him as essentially a lonely figure, strikingly different from all the sociable folk he has to do with, except Shylock." The force of that "but" implies that Antonio's loneliness and his difference from "all the sociable folk" make him like a homosexual, even if he is not "a study in homosexuality." Thus Antonio's homosexual attachment is made to explain his sadness, and his sadness to prove his homosexuality. The logic (by no means uniquely Tillyard's) is as curious as the implication that loneliness and a striking difference from sociable folk are characteristic of homosexuals.

Now this explanation for Antonio's melancholy seems to me quite wrong: its implied consequences (as I will explain shortly) are not coherent with the play's overall shape and tone. And it is important to stress that this reason, rather than any *a priori* [presumptive] theoretical objection, is the basis for rejecting the psychosexual interpretation: for what is at issue here is not only Antonio's sexual preference, but the nature of Shakespearean characterization. The possible extremes are these; that Antonio, as Shakespeare created him, is merely a bundle of personified dramatic conventions melancholy, generous, unlucky: or (at another extreme) that he is a psychologically "realistic" character in whom it is proper to discover submerged psychosexual motivations. And the difficult fact-the very heart of this Shakespearean matter-is that Antonio is not wholly the one sort of character or the other, but a richly impure mixture (like the play itself) of both dramatic tendencies. We need to give due weight to all that is uniquely Elizabethan and "conventional" in Antonio's characterization-and that means, among other things, recognizing him as a figure capable of standing for abstract" ideas, of representing moral qualities. But the necessity to hold on to both sides of Shakespeare's characterizing variousness also makes it important to reaffirm-even in rejecting the idea that Antonio is primarily motivated by a sexual attachment to Bassanio-the character's actual degree of psychological "realism." (pp. 34-6)

The Merchant of Venice is a play in which harmonies are discovered where only discord had seemed possible, and its dominant figure (whether in details of imagery or in the implied shape of the fable as a whole) is the circle, ring, or round. The love of Antonio and Bassanio chimes in that harmonious round, as does the love ofBassanio and

Portia. But to suppose a competition between Antonio and Portia introduces a discord more intractable to resolution than that of Shylock, the unmusical man, himself. So it is not the realism nor the humanness, but the consequent introduction of this irreconcilable competition, that leads me to reject the psychosexual explanation for Antonio's sadness. (pp. 38-9) It is conceivable, I suppose, that one could have a homosexual Antonio without any consequent irreconcilability between Bassanio's two lovers. But then, of course, Antonio's sadness remains inexplicable. And in critical practice, a competition between Portia and Antonio seems the inevitable re sult of the assumption. According to one account, for instance, friendship is relegated "to a subordinate place" by the end of the play, and Antonio is taught that "there is room for friendship within the house oflove, but love holds the upper and controlling hand" [Anne Barton, in her introduction to *The Merchant of Venice* in *The Riverside Shakespeare,* edited by G. Blakemore Evans]. This shrewish love, however, conflicts with all that Portia says about the nature of her relationship to Bas sanio when he wins her in the casket test, when "her gentle spirit / Commits itself to [his] to be di rected, / As from her lord, her governor, her king" [III. ii. 163-65]. And it conflicts with the actual result of the ring episode, which is (in part) the reaf affirmation of Antonio's loving loyalty to both Bassanio and Portia:

I once did lend my body for his wealth, Which but for him that had your husband's ring Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound
again, My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord Will never more break faith advisedly.
IV. i. 249-53]

The love of Antonio and Bassanio (whether or not it dares to speak its name) is a textual fact: but a sexual competition between Antonio and Portia is not, and to invent one raises more problems of interpretation than it solves. (pp. 39-40)

Lawrence Danson, in his The Harmonies of "The *Merchant of Venice* ,"_ *Yale University Press,* 1978, *202 p.*

Adaptations

Merchant of Venice. University of Michigan, 1961.

Educational video and part of the "Plays of Shakespeare" series. 29 minutes.

Merchant of Venice: Act I, Scene III; Act IV, Scene I. Seabourne Enterprises Ltd., 1971.

Educational video which allows students to focus on the themes of the play. Distributed by Phoenix/BFA Films. 26 minutes.

The Merchant of Venice. BBC, Time Life TV, 1981.

Television adaptation of Shakespeare's drama and part of the series "The Shakespeare Plays.'" Features Warren Mitchell, Gemma Jones, and John Franklyn-Robbins. Distributed by TimeLife Video. 157 minutes.

Further Study

Literary Commentary

Barnet, Sylvan, ed. *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of "The Merchant of Venice"': A Collection of Critical Essays.* Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970, 122 p.

A collection of essays by prominent critics on various topics concerning *The Merchant of Venice.*

Bentson, Alice N. "Portia, the Law, and the Tripartite Structure of *'The Merchant of Venice'." Shakespeare Quarterly* 30, No.3 (Summer 1979): 367-85.

