English Drama (Renaissance)

The Merchant of Venice
The Tragic Life of Dr. Faustus

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INTRODUCTION TO WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

William Shakespeare, or the "Bard" as people fondly call him, permeates almost all aspects of our society. He can be found in our classrooms, on our televisions, in our theatres, and in our cinemas. Speaking to us through his plays, Shakespeare comments on his life and culture, as well as our own. Actors still regularly perform his plays on the modern stage and screen. The 1990s, for example, saw the release of cinematic versions of *Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello, A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and many more of his works.

In addition to the popularity of Shakespeare's plays as he wrote them, other writers have modernized his works to attract new audiences. For example, *West Side Story* places *Romeo and Juliet* in New York City, and *A Thousand Acres* sets *King Lear* in Iowa corn country. Beyond adaptations and productions, his life and works have captured our cultural imagination. The twentieth century witnessed the production of a play about two minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and a fictional movie about Shakespeare's early life and poetic inspiration in *Shakespeare in Love*.

Despite his monumental presence in our culture, Shakespeare remains enigmatic. He does not tell us which plays he wrote alone, on which plays he collaborated with other playwrights, or which versions of his plays to read and perform. Furthermore, with only a handful of documents available about his life, he does not tell us much about Shakespeare the person, forcing critics and scholars to look to historical references to uncover the true-life great dramatist.

Anti-Stratfordians — modern scholars who question the authorship of Shakespeare's plays — have used this lack of information to argue that William Shakespeare either never existed or, if he did exist, did not write any of the plays we attribute to him. They believe that another historical figure, such as Francis Bacon or Queen Elizabeth I, used the name as a cover. Whether or not a man named William Shakespeare ever actually existed is ultimately secondary to the recognition that the group

of plays bound together by that name does exist and continues to educate, enlighten, and entertain us.

Family life

Though scholars are unsure of the exact date of Shakespeare's birth, records indicate that his parents — Mary and John Shakespeare — baptized him on April 26, 1564, in the small provincial town of Stratford-upon-Avon — so named because it sat on the banks of the Avon River. Because common practice was to baptize infants a few days after they were born, scholars generally recognize April 23, 1564, as Shakespeare's birthday. Coincidentally, April 23 is the day of St. George, the patron saint of England, as well as the day upon which Shakespeare would die 52 years later. William was the third of Mary and John's eight children and the first of four sons. The house in which scholars believe Shakespeare to have been born stands on Henley Street and, despite many modifications over the years, you can still visit it today.

Shakespeare's father

Prior to Shakespeare's birth, John Shakespeare lived in Snitterfield, where he married Mary Arden, the daughter of his landlord. After moving to Stratford in 1552, he worked as a glover, a moneylender, and a dealer in agricultural products such as wool and grain. He also pursued public office and achieved a variety of posts including bailiff, Stratford's highest elected position — equivalent to a small town's mayor. At the height of his career, sometime near 1576, he petitioned the Herald's Office for a coat of arms and, thus, the right to be a gentleman. But the rise from the middle class to the gentry did not come right away, and the costly petition expired without being granted.

About this time, John Shakespeare mysteriously fell into financial difficulty. He became involved in serious litigation, was assessed heavy fines, and even lost his seat on the town council. Some scholars suggest that this decline could have resulted from religious discrimination because the Shakespeare family may have supported Catholicism, the practice of which was illegal in England. However, other scholars point out that not all religious dissenters (both Catholics and radical Puritans) lost their posts

due to their religion. Whatever the cause of his decline, John did regain some prosperity toward the end of his life. In 1596, the Herald's Office granted the Shakespeare family a coat of arms at the petition of William, by now a successful playwright in London. And John, prior to his death in 1601, regained his seat on Stratford's town council.

Childhood and education

Our understanding of William Shakespeare's childhood in Stratford is primarily speculative because children do not often appear in the legal records from which many scholars attempt to reconstruct Shakespeare's life. Based on his father's local prominence, scholars speculate that Shakespeare most likely attended King's New School, a school that usually employed Oxford graduates and was generally well respected. Shakespeare would have started *petty school* — the rough equivalent to modern preschool — at the age of four or five. He would have learned to read on a *hornbook*, which was a sheet of parchment or paper on which the alphabet and the Lord's Prayer were written. This sheet was framed in wood and covered with a transparent piece of horn for durability. After two years in petty school, he would have transferred to grammar school, where his school day would have probably lasted from 6 or 7 o'clock in the morning (depending on the time of year) until 5 o'clock in the evening, with only a handful of holidays.

While in grammar school, Shakespeare would primarily have studied Latin, reciting and reading the works of classical Roman authors such as Plautus, Ovid, Seneca, and Horace. Traces of these authors' works can be seen in his dramatic texts. Toward his last years in grammar school, Shakespeare would have acquired some basic skills in Greek as well. Thus the remark made by Ben Jonson, Shakespeare's welleducated friend and contemporary playwright, that Shakespeare knew "small Latin and less Greek" is accurate. Jonson is not saying that when Shakespeare left grammar school he was only semi-literate; he merely indicates that Shakespeare did not attend University, where he would have gained more Latin and Greek instruction.

Wife and children

When Shakespeare became an adult, the historical records documenting his existence began to increase. In November 1582, at the age of 18, he married 26- year-old Anne Hathaway from the nearby village of Shottery. The disparity in their ages, coupled with the fact that they baptized their first daughter, Susanna, only six months later in May 1583, has caused a great deal of modern speculation about the nature of their relationship. However, sixteenth-century conceptions of marriage differed slightly from our modern notions. Though all marriages needed to be performed before a member of the clergy, many of Shakespeare's contemporaries believed that a couple could establish a relationship through a premarital contract by exchanging vows in front of witnesses. This contract removed the social stigma of pregnancy before marriage. (Shakespeare's plays contain instances of marriage prompted by pregnancy, and *Measure for Measure* includes this kind of premarital contract.) Two years later, in February 1585, Shakespeare baptized his twins Hamnet and Judith. Hamnet died at the age of 11, when Shakespeare was primarily living away from his family in London. For seven years after the twins' baptism, the records remain silent on Shakespeare. At some point, he traveled to London and became involved with the theatre, but he could have been anywhere between 21 and 28 years old when he did. Though some have suggested that he may have served as an assistant to a schoolmaster at a provincial school, it seems likely that he went to London to become an actor, gradually becoming a playwright and gaining attention.

The plays: On stage and in print

The next mention of Shakespeare comes in 1592 by a University wit named Robert Greene when Shakespeare apparently was already a rising actor and playwright for the London stage. Greene, no longer a successful playwright, tried to warn other University wits about Shakespeare. He wrote: *For there is an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his "Tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide" supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you, and, being an absolute Johannes Factotum, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country.*

This statement comes at a point in time when men without a university education, like Shakespeare, were starting to compete as dramatists with the University wits. As many critics have pointed out, Greene's statement recalls a line from *Henry VI, Part 3,* which reads, "O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide!" (I.4.137). Greene's remark does not indicate that Shakespeare was generally disliked. On the contrary, another University wit, Thomas Nashe wrote of the great theatrical success of *Henry VI,* and Henry Chettle, Greene's publisher, later printed a flattering apology to Shakespeare.

What Greene's statement does show us is that Shakespeare's reputation for poetry had reached enough of a prominence to provoke the envy of a failing competitor. In the following year, 1593, the government closed London's theatres due to an outbreak of the bubonic plague. Publication history suggests that during this closure, Shakespeare may have written his two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis,* published in 1593, and *The Rape of Lucrece,* published in 1594. These are the only two works that Shakespeare seems to have helped into print; each carries a dedication by Shakespeare to Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton.

Stage success

When the theatres reopened in 1594, Shakespeare joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men, an acting company. Though uncertain about the history of his early dramatic works, scholars believe that by this point he had written *The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Taming of the Shrew,* the *Henry VI* trilogy, and *Titus Andronicus.* During his early years in the theatre, Shakespeare primarily wrote history plays, with his romantic comedies emerging in the 1590s. Even at this early stage in his career, Shakespeare was a success.

In 1597, he was able to purchase New Place, one of the two largest houses in Stratford, and secure a coat of arms for his family.
In 1597, the lease expired on the Lord Chamberlain's playhouse, called The Theatre. Because the owner of The Theatre refused to renew the lease, the acting company was forced to perform at various playhouses until the 1599 opening of the now famous Globe Theatre, which was literally built with lumber from The Theatre. (The Globe, later destroyed by fire, has recently been reconstructed in

London and can be visited today.)

Recent scholars suggest that Shakespeare's great tragedy, *Julius Caesar,* may have been the first of Shakespeare's plays performed in the original playhouse. When this open-air theatre on the Thames River opened, financial papers list Shakespeare's name as one of the principal investors. Already an actor and a playwright, Shakespeare was now becoming a "Company Man." This new status allowed him to share in the profits of the theatre rather than merely getting paid for his plays, some of which publishers were beginning to release in quarto format.

Publications

A *quarto* was a small, inexpensive book typically used for leisure books such as plays; the term itself indicates that the printer folded the paper four times. The modern day equivalent of a quarto would be a paperback.

In contrast, the first collected works of Shakespeare were in *folio* format, which means that the printer folded each sheet only once. Scholars call the collected edition of Shakespeare's works the *First Folio.* A folio was a larger and more prestigious book than a quarto, and printers generally reserved the format for works such as the Bible.

No evidence exists that Shakespeare participated in the publication of any of his plays. Members of Shakespeare's acting company printed the First Folio seven years after Shakespeare's death. Generally, playwrights wrote their works to be performed on stage, and publishing them was a novel innovation at the time. Shakespeare probably would not have thought of them as books in the way we do. In fact, as a principal investor in the acting company (which purchased the play as well as the exclusive right to perform it), he may not have even thought of them as his own. He would probably have thought of his plays as belonging to the company.

For this reason, scholars have generally characterized most quartos printed before the Folio as "bad" by arguing that printers pirated the plays and published them illegally. How would a printer have received a pirated copy of a play? The theories range from someone stealing a copy to an actor (or actors) selling the play by relating it from memory to a

printer. Many times, major differences exist between a quarto version of the play and a folio version, causing uncertainty about which is Shakespeare's true creation. *Hamlet*, for example, is almost twice as long in the Folio as in quarto versions. Recently, scholars have come to realize the value of the different versions. The *Norton Shakespeare,* for example, includes all three versions of *King Lear* — the quarto, the folio, and the *conflated* version (the combination of the quarto and folio).

Prolific productions

The first decade of the 1600s witnessed the publication of additional quartos as well as the production of most of Shakespeare's great tragedies, with *Julius Caesar* appearing in 1599 and *Hamlet* in 1600–1601. After the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603, the Lord Chamberlain's Men became the King's Men under James I, Elizabeth's successor. Around the time of this transition in the English monarchy, the famous tragedy *Othello* (1603–1604) was most likely written and performed, followed closely by *King Lear* (1605–1606), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606), and *Macbeth* (1606) in the next two years.

Shakespeare's name also appears as a major investor in the 1609 acquisition of an indoor theatre known as the Blackfriars. This last period of Shakespeare's career, which includes plays that considered the acting conditions both at the Blackfriars and the open-air Globe Theatre, consists primarily of romances or tragicomedies such as *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. On June 29, 1613, during a performance of *All is True,* or *Henry VIII,* the thatching on top of the Globe Theatre caught fire and the playhouse burned to the ground. After this incident, the King's Men moved solely into the indoor Blackfriars Theatre.

Final days

During the last years of his career, Shakespeare collaborated on a couple of plays with contemporary dramatist John Fletcher, even possibly coming out of retirement — which scholars believe began sometime in 1613 — to work on *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613–1614). Three years later, Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616. Though the exact cause of death remains unknown, a vicar from Stratford in the midseventeenth- century wrote in his diary that Shakespeare,

perhaps celebrating the marriage of his daughter, Judith, contracted a fever during a night of revelry with fellow literary figures Ben Jonson and Michael Drayton. Regardless, Shakespeare may have felt his death was imminent in March of that year, because he altered his will. Interestingly, his will mentions no book or theatrical manuscripts, perhaps indicating the lack of value that he put on printed versions of his dramatic works and their status as company property.

