Literary Analysis of The Merchant of Venice

Setting: The Merchant of Venice is set in Italy in the sixteenth century, mainly in Venice. At that time, Venice was an independent city-state. In Shakespeare's era, setting plays, especially comedies, in Italy was a popular practice, and Shakespeare used Italian settings for many of his works.

Characters:

**Antonio** A wealthy Venetian merchant who occasionally lends money, but never charges interest. Since his main source of income is from his merchant ships, he is the "merchant" of the play's title.

**Bassanio** He is a typical Elizabethan lover and nobleman who is careless with his money; hence, he has to borrow from Antonio so that he can woo Portia in style.

**Portia** As one of Shakespeare's most intelligent and witty heroines, she is famous for her beauty and for her wealth, and she is deeply anguished that she must marry only the man who chooses the single casket of three which contains her portrait.

**Shylock** Shylock is an intelligent businessman who believes that, since he is a moneylender, charging interest is his right; to him, it makes good business sense.

**The Duke of Venice** He presides as judge over the court proceedings in Shylock's claim on Antonio.

**The Prince of Morocco** One of Portia's suitors; he loses the opportunity to marry her when he chooses the golden casket.

**The Prince of Arragon** He chooses the silver casket; he is another disappointed suitor for Portia's hand in marriage.

**Gratiano** He is the light-hearted, talkative friend of Bassanio, who accompanies him to Belmont; there, he falls in love with Portia's confidante, Nerissa.

**Lorenzo** He is a friend of Antonio and Bassanio; he woos and wins the love of Shylock's daughter, Jessica.

**Jessica** She is the young daughter of Shylock; she falls in love with Lorenzo and, disguised as a boy, she elopes with him.

**Nerissa** Portia's merry and sympathetic lady-in-waiting.

**Salarino** He is a friend who believes that Antonio is sad because he is worried about his ships at sea.

**Salanio** He is another friend of Antonio; he thinks Antonio's melancholy may be caused because Antonio is in love.

**Salerio** A messenger from Venice.

**Launcelot Gobbo** He is a "clown," a jester, the young servant of Shylock; he is about to run away because he thinks Shylock is the devil; eventually, he leaves Shylock's service and becomes Bassanio's jester.

**Old Gobbo** The father of Launcelot, he has come to Venice to seek news of his son.

**Tubal** He is a friend of Shylock's; he tells him that one of Antonio's ships has been wrecked.

**Leonardo** Bassanio's servant.

**Balthasar** The servant whom Portia sends to her cousin, Dr. Bellario.

**Dr. Bellario** A lawyer of Padua.

**Stephano** One of Portia's servants.

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Plot: Antonio, a leading merchant of Venice, is a wealthy, respected, and popular man. Among his many friends is a young man named Bassanio, who owes Antonio a good deal of money. Bassanio would like to repay his friend, but so far he has been unable to do so. However, he now feels that he may have found a way — but he will again need a loan from Antonio. In Belmont, Bassanio tells Antonio, there lives a beautiful and young and wealthy heiress. Bassanio feels sure that he can win her hand in marriage, but he cannot go courting "hands-hanging." If he is to make a good impression, he has to appear at least as well off as her other wealthy suitors. Antonio tells his young friend that he would gladly lend him whatever amount of money he needs, but at the present time he himself is short of cash. All of his money is tied up in his merchant ships, which are still at sea. However, Antonio will not disappoint Bassanio. He knows of a moneylender who will probably lend him the necessary amount, and Bassanio can use Antonio's good name as security for the loan.

At Belmont, Portia speaks to Nerissa, her confidante, telling her how tired she is of the constant stream of suitors, and how she wishes to be free of the perverse obligation of her father's will: Portia cannot choose her own husband; she can marry only the man who chooses the correct one of three caskets — one gold, one silver, and one lead; one contains her portrait and that one is the lucky casket. So far, none of her suitors has decided to risk choosing one of the caskets, which is all for the good, because Portia has no liking for any of them. However, when Nerissa mentions the name of Bassanio, a possible suitor, Portia's mood brightens. He was once a visitor at Belmont, and Portia was impressed with him.

Meanwhile in Venice, Shylock, a rich Jewish moneylender who harbors a secret hatred for Antonio, has agreed to lend Bassanio three thousand ducats for three months, on Antonio's bond. Foregoing his usual high interest rate, Shylock demands instead that if the day for payment falls due and the money is not returned, he may cut off one pound of flesh from Antonio's body. Antonio agrees because all of his ships are due back in Venice a full month before the bond falls due.

A romantic subplot develops when Lorenzo, a close friend of Antonio and Bassanio, falls in love with Shylock's daughter, Jessica. He manages to elope with her by disguising her as a boy, and she manages to take with her a goodly amount of her father's ducats. Of course, this infuriates Shylock, and he vows revenge. Shortly thereafter, Bassanio and Gratiano leave for Belmont, where the "fair Portia" has just sent away the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Arragon, two more disappointed, unsuccessful suitors. When Bassanio asks to choose one of the caskets, Portia falls immediately in love with him, and she begs him to wait a few days before choosing one of the caskets. He has fallen in love with Portia and insists on taking his chances. He rejects the gold one, then the silver one; he chooses, finally, the lead casket, and on opening it, he finds a portrait of Portia. Both he and Portia are overjoyed, and they make plans to be married at once, along with Nerissa and Gratiano, who have also fallen in love. Happiness reigns in Belmont until Bassanio is brought a letter from Antonio bidding him farewell since his ships have been lost at sea and since it is impossible that he will live after Shylock collects his pound of flesh. Horrified, Bassanio leaves instantly for Venice with money which Portia gives him to pay the bond.

