

All-too-Brief Scene-by-Scene Outline of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*
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I.i The Venetian shipping merchant Antonio is sad but does not know why—a circumstance that compounds his sadness. He dismisses Salarino's suggestion that the cause is business worries, and Solanio's that it is lovesickness. These two leave when Antonio's kinsman Bassanio arrives, along with the talkative Gratiano—who finds Antonio “marvellously chang'd” (I.i.76) and urges him to cheer up—and the quiet Lorenzo.

Gratiano and Lorenzo leave Antonio alone with Bassanio, for whom Antonio has been anxiously waiting in order to hear about a “lady . . . / To whom [Bassanio] swore a secret pilgrimage” (I.i.119f.). Bassanio describes a wealthy heiress, named Portia, whom he must urgently visit at her estate at Belmont (20 miles outside Venice; see III.iv.84) in order to compete for her hand in marriage and, at the same time, free himself from debt. He therefore needs yet another in a series of unrepaid loans from Antonio. Antonio is more than willing to fund Bassanio, as always, but says he has no liquid cash at the moment and tells Bassanio to help him find a moneylender who will lend him whatever sum Bassanio needs.

I.ii At Belmont, Portia laments to her maid Nerissa that she is weary of having to wait for a husband. Nerissa recounts how, to protect her from unworthy suitors, Portia's late “virtuous, and holy” father devised a “lot- / tery” involving “three chests of gold, / silver, and lead—whereof who chooses his meaning / chooses you”; the correct chest, she adds, “will no doubt never be chosen by any / rightly but one who [*sic*] you shall rightly love” (I.ii.26ff.). The two women evaluate the various unsatisfactory suitors who have shown up so far—each of whom, having learned of the lottery since arriving, now plans to leave (cf. II.ii.38-42, ix.7-9, III.i.1-3). Nerissa recalls Bassanio, “a Venetian, a scholar and a soldier, that came hither” “in your father's / time” and who “of all the men that ever my / foolish eyes looked upon, was the best deserving a fair / lady” (I.ii.107ff.). Another suitor arrives.

I.iii On the Rialto, Bassanio acquaints the moneylender Shylock with the amount Antonio wants to borrow (3000 ducats) and for how long (3 months). Shylock asks to speak with Antonio but declines Bassanio's invitation to dinner, since it would mean breaking Jewish dietary laws. As Antonio arrives, Shylock soliloquizes how he hates him and would like to “catch him once upon the hip” (I.iii.43; cf. III.ii.284-88), not only since Antonio as a Christian berates Shylock publicly for charging interest on loans, but also since “in low simplicity” he “lends out money gratis” and thereby depresses the going interest rate (I.iii.40-42). Shylock and Antonio debate whether the Bible permits interest-taking, by appealing to the biblical Jacob (I.iii.68-99). Shylock offers to win Antonio's friendship by lending to Antonio interest-free, with a pound of Antonio's flesh as collateral. Antonio instantly accepts Shylock's offer despite Bassanio's vehement objection.

II.i In Belmont, before deciding which chest to choose, the Prince of Morocco asks Portia to “Mislike me not for my complexion” (II.i.1; cf. I.ii.25, II.vii.79, III.i.27). Portia replies that she is “not solely led / By nice direction of a maiden's eyes” and that he himself “stood as fair / As any comer I have looked on yet” (II.i.13f., 20f.; cf., however, I.ii.34-100).

II.ii Shylock's servant Lancelot Gobbo debates with his conscience over whether to run away from his cruel master. Lancelot's blind father, having come to Venice to visit him, asks him directions and meanwhile fails to recognize him. Lancelot toys with his father before revealing who he is and that he wants to leave Shylock and serve Bassanio—who happens to pass by and soon informs Lancelot that Shylock has already arranged for him to do so. Gratiano arrives to ask Bassanio whether he can go to Belmont with him. Bassanio consents, if Gratiano promises to restrain his “wild behavior” (II.ii.175).

II.iii Jessica gives Lancelot a secret letter for Lorenzo, who will be at Bassanio's for dinner. Lancelot is sad to leave her. Jessica soliloquizes that she is ashamed to be her father's child and will become a Christian and elope with Lorenzo.