Seven years after Shakespeare's death, John Heminge and Henry Condell, fellow members of the King's Men, published his collected works. In their preface, they claim that they are publishing the true versions of Shakespeare's plays partially as a response to the previous quarto printings of 18 of his plays, most of these with multiple printings. This Folio contains 36 plays to which scholars generally add *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. This volume of Shakespeare's plays began the process of constructing Shakespeare not only as England's national poet but also as a monumental figure whose plays would continue to captivate imaginations at the end of the millennium with no signs of stopping. Ben Jonson's prophetic line about Shakespeare in the First Folio — "He was not of an age, but for all time!" — certainly holds true.

INTRODUCTION TO THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

The Merchant of Venice is a controversial and difficult play, in which a modern reader must confront the darker side of Elizabethan culture. The play has been accused of racism, and many people have argued that, because of this, it should no longer be read in schools or performed in the theatre. The accusations of racism are powerful and often justified. Nonetheless, there is another side to *The Merchant of Venice*. It has been staged regularly for over three hundred years and contains a role that many of the most famous actors have longed to play. In addition, its racism has often been reversed in performance, and parts of the play have become viewed as an eloquent plea for human equality. Indeed, in some ways the play has been instrumental in changing people's perceptions of the Jewish community, and it therefore occupies a valuable place in world culture.

Synopsis

The play begins in Venice, a powerful city-state on the coast of what we now call Italy. In the opening scene, we learn the predicament of a young aristocrat named Bassanio. Bassanio has spent all of his inheritance and is now looking for a way to pay off his debts. He thinks he has found one. He has heard that in Belmont, there is a lady whose father has left her a vast fortune. Bassanio has visited her once, and is sure that she loves him. However, he cannot afford to travel to Belmont again.

Fortunately, Bassanio's best friend Antonio is a wealthy merchant and so devoted to Bassanio that he is happy to lend him the money that he requires. However, Antonio has no ready cash, because he is waiting for some ships to return. Therefore, he and Bassanio visit a moneylender. The moneylender is a Jew named Shylock. He and Antonio have a history of animosity, which revolves around their religious differences and their arguments over the morality of moneylending. Upon meeting, they fall into argument once more, whereupon Shylock devises a "merry bond." He suggests that if Antonio fails to repay the loan, he must be fined; but the fine will not be money. Instead, Shylock will be allowed to cut a pound of

flesh from Antonio's body. Antonio is confident that he will be able to repay the loan and signs the bond.

Meanwhile, we meet Portia, the lady in Belmont. She is besieged by suitors who want to marry her. But under the terms of her father's will, a man can only marry Portia if he passes a test first. There are three caskets in Portia's house: gold, silver, and lead. Each has a riddling statement attached to it. If a suitor chooses the correct casket, he will win Portia's hand in marriage. We see two suitors, the Princes of Morocco and Arragon, attempt the test and fail. Back in Venice, Bassanio prepares for his journey. He invites Shylock to his house for a meal. But the offer is, in fact, a diversion. Shylock has a daughter, Jessica, who loves Lorenzo, one of Bassanio's friends. While Shylock is visiting Bassanio, Lorenzo runs to Shylock's house and helps Jessica to escape.

She takes with her some of her father's money. The elopement is assisted by the fact that Shylock's servant, Launcelot, has decided to betray his master and work for Bassanio instead. When Shylock returns to his house he finds that both his daughter and his money have vanished. At the same time, Bassanio leaves for Belmont. Shylock tries to prevent him, but Lorenzo and Jessica have already escaped by another route. Left alone, Shylock asks another Jewish moneylender, Tubal, to find out where his daughter has gone. Tubal observes Jessica and Lorenzo on a spending spree in Genoa, where Jessica swaps Shylock's engagement ring for a monkey. Shylock is furious and thirsts for revenge. In Belmont, Bassanio arrives at Portia's house in splendid clothes. He attempts the casket test. Realizing that the riddles are describing the difference between appearance and reality, he chooses the lead casket, because it is the least impressive-looking. Bassanio is correct in his choice and wins Portia's hand; they are both delighted, and Bassanio becomes lord of Belmont. Simultaneously, Bassanio's friend Gratiano falls in love with Portia's waiting-woman, Nerissa.

However, this happiness is short-lived, as a messenger enters with bad news. In Venice, Antonio's ships have failed to arrive; every one of them has sunk. Shylock is delighted. He now has the opportunity to get his revenge on one of the Christians who caused his unhappiness. He takes Antonio to court, in order to collect his bond: the pound of flesh. Hearing the news, Bassanio and Gratiano rush to Venice with money given by Portia to repay the loan. Portia and Nerissa remain in Belmont,

saying that they will stay in a monastery and pray. But they are lying. In fact, Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves as male lawyers and follow Bassanio to Venice. There, Antonio and Shylock are in court. The court is trying to find a way of preventing Shylock from claiming his pound of flesh. But the law is on Shylock's side, because the bond has Antonio's signature on it.

Shylock refuses to accept Bassanio's money in payment. He wants revenge, not money. Portia arrives, disguised as a lawyer called Balthazar. She begs Shylock to exercise "mercy" (forgiveness), but he refuses. At the last minute, Portia discovers a loophole: The bond says nothing about blood, only flesh. Portia reasons that Shylock must perform the impossible task of cutting flesh without spilling blood. She also discovers that Venetian law demands the execution of any "alien" who threatens the death of a Christian. Shylock is defeated and is ordered to bequeath his money to Jessica and become a Christian. He leaves the court a broken man.

Still in disguise, Portia tests her husband. She asks him for his wedding ring as payment for her saving Antonio. With some misgivings, Bassanio agrees. Nerissa does the same to Gratiano. Then the men return to Belmont. There, Portia, free from her disguise, asks Bassanio where the ring is. He is forced to admit that he gave it to a lawyer. Portia pretends to be devastated, and, after making Bassanio repent, she reveals that, in fact, *she* was the lawyer. Having demonstrated their intellectual superiority, the women forgive their husbands, and the play ends.

Literary and Dramatic Analysis

The first question that *The Merchant of Venice* raises is, What kind of play is this? Is it a comedy, tragedy, tragi-comedy (a play that starts tragically but ends like a comedy), or what? Written in the mid-1590s, when Shakespeare's art was rapidly maturing, it shows the playwright experimenting with a variety of forms. He had just written the three plays of his "lyric period": a comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream;* a romantic tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet;* and a history play chronicling the rise and fall of King Richard II. Some aspects of *The Merchant of Venice* derive from all three of these plays: its beautiful lyric poetry, found, for example, in Lorenzo's monologues in act 5; the comic antics of the clown, Lancelot Gobbo; and the downfall of Shylock. For modern audiences, however, the play raises certain issues that have led some critics to regard this play as a "problem play"; that is, a drama that raises significant moral questions that it fails satisfactorily to resolve, as in Shylock's forced conversion at the end of act 4, scene 1.

Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* at a time when few Jews lived in England, from where they had been forcibly expelled in 1290 by Edward I. Nevertheless, the Jew remained a powerful image in English literature and drama throughout the succeeding ages (see Chapter 3). The trial and execution of Queen Elizabeths physician, Dr. Roderigo Lopez, in 1594; the revival of Marlowe's play, *The Jew of Malta;* and other events aroused renewed anti-Semitism in England and may have led Shakespeare to contemplate writing about a rich Jewish moneylender who, like Barabas in Marlowe's play, acts the role of a villain. But unlike Marlowe, Shakespeare endowed his villain Shylock with some very human qualities that evoke much sympathy. The result is an ambivalence toward Shylock that makes his role one of the most dramatically complex and compelling among all of Shakespeare's characters, and one that reinforces the sense of this work as a problem play.

Shylock, of course, is not the only important character in *The Merchant of Venice,* which takes its title from Antonio, the Venetian merchant who borrows from Shylock to help his friend, Bassanio.

Portia, the rich heiress whom Bassanio courts, is another major character, and the relationship between her and her suitors also raises important moral issues. Is Bassanio mainly after Portia's money, or is there a genuine love between the two? How does Bassanio's friendship with Antonio complicate his relationship with Portia? These are questions that the play raises and tries to resolve. To what extent they are resolved more or less successfully is something that literary and dramatic analysis must consider, as we shall do in the pages that follow.

SHAKESPEARE'S USE OF HIS SOURCES

Like his contemporaries, Shakespeare borrowed freely from previously known works for his plots, characters, and themes. He also invented new twists and turns in his narrative as well as new characters to give his plays fresh appeal, often providing a new perspective on events. Writers have always done this, avoiding charges of plagiarism by their inventiveness. For Elizabethans, the important thing was not the originality of the story, but the imaginativeness of its presentation—the way it was developed, the language used to tell it, and the new slant that emerged from the tale. Shakespeare could, if he wished, invent his own plots, as he did for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest,* but for most of his plays he seemed more interested in reusing old or familiar stories and themes to see what he could do with them. By comparing Shakespeare's play with his sources, then, we can glimpse something of his creative processes at work, noting how he altered certain details and added or omitted others, and then asking what the results of the differences are.

Shakespeare's main source for *The Merchant of Venice* was a sixteenth-century Italian novel, *// Pecorone (The Dunce)* by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino. In this story, Ansaldo, godfather to Gianetto, finances the young man's attempts to win the Lady of Belmonte, a rich widow who requires her suitors to consummate their love before she agrees to wed them, or lose everything they have brought with them. Twice Gianetto fails the test, because of a drink that has been drugged, until the third time, when one of the lady's waiting-women, taking pity on the young man, warns him not to

drink. Meanwhile, to subsidize this third voyage, Ansaldo has had to borrow funds from a Jewish moneylender and forfeit a pound of his flesh if the debt is not repaid on time. Enjoying his good fortune, Gianetto forgets all about the loan until it is too late, but then hurries back to Venice with more than enough money from his wife to repay the debt and save his godfather. The lady, in disguise as a lawyer, follows close behind. When the Jew refuses ten times the amount of the debt and insists on having his pound of flesh, the lady saves the day by requiring the Jew to take exactly one pound without a single drop of blood. Frustrated, the Jew tears up the bond and leaves without so much as the principal allowed to him. The young couple then return to Belmonte, where Ansaldo weds the waiting-woman who had aided Gianetto.

One immediately notices certain differences between Shakespeare's play and his main source. For example, while the moneylender is foiled in his plan to kill Antonio, he is not forced to convert to Christianity at the end; he is only deprived of the money he has lent. Another important difference is the test that Gianetto undergoes as compared with the three caskets in *The Merchant of Venice* from which Portia's suitors must choose. For this part of the plot, Shakespeare had recourse to a story in the *Gesta Romanorum,* where a young woman must choose the right casket before the king will approve the marriage to his son. Perhaps Shakespeare preferred to complicate the plot, introduce more characters, and suggest a significant moral element by having Portia's suitors tested with a choice of caskets. Through the casket plot the characters of Portia and Bassanio are also more fully developed than their counterparts in // *Pecorone.* But the ring plot, through which Portia tests the loyalty of Bassanio at the end of the trial scene, derives from // *Pecorone* and is used in the same way. Still disguised as a lawyer, Portia gets Bassanio to give her the ring she had given him earlier and he had promised never to relinquish.

Another difference that Shakespeare introduced involves the subplot of Lorenzo and Jessica. Here he probably drew on Marlowe's play, where Barabas's daughter, Abigail, falls in love with a Christian and wishes to marry him. Barabas foils their hopes, first by having Abigail's lover killed and then by killing his daughter, who has converted to Christianity and entered a nunnery. Shakespeare

did not follow these unfortunate details but turned instead to another Italian novel, Masuccio's fifteenth-century//*Novellino,* story 14, in which an old miser has a lovely young daughter whom he carefully sequesters at home. Nevertheless, she successfully elopes with a clever young nobleman, despite all the precautions her father has taken. After the couple are happily married and the bride becomes pregnant, a feast is held to which the old father is invited and becomes reconciled with his daughter and her husband. In this story, unlike Shakespeare's adaptation of it, no question of an interfaith marriage is raised.