In Venice, Shylock is no longer interested in the mere payment of the money due him. He wants revenge. A Christian stole his daughter (and she took his money), and nothing will satisfy Shylock except the legal fulfillment of the bond. In the court of justice, presided over by the Duke of Venice, Shylock faces his enemy, Antonio. Antonio is surrounded by his friends and is quietly resigned to death. On all sides, Shylock is surrounded by enemies. Bassanio pleads with Shylockto accept double the money due him, but Shylock refuses.

At this point, Portia, disguised as a lawyer, and Nerissa, dressed as her law clerk, enter the court and tell the Duke that they have been sent from Padua by a learned attorney, Doctor Bellario, to plead the defendant's case. Portia entreats Shylock to be merciful, but he will not listen. She offers the moneylender *triple*the amount owed him, but again Shylock will have none of it. She then solemnly informs the court that Shylock is entirely within his lawful rights. She then informs Shylock that he must be very careful. He must cutoff *exactly*one pound of flesh, and he must not spill one *drop*of Antonio's blood. If he fails, all of Shylock's lands and goods will be confiscated. Shylock hastily decides that he will accept the triple payment of the bond, but Portia says *no;*Shylock then offers to take only the original three thousand ducats, but again Portia refuses, reminding him that it was he himself who demanded the strict interpretation of the law. Furthermore, she says, the law has another hold on him. Since he is an alien in Venice and since he tried to "seek the life" of a Venetian citizen, all his wealth can be divided between the citizen whom he attempted to destroy and the public treasury; in addition, Shylock's own life is in peril because of what he attempted to do.

The Duke decides to spare Shylock's life, but he does give half of Shylock's money to Antonio, and he gives the rest of it to the state. Antonio says that he will not accept the money if Shylock will agree to become a Christian and if, in his will, he will agree to leave his money to his daughter, Jessica, and her new husband, Lorenzo. Shylock, broken and defeated, agrees to all these conditions and leaves the court. Overjoyed, Antonio and his friends offer to pay the young lawyer whatever they can, but, oddly enough, the lawyer wishes only a certain ring which Bassanio is wearing. Bassanio is embarrassed because his wife gave this ring to him and asked him to wear it always. But the lawyer insists and, finally, Bassanio reluctantly gives away Portia's ring. Nerissa likewise cleverly manages to get from Gratiano a ring she gave him. The two ladies then hasten back to Belmont to tease their husbands about the rings.

When Bassanio and Gratiano, along with Antonio, return to Belmont, their wives inquire about the missing rings. Portia and Nerissa insist that the men no doubt gave the rings away to two other women. The husbands swear that it is not true, and it is not until Portia and Nerissa have put their husbands through some long, comically agonizing moments of discomfort that they confess that they themselves were the "learned doctor" and the "clerk" to whom the rings were given. Thus all ends happily, as Portia gives Antonio a letter informing him that three of his ships have arrived safely in port.

Themes: Reality and Idealism

*The Merchant of Venice* is structured partly on the contrast between idealistic and realistic opinions about society and relationships. On the one hand, the play tells us that love is more important than money, mercy is preferable to revenge, and love lasts forever. On the other hand, more cynical voices tell us that money rules the world, mercy alone cannot govern our lives, and love can evaporate after marriage.

The play switches abruptly between these different attitudes. Shakespeare organizes the shifts between idealism and realism by associating the two concepts with the play's two locations. Venice is depicted as a city of merchants, usurers, and cynical young men. Belmont, in contrast, is the land where fairytales come true and romance exists.

Mercy

*he Merchant of Venice* begs the question, does mercy exist in the world? Between religious intolerance and personal revenge, the play seems devoid of a merciful being.

However, against all the odds, Portia does manage to bring about some mercy in Venice. When Shylock faces execution for his crimes, Portia persuades the Duke to pardon him. She then persuades Antonio to exercise mercy by not taking all of Shylock's money from him. Here, Portia's presence turns the proceedings away from violence and toward forgiveness. Portia does, therefore, succeed in transmitting some of her idealism into Venice. Act IV ends with the suggestion that idealism can sometimes survive in the real world.

Prejudice

Throughout the play, and as of Act 3, Scene 4, Launcelot Gobbo is still trying to reconcile his affection for Jessica with his belief that all Jews are devils. This theme continually recurs in the clown scenes, and it seems as though Shakespeare is deliberately making fun of the Christian's attitudes toward the Jews.

The function of a clown is to misunderstand people and undermine their assumptions by asking simple, obvious questions. By highlighting the confusion of biblical texts, and raising pragmatic questions about the conversion of Jews, Launcelot, in his clownish ways, demonstrates the absurdities and complications that arise from the automatic damnation of a religious faith. Ultimately, he prevents the play from simplifying life too much. Beneath the apparently clear-cut cultural divisions in the play is an awareness of the complexities of real life.

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*The Merchant of Venice*

* 2004
* Director: Michael Radford
* Rating: R

A powerful and beautifully filmed period piece. The film features a magnificent performance by Al Pacino in the role of Shylock. Amazing cinematography, sets, overall design, and costumes, serve to transport the viewer to 16th-century Venice. Also stars Jeremy Irons and Joseph Finnes