II.iv With Gratiano, Salarino and Solanio, Lorenzo plans to use the street masquerades that evening to camouflage his elopement with Jessica.

II.v Shylock, arriving home, informs Lancelot of his new master, tells Jessica that he is accepting Bassanio's invitation to dinner after all, and warns her to close up the house against the sights and sounds of the masquerades.

II.vi With Gratiano and Salarino's help, Lorenzo and Jessica elope; meanwhile Jessica despoils Shylock of considerable jewels and money. Afterwards Antonio, who has been looking for Gratiano, finds him and reports that the wind has shifted and Bassanio's ship is about to sail.

II.vii In Belmont, Morocco surveys the inscriptions on the three chests and chooses the gold one. Having chosen incorrectly, he must depart immediately (and keep his choice secret).

II.viii Salarino tells Solanio of Bassanio's setting sail with Gratiano on board—though not Lorenzo, whom, according to Solanio, the Duke's officers have been searching for pursuant to Shylock's vociferous complaint about Jessica's elopement. Salarino describes Antonio's sad parting from Bassanio: "his eye, being big with tears, / Turning his face, he put his hand behind him, / And with affection wondrous sensible / He wrung Bassanio's hand" (II.viii.46-49).

II.ix In Belmont, the Prince of Aragon surveys the inscriptions on the three chests and chooses the silver one. He too chooses incorrectly and must depart immediately. Bassanio's arrival is announced.

III.i Salarino reports to Solanio the rumor that one of Antonio's ships has foundered. Shylock accuses Salarino of complicity in his daughter's elopement. Salarino asks Shylock whether he has heard of Antonio's shipping loss. Shylock replies that he intends to collect the pound of flesh from Antonio: "If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. . . ." (III.i.49ff.) Tubal (Shylock's creditor; see I.iii.52-55) conveys reports of a second shipping loss of Antonio's, of Jessica's spending spree in Genoa, and of Antonio's impending bankruptcy. Shylock tells Tubal to arrange in advance for Antonio's arrest when he defaults on his note two weeks hence.

III.ii In Belmont, Portia asks Bassanio to "pause a day or two / Before you hazard" (III.ii.1f.), lest he choose incorrectly and Portia lose him. Bassanio replies that he "live[s] upon the rack" until he chooses, and must choose right away. With some indirect hints from Portia (e.g., III.ii.2, 57, 63f.), Bassanio considers and correctly chooses the lead chest. Portia gives him her wedding ring, "Which when you part from, lose, or give away, / Let it presage the ruin of your love / And be my vantage to exclaim on you" (III.ii.172-74; cf. IV.ii.419-452, V.i.179-259). Nerissa and Gratiano announce their engagement, which had been secretly predicated on Bassanio's successfully winning Portia.

Salarino arrives with Lorenzo and Jessica in tow—and a letter from Antonio informing Bassanio that "my ships have all / miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very / low, my bond to the Jew is forfeit" and "since in paying / it, it is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared be- / tween you and I [*sic*] if I might but see you at my death" (III.ii.315-19). Portia tells Bassanio to leave for Venice right away; Bassanio replies that he will not sleep till he returns.

III.iii Antonio, in custody, tries but fails to persuade Shylock to be lenient. He understands why Shylock seeks his life—he is bad for Shylock's business, since he has often saved Shylock's clients from forfeiture—and that if the Duke were to protect him by arbitrarily voiding Shylock's loan contract, then Venice's credibility as an international trading center would suffer.

III.iv In Belmont, Portia tells Lorenzo that, with Nerissa, she will fulfill "a secret vow / To live in prayer and contemplation" (III.iv.27f.) at a nearby monastery during Bassanio's absence; she leaves Lorenzo in charge of her household. Meanwhile she tells her trusted servant Balthasar to deliver a letter to her cousin Bellario, a law professor in nearby Padua, and return quickly to meet her coach at the ferry en route to Venice with clothing that Bellario will give him. She explains to Nerissa that they will masquerade as visiting judge and clerk at Antonio's trial.