Shakespeare resorted to some other sources for several details in his drama, but these are the main ones. Even from this very brief summary we can see how he reshaped them to fashion what is essentially a new and more complex rendering. The whole issue of conversion to Christianity is a new element in Shakespeare's representation, but equally important though in a different way are the dramatic construction, the characterizations, and the poetry of *The Merchant of Venice,* to which we must now turn.

POETIC AND DRAMATIC PATTERNS

Despite its controversial or problematic nature. *The Merchant of Venice* contains some of the most lyrical and lovely passages in all of Shakespeare. Many of these passages, like Portia's famous lines on the quality of mercy (4.1.181-99) or Lorenzo's on music and the beauty of the night (5.1.54-65), are worth committing to memory. These set speeches, as they are sometimes called, like the arias in a Verdi opera, delight audiences even as they help develop the dramatic action. But Shakespeare's prose is also important, and we sometimes forget that he was not only a consummate poet but an excellent prose writer as well. Shylock's defense of himself at 3.1.50-69 is one of the most spirited and vigorous pieces of prose ever constructed. Taken out of context, it is often used as a vindication of Shylock's humanity, but in context it works not only as that but as a criticism of Christian behavior. Like Portia on mercy, this is one of the most memorable speeches in the play.

Although Shakespeare at first followed his predecessors among Tudor dramatists in using a great deal of rhymed couplets, by the

time he wrote *The Merchant of Venice* blank verse had become the mainstay of poetic drama. It continued to be used throughout Elizabethan drama and during the reign of James I, gaining in strength and virtuosity while it ever more closely resembled the spoken language of men and women.

Blank Verse

Blank verse basically consists of ten-syllable, unrhymed lines with alternating stresses on the second, fourth, sixth, eighth, and tenth syllables. The stresses may vary—sometimes a good deal—for a number of reasons. For example, when the author wishes to bring emphasis to a word that might not otherwise be accented, or when he simply wishes to avoid falling into too regular a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, which can become monotonous. Occasionally, to signal the end of a scene as at 1.1.184-85, or a stretch of sententiae (proverbial wisdom), Shakespeare used rhymed couplets, often varying the meter at the same time, as at 2.7.65-73.

Songs also are important in Shakespeare's plays. *The Merchant of Venice* contains only one song, but it is a very important one. It appears in 32 as Bassanio approaches the caskets to make his choice. Critics have commented on how the first three lines all rhyme with "lead." They argue that this song seems to be a clue Portia gives Bassanio, directing him how to choose the right one, especially since no such song appears in the other casket scenes with the Prince of Morocco or the Prince of Aragon. Be that as it may—Bassanio does not seem to hear the song, and Portia's integrity would be seriously damaged if it is true—the song provides a pleasant interlude and preparation for the theme of Bassanio's speech, "So may the outward shows be least themselves" (3.2.73 ff.).

Image and Metaphor

As we might expect in a play about merchants, much of the language derives from commercial transactions, even when it may appear rather inappropriate, as when Portia addresses Bassanio

after he has chosen the leaden casket:
You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,
Such as I am. Though for myself alone
I would not be ambitious in my wish
To wish myself much better, yet for you
I would be trebled twenty times myself,
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich,
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 of something which, to term in gross,
Is an unlessoned girl. . . . (3.2.149-59)

Nerissa and Graziano's phrasing in the speeches that follow soon after, when they announce their wish to be married too, reemphasize the commercial aspect of the transaction. Nerissa comments that they have seen their wishes "prosper" (3.2.187), and Graziano speaks of the "bargain" of the faith that Portia and Bassanio have pledged to each other (32.193). Near the end of this part of the dialogue, when Graziano proposes a bet, "We'll play with them the first boy for a thousand ducats" (3.2.213), money once again becomes a pronounced consideration.

Since Shakespeare was writing for a largely literate audience and not merely for the masses that also populated his theater, he felt free also to use many classical allusions. Graziano combines both kinds of language when he greets Lorenzo and Jessica at 3.2.239: "We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece." Here he compares Bassanio and himself to the ancient argonaut Jason on his dangerous voyage to Colchis on the Black Sea in quest of the golden fleece, one of the most famous prizes in classical literature. The speeches of the Prince of Morocco in 2.1 are studded with classical allusions, although he gets some of them wrong, an indication of the way Shakespeare makes fun of his pretentiousness. For example, the prince confuses the story of Hercules and Lichas playing at dice with another story of Hercules thrown into a rage by the

shirt of Nessus. Shakespeare's audience would have picked up the allusions and understood how Morocco mixed them up.

Shakespeare's audience was also steeped in biblical lore. With the advent of the Bishops' Bible and the Geneva Bible and other English translations made available under Elizabeth I's Protestant rule, more and more English people read Scripture on their own, besides hearing it read to them in church every Sunday. Shakespeare could count on his audience therefore to grasp the allusions made directly, as in Shylock's account of Jacob and Laban in 1.3, or indirectly, as at 3.1.80-81 where Shylock alludes to the curse upon his people mentioned in Matthew 27.25 and Luke 13.34-35. Like metaphors, these allusions extend the frame of reference and thus help provide a broader context for the play than might at first seem apparent.

Although no single strand of imagery pervades *The Merchant of Venice* in the way that imagery of blood pervades *Macbeth* or imagery of disease pervades *Hamlet,* the frequent suggestion of music contributes significantly to the play's atmosphere, according to Caroline Spurgeon, who pioneered the study of image patterns in Shakespeare's plays. The two great moments of emotion and romance—Bassanio's casket scene and especially Lorenzo and Jessica's evening scene in 5.1—are dominated by music. Lorenzo summons musicians to play while he and his wife await Portia's return, commenting, "Soft stillness and the night/Become the touches of sweet harmony" (56-57). He is then moved to remark on the music of the spheres, the heavenly harmony that exists in "immortal souls" (60-65). But as the music begins to play, Jessica says she is never merry when she hears sweet music. She means that music puts her into a mood of contemplation, and in a long speech Lorenzo explains the reason for that, alluding to the poet Orpheus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* The point of those passages, in part, is to restore the play to the realm of romantic comedy, disturbed as it was by the events of the trial scene in the immediately preceding act. It also looks forward to what happens at the end of the scene: the reunions and reconciliations of the other two married couples and the good news that Portia delivers to Antonio, Lorenzo, and Jessica. As elsewhere in Shakespeare, music is the symbol of harmony. By contrast, in act 2, where a good deal of music and revelry is suggested, Shylock declares his antipathy to masques and music (2.5.28-36), one of many contrasts the play develops between Shylock and his antagonists.

Many poetical images appear throughout *The Merchant of Venice* consistent with the lyrical spirit that pervades much of the play. Salarino's pageant of argosies at 1.1.9-14 is one such example. Using an elaborate simile, he compares Antonio's state of mind to his sailing ships tossing on the ocean, an image he continues in his next speech. Jessica's comments on her embarrassed disguise as a boy as she prepares to elope with Lorenzo is delightfully witty, as she comments on the nature of love, invoking the image of blind Cupid, the little love god:

I am glad 'tis night, you do not look on me.
For I am much ashamed of my exchange.
But love is blind, and lovers cannot see
The pretty follies they themselves commit;
For if they could, Cupid himself would blush
To see me thus transformed to a boy. (2.6.34-39)

Antonio's description of himself as a "tainted wether of the flock" (4.1.113-15) is a rather different example. It shows how Antonio interprets his state of mind in the final scene before Portia enters; he then vises another image to reveal further the depth of his despondency.

Stage Conventions

Like his fellow dramatists, Shakespeare used a number of stage conventions, or artificial dramatic devices, to develop his plots. Perhaps the most difficult Elizabethan stage convention for modern audiences to grasp is what is called impenetrable disguise. When Portia appears as Dr. Balthazar in 4.1, neither her husband, Bassanio, nor anyone else recognizes her or Nerissa, disguised as her clerk. On stage their costumes, makeup, and voice intonations all help conceal their true identities, but even so, the audience, who have been apprised beforehand, easily recognizes who they are, though their husbands cannot. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when Oberon says he is invisible but remains in plain view of the audience, he is invisible to the characters on stage. This requires the same imaginative acceptance as other stage conventions, such as the aside and the soliloquy. When a character speaks an aside, for example, only the audience hears him or her, notwithstanding

that the speech is perfectly audible to everyone on stage. An example of such an aside is Shylock's speech as Antonio enters at 1.3.38-49. Lancelot Gobbo's monologue that opens 2.2 is an example of a soliloquy, a speech spoken to the audience that, like Hamlet's famous soliloquies, allows us to hear what a character is thinking and is similar to the voice-over technique used today in films and television dramas.

All conventions, like the overall illusion that dramatic representation involves, depend on an audience's acceptance of what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called a "willing suspension of disbelief." While a good deal of Shakespearean drama is realistic, not all of it is: ghosts appear, as *in Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth,* and gods descend from the heavens, as in *As You like It* and *Cymbeline.* At the end of *The Merchant of Venice* at least one unexplained miracle occurs, when Portia announces that three of Antonio's argosies have safely come to harbor, and Lorenzo alludes to another when he says that Portia drops manna in the way of starved people (5.1.294-95). The reality that Shakespeare appeals to more than any other is the reality of the imagination, which is more powerful than any other kind of reality.

Characterization

Discussion of reality prompts a discussion of the nature of dramatic character. To what extent are the characters in Shakespeare's plays, and specifically those in *The Merchant of Venice,* "real" people? Some critics argue that dramatic characters, like characters in a novel, are not real but convey only the illusion of people in real life. They lack any existence before the play begins as well as after it ends. As Prospero says in *The Tempest,* their "little lives are rounded with a sleep." The illusion, however, is sometimes so powerful that we cannot help thinking of dramatic characters as actual historical personages. While few people today would go so far as to describe the girlhood of Shakespeare's heroines, as one ninteenth-century critic, Mary Cowden Clarke, did in a book bearing that title, many modern critics do not hesitate to explore the psychological motivations that underlie a character's actions. Character motivation of course is important in any play or novel; without sufficient motivation a character's behavior will lack credibility.

This is where illusion and reality meet.

A discussion of *The Merchant of Venice,* therefore, inevitably involves character analysis, just as all of Shakespeare's plays do. Some analysis will continue to baffle us as it has done others. What, for instance, is the cause of Antonio's melancholy, announced in the play's opening line? Solanio and Salarino offer some explanations, but Antonio rejects all of them. We never do find out the reason, and Antonio himself remains baffled. At the end he seems relieved to know that his ships have all come in safely to harbor, but does that end his melancholy? And what caused it in the first place? Since the play does not provide the answers to these questions, we can only speculate on the reasons.

Bassanio's motivation in seeking out Portia is by no means simple, either. While he undoubtedly finds her attractive, as she does him, is love the main motivation for Bassanio's quest? Or does her wealth also have a lot to do with it? Can the two motives be separated, or are they inextricably intertwined? Probably the latter, as is the case with some other couples in Shakespeare's plays. (Shakespeare may be a romantic, but he is not a sentimentalist.) And what occasions Jessica's long silence at the end of the play? Her last words are, "I am never merry when 1 hear sweet music" (5.1.69). Lorenzo then reads her a lecture on the power of music to alter states of being in people as in animals. While his explanation may be convincing, is it altogether so? Or is something else bothering Jessica? In many recent productions, directors make a good deal of her apparent brooding on events (see Chapter 7), although in a comedy it is expected that she should be as joyous as the other couples who enter Portia's house.