Argues that Portia is the central character of the play, considering her the drama's protector of law in both the civil sphere of Venice and the natural sphere of Belmont, rather than the embodiment of mercy.

Grebanier, Bernard. *The Truth about Shylock* New York: Random House, 1962, 369 p.

Reconstructs Elizabethan attitudes toward Jews and the practice of usury, determining how much this climate of opinion affected Shakespeare's writing of *The Merchant of Venice.* Grebanier also offers a critical analysis of the play, which he interprets as an allegorical dramatization of the triumph of love and mercy over justice and hate.

Hapgood, Robert. "Portia and *The Merchant of Venice:* The Gentle Bond." *Modem Language Quarterly* 28, No.1 (March 1967): 19-32.

Finds in Portia a "large-minded sense of law" which allows her to lessen the harsh effects of the social bonds of marriage, her father's will, and Venetian law by making "enlightened excep tions. "

Hill, R. F. *"The Merchant of Venice* and the Pattern of Romantic Comedy.", *Shakespeare Survey* 28 (1975): 75-87.

Contends that, unlike Shakespeare's other romantic comedies, *The Merchant of Venice* presents an uncomplicated, idealistic vision of love.

Holmer, Joan Ozark. "Loving Wisely and the Casket Test: Symbolic and Structural Unity in *The Merchant of Venice." Shakespeare Studies* XI (1978): 53-76.

Detailed examination of the manner in which the casket story foreshadows and reinforces themes prevalent throughout the play, especially those related to Shylock and his self-deception concerning wealth, worldly possessions, and the letter of the law.

Krapf, E. E. "Shylock and Antonio: A Psychoanalytic Study of Shakespeare and Anti-Semitism." *The Psychoanalytic Review* 42, No.2 (April 1955): 113-30.

Maintains that the central character in *The Merchant of Venice* is Shylock, not Antonio, and that Shakespeare consciously intended this figure to be nothing more than a comic villain. Krapf adds, however, that Shylock evokes our interest and sympathy because Shakespeare himself was uncertain about his feelings towards Jews.

Landa, M. J. *The Shylock Myth.* London: W. H. Allen & Co" 1942, 48 p.

Traces the historical background of Jews and usury in England and uncovers the origins of the bond story.

Murry, John Middleton. "The Significance of Shylock.'" *The Adelphi* 22, NO.1 (October-December 1945): 1-5.

Presents a view of Shylock as a noble and dignified character, whose actions attempt to address centuries of Christian persecution of the Jews. Murry also compares Shylock and Portia, finding them to be representatives of conflicting orders; Shylock, the old, and Portia, the new. This opposition occurs on many levels, including the social, the religious, and the economic.

Palmer, John. "Shylock.'" In his *Comic Characters of Shakespeare,* pp. 53-91. London: Macmillan and Co., 1946.

Explores the process by which the comic Shylock that Shakespeare intended becomes the tragic or noble Jew that many critics perceive.

Pettet, E. C. *"The Merchant of Venice* and the Problem of Usury.'" *Essays and Studies* 31 (1945): 19-33.

Brief examination of English usury and its influ ence on the plot of the play.

Scott, W. I. D. "Antonio-The Endogenous Depressive." In his *Shakespeare's Melancholies,* pp. 35-46. London: Mills & Boon Limited. 1962.

Maintains that Antonio's sadness is caused by his latent homosexual feelings towards Bassanio.

Shackford, John B. "The Bond of Kindness: Shylock's Humanity.'" *The University of Kansas City Review* 21, No.2 (Winter 1954): 85-91.

Analyzes Christian belief and practice as it is presented in the play and argues that Shylock's motive in the pound of flesh bond is vengeance.

Tillyard, E. M. W. "The Trial Scene in 'The *Merchant of Venice* '.'" *A Review of English Literature* 2, No.4 (October 1961): 51-9.

Examines Portia in Act IV, arguing that her role in the play is the reconciliation of mercy and justice.

Tovey. Barbara "The Golden Casket: An Interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice."* In *Shakespeare as a Political Thinker,* edited by John Alvis and Thomas G. West, pp. 215-38. Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1981.

Interprets the play symbolically, arguing that Shakespeare criticizes Christianity through his dramatization of Bassanio's relationship with Antonio.

Withington, Robert. "Shakespeare and Race Prejudice."_ In *Elizabethan Studies and Other Essays in Honor of George F. Reynolds,* edited by E. J. West, pp.

172-84. Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1945. Discusses whether Shakespeare presents a prejudiced depiction of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice.*

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Shakespeare for Students (SfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Shakespeare for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Shakespeare for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Shakespeare for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Shakespeare for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Shakespeare for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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