III.v Lancelot and Jessica debate theologically whether Jessica is saved by having become a Christian. Lorenzo is comically ineffectual in ordering Lancelot to prepare dinner.

IV.i In court, the Duke suggests that Shylock's delay in showing Antonio mercy is merely theatrical, since unlike "stubborn Turks and Tartars never trained / To offices of tender courtesy," Shylock's Jewish upbringing makes him capable of "human gentleness and love" so as to let him forgive

not only Antonio's "forfeiture" but also "a moiety of the principal" (IV.i.32f., 24, 26). Shylock, however, insists on his legal right "to offend, himself being offended" (IV.i.58). Antonio asks the court to let him "have judgment, and the Jew his will" (IV.i.83). Bassanio offers to pay twice the principal, but Shylock refuses.

The Duke had sent for Bellario to determine the case, and Salarino announces "A messenger with letters from the doctor [i.e., 'teacher'] / New come from Padua" (IV.i.108f.). Gratiano says that Shylock, with his "wolvish, bloody, starved, and ravenous" desires, "almost mak'st me waver in my faith, / To hold opinion with Pythagoras / That souls of animals infuse themselves / Into the trunks of men" (IV.i.138, 130-33). Shylock replies that he "stand[s] for law" (IV.i.142; cf. 175f., 204f., 233ff., with 312 and context).

Portia (in judge's disguise) tells Shylock that his suit, while legally valid, is "Of a strange [*sic*] nature"; after confirming that Antonio "stand[s] within his danger," she infers: "Then must the Jew be merciful." (IV.i.175ff.; cf. IV.i.347ff.) When Shylock retorts, "On what compulsion must I?" she answers: "The quality of mercy is not strained. . . ." (IV.i.182ff.)

In response to Bassanio's plea to bend the law for Antonio's sake, Portia replies that "it cannot be," since "Twill be recorded for a precedent, / And many an error by the same example / Will rush into the state" (IV.i.218ff.). She finds that the bond allows Shylock "A pound of flesh, to be by him cut off / Nearest the merchant's heart," but asks him to "Be merciful. / Take thrice thy money. . . ." (IV.i.230-32) Shylock prefers to "stay here on my bond" (IV.i.240). Bassanio tells Antonio that he is "married to a wife / Which is as dear to me as life itself; / But . . . / I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all / Here to this devil, to deliver you"; Portia, overhearing, replies: "Your wife would give you little thanks for that / If she were by to hear you make the offer." (IV.i.280-88) Gratiano and Nerissa echo the preceding. Shylock comments: "These be the Christian husbands! . . ." (IV.i.289ff.)

Portia warns that Venetian law does not entitle Shylock to shed any "drop of Christian blood" (IV.i.308), the punishment for doing so being total expropriation. When Shylock then offers to drop his suit for three times his principal, Portia disallows it on the grounds that he has already refused that sum in open court. Ditto for "barely my principal" (IV.i.340). Nor is he free to go, since "If it be proved against an alien [*sic*] / That by direct or indirect attempts / He seek the life of any citizen, / The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive / Shall seize one half his goods; the other half / Comes to the privy coffers of the state; / And the offender's life lies on the mercy / Of the duke only. . ." (IV.i.347-54). The Duke immediately pardons Shylock's life and offers to reduce the state's half of Shylock's estate to a fine.

When Shylock laments, "Nay, take my life and all! . . .," Portia asks: "What mercy can you render him, Antonio?" (IV.i.371ff.) In reply, Antonio says that he is content to see the Duke reduce the state's claim on half of Shylock's estate to a fine, so long as Antonio can act as trustee for the other half, which at Shylock's death would be inherited by Shylock's son-in-law (Lorenzo); also, Shylock must become a Christian, and must bequeath all his remaining possessions at his death to Lorenzo and Jessica. The Duke endorses Antonio's stipulations in full. Shylock agrees to sign the court document, but asks to leave, since he is "not well" (IV.i.394).