Finally, what motivates Shylock to accept conversion to Christianity as a means of saving his life? For a Jew, the one biblical command that may not be broken is the command not to take any other God before Jehovah. Shylock clearly violates this command, as he has violated other commands in his faith. Have the Christians broken his spirit to such an extent that he no longer has any integrity left whatsoever? Or is he merely a craven moneylender after all? His behavior has sometimes been interpreted either way, for in this respect the play remains tantalizingly ambiguous. Again, is

Antonio's mercy really that, or is it a more sinister kind of revenge than even Shylock's demand for his pound of flesh was? Some critics favor the first explanation, arguing that Shakespeare's audience believed salvation could come only through Christianity. But others, especially in our post-Holocaust days, find the demand for Shylock's conversion not unlike the cruelty of the Spanish inquisition.

Multiple Plots and Subplots

Shakespeare borrowed not from one but several sources for *The Merchant of Venice,* fusing the casket plot, taken from the *Gesta Romanorum,* to the quest plot in Ser Giovanni's *Il Pecorone.* He did this not only to vary his narrative, but also to contrast different types of characters with the different types of caskets. Morocco, Aragon, and Bassanio all differ from each other, as they differ from the first group of suitors mentioned in act 1, scene 2. Shakespeare also inserted the subplot of Jessica and Lorenzo's elopement to show yet another kind of romantic courtship. At the same time, this subplot brings out aspects of Shylock's character that may make him more or less sympathetic. Much depends on how it is interpreted and portrayed, particularly on how we see Shylock's relationship with his daughter. She claims "Our house is hell" (2.3.2), but Jessica may simply be a discontented young woman bridling at her father's austerity. Shylock, however, may not be the kind of loving parent she wants and needs, a factor motivating her rebelliousness.

Juxtaposition in Elizabethan Drama

One of the basic techniques of Elizabethan drama, which was performed without intermission from start to finish (act intervals came later in the seventeenth century), was the juxtaposition of scenes, one against the other. In this way the action of the scenes could be seen to comment upon each other. For example, Antonio's melancholy opens the play and is followed in the next scene by Portia's world-weariness. Shakespeare evidently intends a comparison or contrast between the two important characters and expects us to notice how their problems are ultimately resolved—if they are.

Sometimes the juxtapositions occur within a scene. In act 3, scene 1, Solanio and Salarino begin by discussing Antonio's disasters at sea and then turn to Shylock's misfortunes as the latter enters. What does Antonio's ill luck have to do with Shylock's lament for the loss of his daughter? What makes Salarino, after taunting Shylock rather unmercifully, bring up Antonio's losses at sea? Are they merely idle gossipers, or do they have some sinister motive? The play offers no answer to this question, but note that it is precisely here that Shylock first says that he may foreclose on his bond with Antonio. Only a deeply disturbed individual could see in that action anything like an appropriate revenge for Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo. It smacks of the worst kind of spitefulness, however justified it might otherwise appear. Later on, in the trial scene Portia will juxtapose the advantages of mercy as opposed to justice and instruct all those present as well as Shylock on the quality of mercy. She delays resolving the difficulty Antonio is in until almost the last moment not only to heighten the suspense of the scene and intensify the dramatic events that follow, but also to give Shylock every opportunity to relent.

Finally, Shakespeare retains the ring plot from // *Pecorone* for his last two scenes, compounding it by having Nerissa also get her ring back from Graziano. Through the ring plot these wives teach their husbands a good lesson about marital loyalty, which in their view supersedes the loyalty between friends. For this reason, Portia gives the ring to Antonio to return to Bassanio, thereby symbolically indicating her supremacy over her male rival regarding Bassanio's devotion.

Thematic Development

Several themes have already been suggested in the foregoing analyses of language and character, such as the relation of mercy and justice, the nature of love, and the bonds that connect or tie one human being to another. Themes are the underlying ideas that help to unify the action of a play and develop its meaning. They can be identified in various ways by focusing on key words or images and their repetition throughout the play. Recurrent or contrasting actions by the characters may also suggest themes, just as analysis of the relationship between main plot and subplot often

does. Sometimes what seems to be merely a comic interlude may suggest a major theme, just as Lancelot Gobbo's scene with his father suggests the relationship between parent and child that is very much at the heart of *The Merchant of Venice.* Similarly, the dramatic structure of a play may suggest its organizing principle and thereby one of its major themes. For a play need not be limited to a single theme, but on the contrary may have several important themes worthy of analysis.

The major theme in *The Merchant of Venice* is the theme of bondage and bonding. The play deals with all kinds of ties: between father and child, between friend and friend, between master and servant, between creditor and debtor, and so forth. But perhaps the most important bond of all is the one that connects one human being with another, implicit in most of the other types of ties found in this play. The first line of the play also suggests another kind of bond—the way Antonio seems tied to melancholy, a melancholy he is at pains to understand but is unable to. His friends, Salarino and Solanio, try to help him sort out his feelings, but to no avail. Then other friends, Bassanio, Graziano, and Lorenzo, appear. It is not entirely clear what the relationships are between them and the other two friends, who leave the scene rather abruptly, but Antonio reassures Salarino and Solanio that, whatever coolness may have grown between the two groups, these two men are very dear to him. A comic interlude follows during which Graziano tries to cheer up Antonio, as Salarino and Solanio had tried earlier. His jocularity notwithstanding, Graziano delivers some acute observations, such as the way men occasionally try to secure a reputation for wisdom by appearing grave and silent. He then leaves with Lorenzo so that Bassanio may talk privately with Antonio.

The rest of the scene shows the strong bond that ties these two friends together. They are more than just friends; they are almost like father and son, reflecting the relationship between Gianetto and Ansaldo in Shakespeare's source, // *Pecorone.* But the relationship here is at a later stage, for Bassanio is already in debt to Antonio and is uneasy about once more asking his friend for funds, especially since they will be used to woo a lady for his wife. The potential conflict between friends and lovers (soon to become

spouses) is thus introduced, but throughout the play Antonio tries to act as generously as he can. He is even willing, when it comes down to it, to pledge his life so that Bassanio can have sufficient funds to make a good impression when he goes to Belmont to see Portia.

The next scene focuses on another kind of bond, the one that ties a daughter to her father's will. Although Portia at first bridles at this obligation (1.2.21-25), under Nerissa's tutelage she recognizes the virtue inherent in her father's requirement that whoever marries her must first choose the right casket. As Nerissa says, Portia's father was "ever virtuous," and at his death he was inspired to good purpose, sensing that whoever chooses the right casket will be the one Portia will "rightly love" (1.2.27-32). Later in the play, the bond between parent and child is developed in other ways: comically in the scene between Lancelot Gobbo and his father (2.2), and more seriously in the relationship between Shylock and Jessica, who not only deserts her father, but also her religion—another bond that is not as easily broken as Jessica may think. The third scene introduces several different but related kinds of bonds. The first is the commercial bond, the agreement between creditor and borrower for a certain sum of money. But the bond that ties enemies to each other is also present as well as the attempt to overcome a historic enmity and enter a new relationship. Shylock's attitudes are very peculiar. The contradictions and inconsistencies in his speeches are only part of his strange behavior.

On the one hand, he says he hates Antonio and resents his behavior toward him (1.3.38-49, 103-25); on the other hand, he would be friends with Antonio and have his love (1.3.133-38). To this end he is willing to offer a loan *at no interest.* For a moneylender this gesture is most unusual, and it takes Antonio by surprise. Despite Bassanio's reluctance to let his friend enter into the agreement, Antonio goes ahead with the "merry bond," which involves the forfeiture of a pound of his flesh if he defaults. He feels very confident that his ships will come in well before the due date and supply him with enough money to repay the debt easily (1.3.153-56, 178). Rightly or wrongly, he believes Shylock has had a change of heart; he remarks to Bassanio, "The Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind" (175).

Earlier in this scene, when Bassanio invites him to dinner, Shylock rejects the invitation, asserting allegiance to his religion (1.3.30-35). But in act 2 Shylock goes off to dine with Bassanio and his friends after all. His explicit motive, or what he says to Jessica, is "to feed upon /The prodigal Christian" (2.5.14-15). One can't help suspect, however, that he may still be trying to ingratiate himself further with Antonio, who will be there, too. Whatever the case—and these motives are not mutually exclusive—this is the first indication that Shylock's tie to his religion may not be as strong as it seems, regardless of his knowledge of the Hebrew bible, which he expounds in 1.3, or his membership in a synagogue (3.1.122-23).

Act 2 develops thematically many of the bonds already discussed and introduces others. Portia's suitors, for instance, are bound by the terms of their choice: if they pick the wrong casket, they must leave at once, tell no one about the choice, and remain unwed for life (2.910-15). During the scenes with the princes of Morocco and Arragon, Portia also shows the obligations of courtesy, and only after they leave does she reveal her true feelings toward them, which are just as unfavorable as those toward her earlier suitors (1.2.38-108, 2.7.79, 2.9.78-79). Lancelot Gobbo's monologue in 2.2 comically develops the motif of the bond between master and servant, which is further developed in Shylock's attitude toward him (2.5.45-50; cp. 1.3.172-73). These ties are not indissoluble; nevertheless, they require some searching of one's conscience to break them.

Act 3 dramatizes the breaking of some bonds and the forging of new ones. Word arrives that one of Antonio's ships has been lost. Meantime, Jessica has eloped with Lorenzo, and Shylock mourns his daughter and his ducats (2.8.12-22, 3.1.23-35, 75-91). When, after mocking Shylock's despair, Salarino mentions Antonio's ill fortune, he (more or less inadvertently) ignites Shylock's desire for revenge, which he justifies in his long speech identifying himself, as a Jew, with all humanity, including Christians (3.15 5-69). His claim that Christians have taught him to be vindictive may be arguable, but neither Salarino nor Solanio disputes the claim, interrupted though they are at this point by a messenger summoning them to Antonio's house. The scene concludes as Shylock, receiving

unwelcome news of Jessica's spendthrift ways from Tubal, pledges to exact his forfeit if Antonio defaults on his debt payment. While this is going on in Venice, at Belmont Portia and Bassanio enjoy an idyllic time together and have fallen in love. It is questionable whether Portia's clear preference for Bassanio leads her to assist him in making the right choice of caskets by having a song sung, whose first three lines rhyme with *lead* (3.2.63-65). She overtly insists that though she is tempted to aid Bassanio, she will not (3.2.10-12), and some critics take her at her word. Nevertheless, it is only here, in Bassanio's casket scene and not in the others, that any music is played. Has Portia thus violated her bond? Bassanio, of course, may be too engrossed in meditation while the song is sung, pondering the inscriptions on the caskets and making his decision. When at length he chooses the right casket, Portia is overjoyed, as everyone else is, and Graziano and Nerissa also announce their engagement. So the bonds of matrimony are forged, sealed by the rings that Portia and Nerissa give their husbands. Into this scene of festivity intrudes the news from Venice, that Antonio's ships have all been lost and he is forfeit to Shylock. Bassanio is stunned, but Portia leaps to his aid as a good, rich wife should, sending him immediately back to Venice with more than enough ducats to satisfy the debt Antonio owes. She only insists that they be married first, without taking any time to consummate the act. After Bassanio and Graziano leave, she turns her household over to Lorenzo and Jessica (3.4.24-40), who have come to Belmont with Salerio bearing the ill tidings, and she announces her plan to Nerissa to follow their husbands to Venice disguised as men (3.4.57-84). Violating the propriety of their sex by doing so, they are bound to a higher obligation—to help their loved ones where and as they can.

Act 3, scene 3 is a prelude to the trial scene (4.1), showing Shylock's adamant refusal to relinquish his hold on Antonio. He stands on Venetian justice, he claims, which cannot allow any divergence without risking its credit in the world. Antonio concedes as much (3.326-29), as later the duke does, too. A state is bound to observe and enforce its laws, as Shylock well knows. He thus appears to have the upper hand here and during the first part of 4.1. When Portia appears in disguise as a doctor of laws with Nerissa as her clerk, she recognizes the justice of Shylock's claim at first and

pleads with him to show mercy. But Shylock feels no compulsion to be merciful, whereupon Portia argues that the quality of mercy is not "strained," or forced (4.1.181-202). Men are not bound to be merciful; mercy issues from a generous and forgiving spirit. Her words fall on deaf ears, unfortunately, and Shylock proceeds with his claim to exact his forfeit.
Just as he is about to do so, despite the pleas from all concerned,

Bassanio choosing the casket; illustration by Gordon Browne in *The Works of Shakespeare,* ed. Henry Irving and Frank A. Marshall (1888), vol. 3. Portia interrupts him with another piece of Venetian law about which Shylock is unaware. The moment resembles that in Genesis, when Abraham, having bound his son Isaac as a sacrifice to the Lord, is interrupted by an angel and prevented from going through with his act of human sacrifice, which is so adverse to everything Judaism stands for (see Gen. 22.1-14). By her action, Portia not only saves Antonio's life, she also saves Shylock from violating his own humanity by performing an extremely cruel, not to say inhuman, deed. Only she does not stop there. Caught in a web of his own making, Shylock then tries to leave with the money Bassanio has offered him, but he is not allowed to receive so much as his principal. The law, which Shylock has insisted he is bound to, has yet another hold on him: as an alien in Venice (Jews were not allowed to be citizens), his life and all his possessions are forfeit to the state, insofar as he had designs against the life of a true Venetian citizen.

Here the duke's mercy is spontaneous, contrasting directly with Shylock's refusal earlier to show any mercy at all. Antonio's mercy is more considered and deliberate, and for modern audiences more problematical. First, Shylock must agree to bequeath all he possesses at his death to Lorenzo and Jessica; second, he must convert to Christianity. A careful reading of the play will show that however difficult Shylock finds these conditions, they are not impossible. For he has not been a truly religious Jew. He has not been deeply bound to his religion, for no Jew would insist on such diabolical vengeance as Shylock has done. That is why when he enters the duke's court (4.1.14), he enters alone. Neither Tubal nor any other member of the Jewish community in Venice accompanies him. (In the National Theatre's production in London in

1999, Tubal does enter but leaves when he sees Shylock determined to go through with his action against Antonio.) His forced conversion may repel us today, though it probably did not repel Shakespeare's audience, who may have seen this as Shylock's best chance for salvation. Nevertheless, Shylock's pain at the end, and his admission that he is ill, leaves many on stage and off feeling uncomfortable.

The last act is important for restoring the play to something more closely resembling romantic comedy. The main action involves the rings that Portia and Nerissa, in their disguises, have extracted from their husbands. Despite the men's promises never Graziano giving Portia the ring; illustration by Gordon Browne in *The Works of Shakespeare,* ed. Henry Irving and Frank A. Marshall (1888), vol. 3. to part with the rings, at Antonio's urging Bassanio yields and sends Graziano after Portia with his ring (4.1.445-50). We do not see how Nerissa gets the ring from Graziano, who shows her the way to Shylock's house to deliver his deed of gift to Lorenzo and Jessica, but it is she who first denounces her husband for having given the ring away (5.1.141-65). What follows is an object lesson to the husbands, teaching them to respect more completely the vows they make to their wives and, by implication, all of the bonds that unite them as husband and wife. By accepting Antonio's pledge of his soul to guarantee Bassanio's honor, Portia also establishes the priorities she feels are necessary for her future household.

CONCLUSION

Like any literary artifact, a Shakespearean play is a complex structure that uses a variety of techniques. Thematic and dramatic structures, including verse patterns, prose, imagery and metaphor, characters, theatrical conventions, multiple plots, and the juxtaposition of scenes—each contributes to the overall design and meaning of the play. Close reading and analysis of these patterns lead to a richer and fuller experience, bringing us ever closer to the heart of Shakespeare's work. In addition, analysis of Shakespeare's source materials and of the ways in which he adapts them to his own purposes also helps bring us closer. Because Shakespeare's works are as complex as they are. involving ambiguities that reflect the profound depths of human experience, analysis and

discussion may seem endless, but the deeper one probes, the more fruitful the results.

QUESTIONS FOR WRITTEN AND ORAL DISCUSSION

1. Discuss questions of genre that *The Merchant of Venice* raises. What elements of tragedy does it include? What are its comic aspects? Is Shylock a tragic victim or a comic villain, like Marlowe's Barabas?

2. The modern critic Northrop Frye says that in a well-constructed comedy not all of the moods are comic in the sense of festive. He also says that in comedy not all of the characters advance toward the new society of the final scene; a character or two remain isolated from this action like spectators of it. In *The Merchant of Venice* who fits this description? Is it important that such characters should be included in comedy, and if so, why?

3. Another critic, John Baxter, says that Shakespeare reveals "a complex awareness of life." What do you think he means by that? What are the identifiable components of this non-simplistic view of life in *The Merchant of Venice,* and how are they developed?

4. Analyze carefully as a piece of poetry Portia's speech on the quality of mercy (4.1.181-99). What are the principal poetic devices that she uses? How, for example, is mercy like a "gentle rain"? What biblical allusions does she employ, and how do they operate in her speech? Do the same thing for other set speeches in this play.

5. Analyze Shylock's prose speech at 3.1.50-69. How does his use of rhetorical questions work? What effect do his repetitions or parallelisms have? How powerful is the speech, and to what do you attribute its overall effectiveness?

6. Organize a debate about the song, "Tell me where is fancy bred" (32.63-72) as Bassanio decides which casket to choose. Have one side argue that Portia unfairly leads Bassanio to make the right choice, because she has fallen in love with him. Have the other side argue that the song is a harmless interlude used simply to vary the

casket-choosing episode; moreover, Portia has already explicitly said that she will not teach Bassanio how to choose (32.10-12) and that if he loves her, he will choose correctly (2.2.41).

7. What is Shylock's motive at 4.1.84-86 for rejecting the money offered him and insisting on the forfeit of the bond? When the moneylender is frustrated in his attempt to kill the merchant, why does Shakespeare continue the episode, bringing in additional penalties against Shylock, including the requirement that he convert to Christianity?

8. Find as many biblical allusions as you can in *The Merchant of Venice.* How does each one function in its context? Why, for example, does Shylock recount the story of Jacob and Laban to Antonio in 1.3? What effect does it have? Do the names of the Jewish characters—Jessica, Tubal, Chus (who is mentioned but does not appear), as well as Shylock—carry any special significance, given their biblical origins?

9. What is Graziano's dramatic function in *The Merchant of Venice?* He is Shakespeare's invention, not found in any of his sources. So is Nerissa. What does their relationship add to the development of the play, thematically as well as dramatically?

10. How do Venice and Belmont contrast with each other? In what sense is Belmont a pastoral retreat from the world, especially the world of business, lawsuits, politics, and the like?

11. Organize another debate on the issue of Christian anti-Semitism in the play. Is it adequate grounds for Shylock's revenge? Or does Shylock go too far? What about his conversion to Christianity? Is Antonio justified in making this a condition of Shylock's reprieve?

12. Write a sixth act to *The Merchant of Venice* in modern English about the married life of Portia and Bassanio, Nerissa and Graziano, Jessica and Lorenzo. How do you imagine they get on with each other? Where do Shylock and Antonio fit in, or do they? Do they become friends at last?

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Classical and Renaissance Concept of Male Friendship

From ancient times through the Renaissance, friendship between men was regarded as the highest form of social relationship, even surpassing that between man and woman in matrimony. In Plato's *Symposium,* for example, Socrates places male friendship higher on the scale of love than he does marriage between the sexes. Homosexual love did not have the stigma it later came to bear in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but Socrates did not consider that the purest or highest form of love. Stories of the devotion between male friends abound in classical literature and throughout later ages. In the Bible, the devotion between David and Jonathan became proverbial. The willingness of one friend to give his life for another was the true test of friendship.

In *The Merchant of Venice* the friendship between Antonio and Bassanio is tested in precisely this way. While some recent stage productions of the play treat it as a homosexual relationship, at least where Antonio is concerned, Shakespeare only barely suggests that this might be the basis of their friendship, especially when Solanio and Salarino discuss Antonio's parting from Bassanio as he leaves for Belmont (2.8.36-53). Portia seems to recognize the threat their relationship may pose for her marriage to Bassanio, and it may account for her use of the ring plot at the end of the play. Since she also recognizes the depth of her husband's love for his friend, she is willing to defer the consummation of their marriage until the problem of Antonio's forfeiture is resolved (3.2.241-324).

The biblical story of David and Jonathan appears in 1 Sam., beginning in chapters 18.1-15 and 19.1-10, continuing through chapters 20.1-43, 31.2-3, and ending with David's lament for Jonathan (2 Sam. 1.17-26). It concludes with the famous lines: "Woe is me for thee, my brother Jonathan. Very kind hast thou been unto me. Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. How are the mighty overthrown, and the weapons of war

destroyed." Another famous story portrayed the friendship of Damon and Pythias, which Elizabethan playwright Richard Edwards (1523-1566) made into a play that was performed before Queen Elizabeth by the Children of the Queen's Chapel, probably at Christmas, 1564. Damon and Pythias (ca. 1564) may also have been The story of Damon and Pythias as Edwards dramatizes it contrasts the devoted friendship of the two Greeks against the false friendship of two Sicilians, Aristippus, a philosopher, and Carisophus, a scheming parasite. When Damon and Phythias visit Syracuse in Sicily, accompanied by Damon's servant, Stephano, Damon makes the mistake of telling Carisophus that he wants to go around and see the city, whereupon Carisophus informs the tryannical ruler, Dionysius, that Damon is a spy. Dionysius arrests Damon and condemns him to death. When Damon asks permission to go home to set his affairs in order, Pythias offers himself as a hostage to guarantee his friend's return within three months. Dionysius agrees, but as the day set for Damon's return arrives, Damon does not appear. Pythias is prepared to sacrifice himself for his friend, when Damon appears, running to turn himself in. The two friends argue about who should die. Dionysius becomes so impressed with their devotion to each other that he experiences a moral conversion and frees both of them on condition that they accept him into their fellowship.

Early in the play, their servant Stephano describes the friendship between Damon and Pythias:
These two, since at school they fell acquainted,
In mutual friendship at no time have fainted,
But loved so kindly and friendly each other.

performed at Merton College, Oxford, early in 1568.

As though they were brothers by father and mother.
Pythagoras learning these two have embraced,
Which both are in virtue so narrowly laced
That all their whole doings do fall to this issue,
To have no respect but only to virtue:
All one in effect, all one in their going,
All one in their study, all one in their doing.
These gentlemen both, being of one condition,

Both alike of my service have all the fruition.
Pythias is joyful if Damon be pleased,
If Pythias be served, then Damon is eased.
Serve one, serve both: so near, who would win them?
I think they have but one heart between them. (ed. 1571; scene 5, lines 240-71)

The nature of friendship has inspired many discourses on the subject, from classical times to the present. One of the most famous and highly regarded in the Renaissance, often cited by others, was the Roman orator Cicero's *De Amicitia* (Of Friendship). It was translated by Elizabeth I's godson, Sir John Harington in 1550, but was already very influential. Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 B.C.), or Tully as he is also known, was the most famous orator of his time. He was also an important politician and statesman during the period of the Roman republic. He actively opposed Julius Caesar during the Roman civil war, but after it ended, Caesar forgave him and he lived as an honored Roman under the dictatorship. Cicero was not a member of the conspiracy against Caesar, which led to the dictators assassination, but he did not oppose it, although he and Marc Antony were bitter enemies. After Octavius Caesar conquered Rome, Antony persuaded him to have Cicero executed.

Written in the year 44 B.C., *De Amicitia* takes the form of a dialogue among Gaius Laelius, a renowned Stoic and elegant orator, and his two sons-in-law, Quintus Mucius Scaevola, a distinguished lawyer, and Gaius Fannius Strabo, a historian and tribune of the plebians. The time is 129 B.C., shortly after the death of Scipio Minor, who was Laeliuss best friend, and is the occasion of the discourse. The following excerpts include some of the principles of friendship that Cicero advocated and that Renaissance authors admired.