Portia declines the Duke's dinner invitation; the Duke tells Antonio to "gratify this gentleman, / For in my mind you are much bound to him." (IV.i.404f.) When Bassanio offers to pay her the 3000 ducats intended for Shylock, she replies that she is already "well satisfied," that her "mind was never yet more mercenary," and that she "pray[s] you know me when we meet again." (IV.i.413ff.) After Bassanio insists that she "Take some remembrance of us as a tribute, / Not as a fee," she requests "your [Antonio's?] gloves" and Bassanio's ring (IV.i.420ff.). Bassanio withholds the ring and offers to find her the "dearest ring in Venice" instead; Portia comments that he is "liberal [*sic*] in offers": "You taught me first to beg, and now methinks / You teach me how a beggar should be answered." (IV.i.433ff.) Bassanio explains that he cannot part with his wedding ring; Portia replies in parting: "That scuse serves many men to save their gifts. / And if your wife be not a mad woman, / And know how well I have deserved this ring, / She would not hold out enmity for ever / For giving it to me." (IV.i.442-46)

After Portia leaves, Antonio urges Bassanio to “let him have the ring”: “Let his deservings, and my love withal / Be valued ’gainst your wife’s commandement [*sic*].” (IV.i.447-49) Bassanio sends Gratiano after Portia with the ring.

IV.ii Gratiano overtakes Portia and hands her Bassanio’s ring. Nerissa plans to get Gratiano’s ring.

V.i Outdoors in the moonlight at Belmont, Lorenzo and Jessica await Portia’s and Bassanio’s separate returns. They compare four tragic love-affairs that all took place on moonlit nights. Portia’s servant Stephano arrives to announce that Portia will return before daybreak. Lancelot reports a message that Bassanio will return before then as well.

Lorenzo decides that he and Jessica will wait for them outdoors; he asks Stephano to “bring your music forth into the air,” since “soft stillness and the night / Become the touches of sweet harmony” (V.i.53, 56f.)—which echo the inaudible harmony of the heavenly spheres. Jessica comments that she is “never merry when she hears sweet music” (V.i.69). Lorenzo replies that she is too spirited, and tells her to note how the “savage eyes” of untamed animals are “turned to a modest gaze / By the sweet power of music . . . / Since nought so stockish, hard, and full of rage / But music for a time doth change his nature. / The man that hath no music in himself / Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds, / Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils; / . . . / Let no such man be trusted.” (V.i.78ff.)

From a distance, Portia notes how far a small candle in her hallway, outshone by the sun during the day, throws its beams at night—like “a good deed in a naughty world”—and infers that “Nothing is good . . . without respect” (V.i.91, 99). Portia returns home, followed by Bassanio, who introduces her to Antonio as “the man . . . / To whom I am so infinitely bound” (V.i.134f.).

Gratiano and Nerissa quarrel over Gratiano’s missing ring (V.i.142ff.). Portia comments that Bassanio would not part with his ring, but Gratiano discloses that “My lord Bassanio gave his ring away / Unto the judge that begged it. . . .” (V.i.179f.) Portia swears to Bassanio that she “will ne’er come in your bed / Until I see the ring!” (V.i.190f.) When Bassanio replies, “Sweet Portia, / If you did know to whom I gave the ring, / . . . / You would abate the strength of your displeasure,” Portia exclaims: “If you had known the virtue of the ring, / . . . / You would not then have parted with the ring,” and “I will become as liberal [*sic*] as you; / I’ll not deny him [*sc.*, the ‘judge’ who saved Antonio] anything I have, / No, not my body nor my husband’s bed.” (V.i.192ff.) Antonio realizes that “I am th’ unhappy [*sic*] subject of these quarrels,” and offers to “be bound again, / My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord / Will never more break faith advisedly” (V.i.238, 251-53).

Portia then reveals her role in court and produces a letter disclosing that “three of [Antonio’s] argosies / Are richly come to harbor suddenly” (V.i.276-78). Nerissa produces a “deed of gift” from Shylock showing Lorenzo and Jessica as his heirs. Portia promises to answer all further questions later.

Gratiano asks Nerissa whether she wants to stay for Portia’s answers or “go to bed now, being two hours to day”; he adds, “. . . while I live I’ll fear no other thing / So sore as keeping safe Nerissa’s ring” (V.i.303, 306-307).