FROM CICERO, *DE AMICITIA* (44 B.C.)
(Trans. Sir John Harington, London. 1550)

They which behave themselves, and do so live that their faith, their honesty, their uprightness and liberality is allowed, and in them neither

covetousness, neither treachery, neither rashness is seen to be, and beside
this be of great constancy . . . all these like as they be taken for good men, so we think them worthy to be called, who follow nature, the best guide of well living, so far as mans power can lead them. For this methinketh
I do spy, that we are so born together as there should be among all men a certain fellowship. And the greater the fellowship should be, the nearer that everyone cometh to another. And therefore citizens be dearer to us than foreigners, and kinsfolk nearer than friendfolk. For toward these Nature herself hath bred a friendliness. But in this there is not surety enough, for in this point friendship passeth kindred, in that kindred may be without good will, but friendship can no wise lack it. For take away good will, and friendship loseth; but cousinage keepeth still his name.

But how great the virtue of friendship is, it may hereof best be understood,
that of innumerable companies of mankind, which nature herself hath knit together, it is a thing drawn and brought to such a strait, that friendship is always joined either between two, or else between few. For friendship is nothing else but a perfect agreement with good will and true love in all kind of good things and goodly. And I know not whether any better thing hath been given of God unto men, wisdom excepted, than this same friendship. Some set riches before, some health, others power, and others honor, many also pleasures. But certainly this last is for beasts, and those other uppermore be fading and uncertain, and be not so much within the compass of our wisdom as within the fickleness of fortune. But they which place our chiefest weal in virtue do therein very well; and yet, this same virtue it is which both engendereth and upholdeth friendship. Neither may friendship by any means be without virtue.
. . . What sweeter thing can there be than to have one with whom thou darest so boldly talk all matters, as with thine own self? How should the profit of welfare and prosperity be so great if you had not some which should rejoice so much thereat as yourself? But as for evil plight and adversity, it were hard to bear them without such a one as would bear the same more grievously than yourself. To conclude, all other things that are desired, each one to each man serveth the turn, as riches for use, wealth for worship, honor for praise, pleasure for delight, health to want

grief and to do the office of the body. Friendship containeth more things in it. Withersoever you turn, it is at hand. It will be kept out of no place; it is never unreasonable, nor ever troublous. Therefore, neither water, nor fire, nor air, as they say, do we in more places use than this friendship.

And now I d o not speak of the common or mean sort of friendship, which yet delighteth and profiteth, but of the true and perfect, as theirs was, which being few are soon told. For friendship maketh welfare the goodlier, and evilfare—by sundering and parting of griefs—the lighter. And where friendship hath in it many and great commodities, yet this exceedeth all the rest, that she forecomforts us with the good hope that is to come. She suffereth men's hearts neither to faint nor yet to fall, but he that beholdeth his friend doth, as it were, behold a certain pattern of himself. Wherefore in friendship the absent be present, the needy never lack, the sick think themselves whole, and—that which is hardest to be spoken—the dead never die. So great honor, remembrance, and desire breedeth in them toward their friends. By reason whereof their deaths be thought happy, and others' lives be much praised. But if you should take out of the world the knot of friendship, neither can there any house, neither any city be able to continue; no, not the tillage of the land can endure. And if this cannot be understood hereby, yet of strife and debate it may well be perceived, how great the power of concord and friendship is. For what house so steady, or what city stands so fast, but through hatred and strife it may be utterly overthrown? Whereupon, how much goodness resteth in friendship it may easily be judged.

Elizabethan Marriage

The position of women in Renaissance England was quite different from their position today. Women had few rights. For example, they could not attend university, they could not vote or be elected to political office, and they had very limited control over their own property. As children, they were utterly subjugated to their parents, especially their fathers. As wives, they were under the domination of their husbands, who had control of all their personal property. Women had little recourse to the law, which of course admitted no women as judges or attorneys. That is why Portia, capable and intelligent though she maybe, must assume the disguise of Dr. Balthasar in *The Merchant of Venice* when she appears in the trial scene. To enter a man's world, as she and Nerissa do in act 4, they must appear as men. At first, like Rosalind in *As You Like It,* they joke about it (3.4.60-80), but during the trial they behave generally very seriously indeed.

The ideal woman in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was one who, at least in men's minds, was submissive, meek, obedient to her lord and master, virtuous, soft-spoken or (better) silent, and modest in both dress and comportment. Were she otherwise, for example, if she dared to oppose her husband's will, she was subject to his discipline, which could involve a beating, or possibly worse. Petruchio's treatment of his shrewish wife, Katherine, in *The Taming of the Shrew* after they are married would not be considered extraordinary, and certainly not illegal.

Patriarchy was thus the order of the day. Men ran the family, the church, business and trade, the courts, and every other major social enterprise. Women, after all, were the weaker sex, weaker in every sense—intellectually, emotionally, and physically (compare Hamlet's phrase, "Frailty, thy name is woman," 1.2.146). It was only proper, therefore, that women should be subordinated to men. Women were relegated to housekeeping (again, under male supervision) and the breeding of children. The concept of patriarchy, moreover, derives from Scripture, where, according to Gen. 2.18, woman was created as "a help meet" for man. The patriarchs,

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, later ruled as head of the family and founded the lineage of the children of Israel. But patriarchal structures were and are not limited to the Judeo-Christian tradition. They exist in many other cultures, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Chinese and Japanese in Asia, and in many African cultures, where again women are regarded as less capable than men. Only recently have women fought for and won more rights than they ever had before, at least in the West, although the movement is gradually spreading throughout the rest of the world. In Shakespeare's England patriarchal control began at birth, where children were concerned. Fathers had complete charge of their offspring and could do with them what they wished. Parental consent was required for marriage. A father could bestow his child in marriage as he saw fit, and the child had little or no recourse, although his or her agreement was advisable, if not required, to forestall rebelliousness or unhappiness. In *Romeo and Juliet,* for example, Juliet's father, Old Capulet, advises her suitor Paris to win Juliet's heart first before he gives his consent to the marriage (1.2.14), but later he orders Juliet to marry Paris, regardless of her feelings (4.5.137-95). Elopements, available to both male and female children, provided one escape from parental tyranny, but they were rare and hazardous.

Unlike Romeo and Juliet, who were in any case of the wealthy aristocracy, young people in sixteenth-century England tended to marry late: the national average for women was between twenty two and twenty-five; for men, twenty-four to thirty. People married late because they needed to have the economic resources to maintain a family before marrying. The Fool in *King Lear* comments on the dangers of reckless, early marriage:

The codpiece that will house,
Before the head has any,
The head and he shall louse,
So beggars marry many. (3.2.25-28)

Overhasty marriages could and often did lead to poverty for impetuous couples.

The average age for women in the upper levels of society entering their first marriages was lower, however, than that of other

women. Hence, fathers took whatever precautions they could to insure that their daughters did not marry unwisely, that is, to a fortune hunter or other undesirable man. If the daughter was still unmarried at the time of her father's death, his will sometimes carried provisions to restrict her freedom of choice or run the risk disinheritance. The conditions in the will of Portia's father are extraordinary— for example, that her husband must choose the right casket—and probably not enforceable legally, but they are a dramatic device to show her father's care for his daughter, that is, his concern that she not choose her mate unwisely. Although Portia in 1.2 bridles against those conditions, she ultimately recognizes their significance and determines to abide by them, even after she finds Bassanio, the person she truly loves.

In Elizabethan England, church weddings were not required for a binding marriage, although of course the Church did its utmost to insist on its role in blessing all unions between men and women. Ecclesiastically as well as legally, all that was required for a marriage to be binding was for the couple to make their vows to each other before witnesses. Notwithstanding, in *The Merchant of Venice,* before sending Bassanio off to Venice to try to rescue Antonio, Portia demands that they first go to church and get married (32.301). Once a couple wed and the marriage was consummated, they were bound to each other forever. Divorce was difficult if not impossible, certainly among all but the aristocracy, and then only for the reason of adultery.

Intermarriage between faiths was severely frowned upon; in fact, it was forbidden, unless the non-Christian member of the couple converted. Preachers cited Scripture to this effect, both from the Old and the New Testament. In this respect, the marginal gloss—the annotations in the margin—found in the Geneva Bible beside Gen. 24.3-4 is instructive. There Abraham commands his eldest servant to get a wife for his son Isaac not from among the daughters of the Canaanites but from his own country. The annotation reads: "He would not that his son should marry out of the godly family." A further gloss on verse 37 says: "For the Canaanites were accursed and therefore the godly could not join with them in marriage."

For Christians, Jews fell into the category of the ungodly, or infidels (despite her conversion, Graziano still refers to Jessica as an "infidel" when she arrives at Belmont with Lorenzo, 3.2.216). But in the New Testament allowance was made for some intermarriages. In 1 Cor. 7.14, for example, Paul says: "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband." The Geneva Bible glosses: "Meaning, that the faith of the believer hath more power to sanctify marriage than the wickedness of the other to pollute it." Nevertheless, in 2 Cor. 6.14, Paul warns against intermarriage: "Be not unequally yoked with infidels; for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness?" Although Jessica believes she is "saved" by her husband, who has made her a Christian, Lancelot Gobbo continues to tease her unmercifully on her intermarriage with Lorenzo (3.5.1-23).

After marriage, a wife's possessions reverted to her husband's control, as Portia recognizes when Bassanio chooses the lead casket and thereby wins the right to make her his wife. Since she is in love with him, she does not demur; on the contrary, Portia says she wishes she were "A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich" for his benefit (3.2.154). "Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours / Is now converted," she says:

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. (3.2.167-71)

While this may sound strange to modern ears, indeed, offensive even to those who are not feminists, to an Elizabethan it did not. Morally as well as legally it was regarded as only right and proper, as many Christian preachers taught and sermonized. A treatise published in London in 1632 called *The Law's Resolution of Women's Rights: or, the Law's Provision for Women: A Methodical Collection of such Statutes and Customes, with the Cases, Opinions, Arguments and Points of Learning in the Law, as Do Properly Concern Women,* makes the point quite clearly in Book III, Section VIII: "That which the Husband hath is his own":

But the prerogative of the Husband is best discerned in his dominion over all eterne things in which the wife by combination divesteth herself of property in some sort and casteth it upon her governor, for her practice everywhere agree with the theorick of law, and forcing necessity submits women to the affection thereof. Whatsoever the husband had before the coverture either in goods or lands, it is absolutely his own, the wife hath therein no seisin [i.e., right of possession] at all.

The foundation for these views lay, again, in Scripture, in Adam's lordship over Eve and the later patriarchs' rule over their families. At the macro/micro level, as the king was the supreme head of the state, the husband was supreme head of the family. The Protestant Reformation did nothing to change this; instead, it repeatedly stressed wives' subordination to the husbands. It would be centuries before this arrangement changed, although in many practical affairs women in fact did exercise a good deal of control in their families and, when taken by their husbands into business, in commercial enterprises as well.

Review Questions

IDENTIFY THE QUOTATION

Identify the following quotations by answering these questions:
* Who is the speaker of the quote?
* What does it reveal about the speaker's character?
* What does it tell us about other characters within the play?
* Where does it occur within the play?
* What does it show us about the themes of the play?
* What significant imagery do you see in the quote, and how do these images relate to the overall imagery of the play?

1. The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree; such a hare is madness the youth to skip o'er the meshes of good counsel the cripple. But this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me a husband.

2. Who riseth from a feast
With that keen appetite that he sits down?
Where is the horse that doth untread again
His tedious measures with the unbated fire
That he did pace them first? All things that are
Are with more spirit chased than enjoyed.

3. So may the outward shows be least themselves;
The world is still deceived with ornament.

4. The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.

5. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?

6. My Lord Bassanio, let him have the ring.
Let his deservings and my love withal
Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment.

7. If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends; for when did friendship take
A breed of barren metal of his friend?

8. Why, all the boys in Venice follow him,
Crying, His stones, his daughter and his ducats.

9. Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turquoise. I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.

10. Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in we cannot hear it

TRUE/FALSE

1. T F Jessica steals money from Shylock.

2. T F Portia refuses to submit to the casket test.

3. T F Bassanio compares Portia to the Golden Fleece.

4. T F Shylock's wife once gave him a ring.

5. T F Antonio is Jewish.

6. T F Shylock wins the trial.

7. T F Gratiano marries Jessica.

8. T F Morocco chooses the golden casket.

9. T F There is a death's head in the silver casket.

10. T F According to the song, fancy is engendered in the eyes.

11. T F Portia takes on the name of Balthazar when she disguises herself.

12. T F Shylock is legally entitled to take a pound of flesh from Antonio.

13. T F Jessica and Lorenzo are left in charge of Portia's house when she leaves.

14. T F Old Gobbo is deaf.

15. T F Launcelot got a Moorish woman pregnant.

MULTIPLE CHOICE

1. Does Shylock

a. Borrow money from Bassanio
b. Lend money to Bassanio
c. Lend money to Antonio

2. Which of the following characters does *not* get married at the end of the play?

a. Portia
b. Gratiano
c. Antonio
d. Jessica

3. Which of these concepts does Portia describe as the most important principle in the courtroom scene?

a. Mercy
b. Justice
c. Money

4. Who designed the casket test?

a. Portia
b. Portia's father
c. Portia's mother

5. Where do Lorenzo and Jessica escape to?

a. Belmont, then back to Venice.
b. Genoa, then on to Belmont.
c. Belmont, then on to Genoa.

6. Launcelot is:

a. Shylock's servant who defects to Bassanio
b. Bassanio's servant who defects to Antonio
c. Antonio's servant who defects to Shylock

7. What is the 3,000 ducats?

a. The money Jessica steals from Shylock
b. The forfeit on Shylock's bond
c. The money Antonio and Bassanio borrow from Shylock

8. How does Tubal help Shylock?

a. He searches for Jessica
b. He lends him money
c. He tries to prevent Jessica from leaving

9. What is Bassanio's occupation described as in the text?

a. A merchant and a traveler
b. A soldier and a scholar
c. An idle lord

10. Which of the female characters disguise themselves as boys during the course of the play?

a. None of them
b. Portia and Nerissa
c. All of them

11. Antonio says "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad," to

a. Bassanio and Gratiano
b. Shylock and Jessica
c. Solanio and Salerio

12. Which character is the "fool"?

a. Launcelot
b. Antonio
c. Old Gobbo

13. What does Jessica swap her father's ring for?

a. A parakeet
b. A stoat
c. A monkey

14. "Balthazar" asks Bassanio for:

a. A loan
b. His ring
c. A monkey

15. What does Shylock bring with him to the courtroom?

a. A knife and scales
b. Leah's ring
c. 3,000 ducats

FILL IN THE BLANK

1. Launcelot Gobbo and Jessica both run away from _____.

2. Antonio loses all his money because _____.

3. Bassanio, Gratiano, and Jessica all give away a _____.

4. Shylock demands _____ as the penalty for nonpayment of his loan.

5. Lorenzo tells Jessica about the music of the _____.

6. The Prince of _____ boasts about his exploits in the wars.

7. Shylock leaves Jessica alone when he visits _____'s house for dinner.

8. _____ is made a prisoner when he becomes bankrupt.

9. The Prince of Arragon chooses the _____ casket.

10. Gratiano marries _____.

DISCUSSION
Use the following questions to generate discussion:

1. Despite accusations of racism, *The Merchant of Venice* continues to be performed across the world. Do you think this is right, or is the play unacceptable for a modern audience? Give reasons for your answer.

2. To what extent does Portia conform to conventional Renaissance ideas about how a woman should behave?

3. It has been suggested that *The Merchant of Venice* depicts characters exerting different types of control or "bondage" over each other. What examples can you find to support this claim? Do the characters escape from their "bondage"?

4. Is Bassanio an uncomplicated and somewhat bland romantic hero? Give reasons for your answer.

5. Do you read *The Merchant of Venice* as a vindication of Christian teaching? Discuss, with reference to Renaissance opinions, not modern ones.

6. In your opinion, which character in the play is the most obsessed with money? Consider the question carefully and give reasons for your answer.

7. Which does the play depict as more important: friendship or love? What do you think we are supposed to conclude about friendship and love at the end?

8. Do you think that Jessica is portrayed as an admirable character?

9. Some people find the character of Launcelot Gobbo annoying, unfunny, and irrelevant to the plot. How would you argue against this view?

10. There are three rings in the play, belonging to Bassanio, Gratiano, and Shylock. Comment on what happens to these rings, their importance to the plot, and their relevance to the issues discussed in the play.

Bibliography

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Date and source

The magnificent sailing ships of the sixteenth century are an unseen presence throughout *The Merchant of Venice*. 'Argosies with portly sail' dominate the opening dialogue, and in the last scene our sense of an ending is satisfied by the news that three of Antonio's ships 'are richly come to harbour'. So it is highly fitting that the clearest indication within the play of the date at which it was written should be an allusion to a real ship of the period.

In June 1596 an English expedition under the Earl of Essex made a surprise attack on Cadiz harbour. The first objective was four richly appointed and provisioned Spanish galleons ; worsted in the fight, these cut adrift and ran aground. Two of them, the San Matias and the San Andres, were captured before they could be fired, and were triumphantly taken into the English fleet as prize vessels.1 It is generally agreed that the San Andres, renamed the Andrew, is the ship alluded to as a byword for maritime wealth at line 27 of the play's first scene :

I should not see the sandy hourglass run
But I should think of shallows and of flats,
And see my wealthy Andrew docked in sand,
Vailing her high top lower than her ribs
To kiss her burial. (1.1.25-9)

The phrase ' my wealthy Andrew ' is small but significant evidence that *The Merchant of Venice* was written not earlier than the late summer of 1596.2

The latest possible date for the play is only two years after this. As the first step towards publication, its title was entered in the Stationers' Register on 22 July 1598. Some six weeks later, on 7 September, Francis Meres's *Palladis Tamia* was entered in the same Register; a compact account of the state of English literature, it lists six comedies by Shakespeare, of which *The Merchant of Venice* is the last. Between them, these entries make clear both that the play was in the repertory of Shakespeare's company, and that a manuscript of it had been sold for publication, by the late summer of 1598.

So the play could have been a new one in either the 1596—7 or the 1597-8 acting season. The 'wealthy Andrew' allusion does not clearly favour one date rather than the other, since, as John Russell Brown has shown, the Andrew was several times in the news and several times in danger of ' shallows and of flats ' between July 1596 and October 1597.3 The fact that she was 'docked in sand' at Cadiz and that she nearly ran aground subsequently in the Thames estuary would make an allusion apposite enough in 1596. She was, however, rather more likely to have become a household name in the next year, when, after weathering the terrible storms of August which disabled her sister galleon, she served as a troop carrier in the Islands voyage. On her return in the storm-ridden month of October, Essex was unwilling to let her sail past the Goodwin Sands where, Shakespeare's play reminds us, 'the carcases of many a tall ship lie buried '(3.1.4-5 ; compare 2.8.28-31). Essex had good cause to be apprehensive ; the weather was such that it scattered and damaged a whole Spanish armada. Men's minds were a good deal occupied with ' peril of waters, winds, and rocks ' in the autumn of 1597. And as the shareholders in the Islands voyage began to realise what a fiasco it had been, a play about failed maritime ventures would have taken on a sombre contemporaneity.

The strongest indication that the play originated in the theatrical season of 1597-8 comes, however, not from any internal allusion but from a proviso in the Stationers' Register that it should not be printed without the consent of the Lord Chamberlain - by which we may understand the agreement of Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. The most reasonable explanation of this safeguard is that the actors did not want the play to appear in print while it was still enjoying the success of a theatrical novelty.1 Even if we had no objective evidence such as this of the play's date, 1597 would strike most readers of *The Merchant of Venice* as about right. The play's skilful blending of several plots, its enterprising and emancipated heroine and its supple, pellucid style all serve to link it to the group of mature comedies, *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598), *As You Like It* (1599), and *Twelfth Night* (1601-2). It has a strong affinity also, despite the difference in genre, with the *King Henry IV* plays (1597 and 1598): we recognise in the first words of Shylock and Falstaff the same new-found and boldly grasped power to individualise a character dramatically through the sounds, rhythms, idioms and images of prose speech.

The same confidence shows itself in Shakespeare's handling of his main source. Like several other of his romantic comedies, the mood and atmosphere of which it presages, *The Merchant of Venice* is based on an Italian *novella* or short story; in this case the tale of Giannetto of Venice and the Lady of Belmont, which forms part of the collection called // *Pecorone* (' the big sheep ', or simpleton - the English equivalent would be ' the dumb ox ') written in the late fourteenth century by Ser Giovanni of Florence and published at Milan in 1558. No Elizabethan translation is known, but as several modern ones are available only a brief synopsis is attempted here.2

A rich merchant of Venice called Ansaldo adopts his orphaned godson Giannetto. When the young man wants to join in a trading expedition, Ansaldo provides him with a splendid ship and rich cargo. On the voyage out, Giannetto is diverted to the port of Belmont, whose Lady has let it be known that she will marry none but the man who is able to spend a successful night with her; those who fail this test must be prepared to lose all they possess. She for her part makes sure of her suitors' failure by giving them drugged wine. Giannetto falls for the trick and duly loses his ship to the Lady. He returns to Venice where he hides in shame; but Ansaldo seeks him out and, on being told the ship has been lost at sea, equips his godson for a second voyage. Everything, not surprisingly, happens exactly as it did the first time. To finance a third voyage, Ansaldo now has to borrow beyond his means, so he pledges a pound of his flesh to a Jew in return for a loan often thousand ducats. This time, a 'damsel' warns Giannetto not to drink the proffered wine, and he is able to win the Lady. He lives happily as the Lord of Belmont, and does not think about the bond until the day of reckoning comes round. Then he tells the Lady of Ansaldo's plight and she sends him off to Venice with a hundred thousand ducats. The Jew, however, is not to be deflected from his murderous intentions. The Lady herself now arrives in Venice, disguised as a lawyer, and having failed to persuade the Jew to accept ten times the sum lent, takes the case to the open court. There she tells the Jew that he is entitled to his forfeiture, but that if he takes more or less than the exact pound, or sheds a single drop of blood, his head will be struck off. Unable to recoup even the original loan, the Jew in rage tears up the bond. The grateful Giannetto offers payment to the lawyer, who asks instead for his ring, which he yields after much protestation of his

love and loyalty for the Lady who gave it him. In company with Ansaldo, Giannetto now returns to Belmont, where he gets a very cool reception. Only when the Lady has reduced him to tears by her reproaches does she tell him who the lawyer was. Finally Giannetto bestows the obliging 'damsel' on Ansaldo in marriage.

This synopsis highlights the differences as well as the similarities between Ser Giovanni's story and Shakespeare's play. Clearly the flesh-bond plot is virtually the same in both. So is the affair of the ring, though Shakespeare handles this with a lighter touch, omitting the sentimental reflections with which Giannetto relinquishes the keepsake, and doubling the entertainment of the ending by involving Gratiano and Nerissa in its contretemps. That Shakespeare read Ser Giovanni's story, either in the original or in a very faithful translation, is put beyond doubt in any close comparison of the two works. Shakespeare seizes upon all the vivid details of the Lady's intervention to save Ansaldo - her taking the bond and reading it, her conceding its validity so firmly that the Jew approaches the merchant with his razor bared, her dramatic last-minute halt to the proceedings. Generations of actors who have never read // *Pecorone* have instinctively felt it right for the thwarted Shylock to tear up his bond. One puzzling feature of the play, the discrepancy between Bassanio's long sea voyage to Belmont and Portia's headlong coach ride to the Venetian ferry, is cleared up in the Italian source: 'Take a horse at once, and go by land, for it is quicker than by sea.'1

Even more important than these details is the emotional cast of the tale. Much is made of Ansaldo's generosity and long-suffering, and of his readiness to risk his life for his godson, whose shiftiness forebodes the difficulties that faced Shakespeare when he sought to make Bassanio an attractive hero. Ansaldo's behaviour after Giannetto's first two mishaps is described in language which recalls the Prodigal Son's father, and these resonances may have given rise to Gratiano's image of the ' scarfed bark ' (all Giannetto's ships are gay with banners) setting forth ' like a younger or a prodigal ' but returning 'lean, rent, and beggared by the strumpet wind' (2.6.15-20). The Jew in the Italian tale is a less realised character than the merchant, but as in the play his obduracy has a clear religious and commercial motivation : ' he wished to commit this homicide in order to be able to say that he had put to death the greatest of the Christian merchants'.1 Finally, there are enough close verbal parallels to prove conclusively that Shakespeare knew and made use of Ser Giovanni's story.2

Not everything in the tale of Giannetto was to Shakespeare's purpose. He forestalled the absurd match of the merchant and the damsel by having Nerissa marry Gratiano in Act 3. More importantly, the ribald story of the bed test, which makes nonsense of all the talk of the Lady's generosity, is replaced by the highly moral tale of the three caskets, which has survived in a number of versions from the ninth century onwards.3 The medieval collection known as the *Gesta Romanorum* includes the story of a choice between vessels of gold, silver and lead which is made a test of marriageworthiness - though of a woman, not a man. In translation, this forms part of a selection from the *Gesta Romanorum* published in London in 1577 and, with revisions, in 1595. We can be reasonably sure this last was the edition used by Shakespeare, because in its translation of the casket story there occurs the unusual word ' insculpt ' which is also used by Morocco when he is making his choice of casket (2.7.57).4 Shakespeare handles the tale very freely, making the caskets the test for a whole series

of suitors; this was a common romance pattern, which needed no specific model.
So far we have been assuming that Shakespeare was the first to substitute the story of the caskets for Ser Giovanni's tale of the drugged wine. This assumption grows into a near certainty when, on subjecting the play to close scrutiny, we discover residual traces of the story that Shakespeare cut out. Among the loose ends is Bassanio's impecunious state at the beginning of the play, which leads the audience to suspect him of wooing Portia in an attempt to mend his fortunes ; in the *novella* it is the Lady herself who is responsible for Giannetto being penniless, as she has already seized the ships and cargoes from his first two ventures. Indeed Bassanio's argument that the best way to find a lost arrow is to send another after it, which is almost too much for Antonio's patience, would be nearly valid in the context of Giannetto's triple attempt. In Antonio's expression 'secret pilgrimage' (1.1.119) there is a vestige of the secrecy with which Giannetto hid his quest from his trading companions; and Bassanio's costly gifts are likewise a reminder of the high price Giannetto paid for his first two voyages. Perhaps too it was the recollection of the risk run by the Lady's suitors that caused Shakespeare to invent such hard conditions for those who woo Portia, and, in his adaptation of the *Gesta Romanorum* tale, to change the inscription on the leaden casket from ' Whoso chooseth me shall find that God hath disposed ' to ' Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath' (2.7.16).5
These traces of the story in its original form imply that Shakespeare made his own adaptation of the story direct from the *novella* and did not, as was long supposed, rework a play in which the flesh-bond plot and the casket plot had already been welded together. Lost source plays are, however, persistent ghosts in Shakespearean scholarship, and the one that haunts discussions of *The Merchant of Venice* has proved particularly hard to lay. It even has a name. The sometime actor Stephen Gosson, in his attack on the immorality of the stage which was published in 1579, exempted from his censure two plays which had been acted at the Red Bull. One of these, *The Jew,* he describes as representing ' the greediness of worldly choosers, and bloody minds of usurers'.1 This has been taken as proof that a play combining the casket story with that of the pound of flesh already existed in the 1570s, so that Shakespeare had only to re-write it for a new generation of playgoers twenty years later. But it is difficult to see how a play containing the casket story could be said never, in Gosson's phrase, to wound the eye with amorous gesture. Moreover the art of interweaving two or more stories in the manner of Italian intrigue comedy was still unknown to the English stage of the 1570s. Nor is there any need for Gosson's words to refer to a double plot : they can simply mean ' the greediness of those who choose the worldly way of life, such as bloody-minded usurers ' ; Morocco and Arragon, whatever their short-comings as suitors, hardly deserve to be called * worldly \ 2 In short, while a play about a Jewish moneylender existed some twenty years before Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*\ we have no proof whatever of the two plays being connected, whereas the text of Shakespeare's comedy offers ample evidence that he himself inserted the casket tale into the story of Giannetto.
The flesh-bond story has a long ancestry as a folk tale,3 and Shakespeare is likely to have known other versions beside Ser Giovanni's. The ballad of *Gernutus,* a very basic version which involves only the Jew, his merchant victim from whom he obtains the bond as 'a merry jest', and a judge who, at the moment the Jew is ready 'with

whetted blade in hand ' to claim his due, intervenes to tell him the pound of flesh must be exact and bloodless, is undated ; the phrases quoted are just as likely to have derived from Shakespeare's play as to have contributed to it.4 Another version could have been read by Shakespeare shortly before he wrote *The Merchant of Venice* : this is the English translation of Alexandre Silvayn's *The Orator* (1596), in which a brief narrative 'Of a Jew, who would for his debt have a pound of the flesh of a Christian ' is followed by the Jew's appeal against the ' just pound ' judgement, and the Christian's speech in reply. One of the Jew's arguments is that there are worse cruelties than exacting a pound of flesh - for example, keeping one's victim in 'an intolerable slavery'. Shakespeare perhaps picked up the idea and put it to better use in Shylock's 'You have among you many a purchased slave...' (4.1.90-8). Certainly the tone of Shylock's retorts at the trial is sometimes very close to that of Silvayn's Jew. ' A man may ask why I would not rather take silver of this man, than his flesh...' could well have prompted 'You'll ask me why I rather choose to have / A weight of carrion flesh than to receive / Three thousand ducats...' (4.1.40-2).*1*

The ballad of Gernutus and Silvayn's orations are more in the nature of passing influences than sources. A work which could have been of wider use to Shakespeare, in that it may have given him a lead-in to his elaboration of the flesh-bond plot by means of the duplication of lovers and the added story of Jessica's elopement, is a tale inset into the third book of Antony Munday's romance *Zelauto, or the Fountain of Fame* (1580). The dramatic liveliness of this tale has led to the suggestion that a play by Munday himself, based on an Italian original, lies behind it;2 not necessarily a complete play, since the reason Munday was described by Meres as ' our best plotter ' could be that he wrote play outlines, or *scenari,* which would have been sold to acting companies and worked up into full-dress dramas by their regular playwrights.3 The basic situation in the story is that Strabino loves Cornelia, the sister of his friend Rudolfo, who for his part falls in love with Brisana, the daughter of the rich old usurer whom Cornelia is in danger of being forced to marry. The two friends pledge their right eyes as a means of getting a large loan from the usurer, and buy a rich jewel by which they win the consent of Cornelia's father to her marrying Strabino. When the usurer, who has meanwhile agreed to Brisana marrying Rudolfo, discovers that he has been outbid as a suitor by his own money, he summons the young men before a judge and claims the forfeiture. Using the same religious argument as Portia, the judge urges him to show mercy. But he is deaf to entreaty : ' I crave justice to be uprightly used, and I crave no more, wherefore I will have it.'4 The friends call on their attorneys to speak for them, and Brisana and Cornelia, dressed in scholars' gowns, step forward. Brisana's arguments, which have to do with the failure to repay by a certain date, might be heard in any court ; it is Cornelia who clinches the matter by stipulating that the usurer, in taking his due, must spill no blood. Realising that he is not going to get his money back, the usurer capitulates, accepts Rudolfo as a son-in-law, and declares him his heir.

Any influence Munday's tale may have had is secondary to Shakespeare's use of Ser Giovanni's story; Portia's plea is here, but no merchant and no Jew. What is interesting in Munday's story, apart from its tone (to which we shall return), is its reduplication of lovers, by which the usurer is given a son-in-law to inherit his wealth and the heroine a companion to help bring the trial to a happy end. If Shakespeare

did, as is probable, encounter Munday's romance, these two characters underwent a second binary fission in his imagination, Rudolfo differentiating into Lorenzo and Gratiano, and Brisana into Jessica and Nerissa. In this way, the love interest was trebled. Furthermore, the addition to Shakespeare's play of the moneylender's daughter increased a strong theatrical influence to which we must now turn, that of Marlowe's Jew *of Malta.*

Until the allusion to the Andrew was identified, *The Merchant of Venice* was usually dated 1594. It was known that anti-Jewish feeling was rife in that year because of the trial and execution of Ruy Lopez, a Portuguese Jew by birth and physician to Queen Elizabeth, who was convicted of attempting to poison both the Queen and an eminent Spanish refugee called Antonio Pérez.*1* Marlowe's *Jem of Malta* enjoyed a revival during Lopez's trial, and it has been suggested that Shakespeare wrote his play about a Jew to emulate the success of Marlowe's piece. The fact that *The Merchant of Venice* is now generally dated two or three years later does not of itself dissociate the play from the Lopez affair. But Shylock, unlike Marlowe's Jew, bears very little resemblance to Lopez. He is neither a poisoner nor, before his final exit, a convert, and though the choice of the name Antonio could be a faint reverberation of the trial, it was a common Italian name which Shakespeare used for several more characters.2

But if Ruy Lopez did not linger in Shakespeare's memory, Marlowe's Barabas certainly did. Shylock has learnt from Barabas how to respond to Christian contempt : Barabas finds it politic to * Heave up my shoulders when they call me dog ' (*Jew of Malta* 2,3.24)3 and Shylock submits with a * patient shrug ' to being called ' misbeliever, cut-throat dog' (1.3.101, 103). In both, this obsequiousness masks a fierce racial pride: Shylock recalls (1.3.81) the prosperity of Jacob with as much satisfaction as Barabas does the 'blessings promised to the Jews' *{Jew of Malta* 1.1.103). Like Barabas, he believes that without the divine seal of material prosperity, life is not worth living. To those who take away his wealth Barabas cries:

Why, I esteem the injury far less,
To take the lives of miserable men,
Than be the causers of their misery ;
You have my wealth, the labor of my life,
The comfort of mine age, my children's hope ;
And therefore ne'er distinguish of the wrong *(Jew of Malta* 1.2.146-51)

- a passion heard again from Shylock :

Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that:
You take my house when you do take the prop
That doth sustain my house; you take my life
When you do take the means whereby I live. (4.1.370-3)

Despite such echoes of *The Jew of Malta, The Merchant of Venice* is a different kind of play and the product of a different kind of imagination. Marlowe's powerful and grotesque tragedy was so vivid in the memories of Shakespeare's audience that it must have presented itself to him as a challenge rather than a source. When he seems most dependent on it, closer examination often reveals that he is holding it at bay : that is, in the manner of painters - Francis Bacon, for example, ' quoting ' Velazquez - he recalls the older work in order to show how far from it his own concerns lie. Marlowe's opening scene exuberantly celebrates the Jew's wealth of gold and silks and spices,

in preparation for the portrayal of a world of materialist relationships. In Shakespeare's first scene, argosies with their cargoes of silk and spices are powerfully evoked, but they are made to appear an irrelevance to the world of feeling revealed in Antonio's sadness and his affection for Bassanio; they are the means by which Antonio may serve Bassanio's ends, whereas Barabas's wealth is an end in itself. This fruitful and creative resistance to Marlowe's play is most evident in the contrast between Jessica and Barabas's daughter Abigail. The scene in which the runaway Jessica throws down a casket of her father's jewels to her waiting lover deliberately recalls the night scene in *The Jew of Malta* in which the loyal Abigail extracts the sequestered treasure from her father's house and throws it down to him. Profound differences of character, tone, and circumstance in the two episodes are to make Shylock's ' My daughter ! O my ducats! O my daughter!' (2.8.15) as ironic an echo of Barabas's triumphant 'O girl, O gold, O beauty, O my bliss!' *{Jew of Malta* 2.1.54) a s *s Marlowe's own use of the happy Ovidian lover's *Lente, lente, currite noctis equi* at the dire climax of *Doctor Faustus. The Jew of Malta* is not, in the conventional sense, a source of *The Merchant of Venice.* It is a persistent presence, which Shakespeare manipulates with confident skill.1