

Dear Friend and Dear Lover: Reconciling Relationships in The Merchant of Venice

I would not be surprised if, as I proceed with my paper, you become lost among the names and relationships of the various characters. You should have received a handout with an alphabetical list of the various characters I will discuss and their relationships to each other on the first page; I hope this will be helpful to you. The remaining pages of my handout consist of excerpts from several scenes I will be discussing; I will direct you to the appropriate pages as I read.

William Shakespeare tells us a story about friends, love, groups—and about pressures that could destroy those social structures—in The Merchant of Venice. He especially focuses on friendships and marital relationships and the threats that are posed to them. The moneylender Shylock is a primary and external danger to them; he catalyzes many of the situations that build the play's plot and thus moves their allied relationships into new associations. The interaction of various relationships and social roles is a further, internal complication, and though the friendships in the play are strong, they will be stressed as many of the characters move towards marriage. Through the trials arising from Shylock's actions and the increasing complexity of their lives, the characters are forced to alter and expand their relationships.

With that said, I feel I now must provide you with a short synopsis of the play. I hope that my brief and inadequate recitation will encourage you to read the play for yourself.

The play opens as the Venetian merchant Antonio and his friend Bassanio make plans to enable Bassanio to pursue his love, Portia. Bassanio needs money; Antonio offers to take out a loan on his behalf from Shylock, a Jewish, non-Venetian moneylender. Antonio and Shylock

have had a mutually hateful relationship in the past; nonetheless, the two parties agree to a contract. Shylock proposes, purportedly as a joke, that if Antonio cannot repay the loan, he will forfeit a pound of his flesh as payment. Bassanio departs for Portia's house, Belmont, accompanied by his friend Gratiano and a new servant, Lancelot, who has just left Shylock's service. That same evening, a fourth Venetian friend, Lorenzo, runs away with Shylock's daughter, Jessica, who takes money and jewelry with her. Later, Shylock learns from a fellow Jew, Tubal, of his daughter's whereabouts and behavior since she left, and hears a rumor of the sinking of several of Antonio's ships. At the end of their conversation, Shylock resolves to take the full forfeiture from Antonio.

Bassanio arrives at Belmont, and wins both Portia's heart and the lottery of caskets that her father instituted to choose her husband. Gratiano, too, finds love at Belmont; he becomes engaged to Portia's confidante, Nerissa. Just as the women are bestowing rings on their newly-chosen husbands, Jessica and Lorenzo arrive, along with a messenger from Venice with a letter informing Bassanio that Antonio has indeed been unable to repay the loan and has been thrown in jail. The men depart in haste for Venice, and Portia and Nerissa follow them secretly.

At Antonio's trial, a stranger, a young lawyer—Portia in disguise—is able to save him by invoking a technicality: Shylock cannot take any blood from Antonio. He should, in fact, be punished for seeking to harm a Venetian citizen, but the court offers to rescind his punishment if he reinstates Jessica and Lorenzo as his heirs. Shylock agrees and leaves the courtroom quietly. Bassanio offers to pay the young lawyer for his work, but he will take nothing but the ring from Portia. At first, Bassanio refuses, but after awhile, he sends it to the lawyer; Nerissa also manages to obtain Gratiano's.

Everyone hurries back to Belmont. Portia and Nerissa discover the loss of the rings, and are at first angry with their husbands, but then they reveal their alter egos. The play concludes as everyone proceeds to further explanations over supper.

As stated before, the characters are forced to expand and alter their relationships through the course of the play. At the beginning of the play, the most important relationships in the lives of the various characters are friendships, both in social groups and individual pairs. These friendships are rooted in rituals that showcase the values of the friends' society; for instance, the young men of Venice are tied together by a common interest in revelry and the preparations for it, as in Act II, Scene 4. An excerpt from this scene is on page 2 of your handout, as well as an abbreviated version of Act I, Scene 2, in which Portia and Nerissa discuss Portia's love life. I would like you to briefly glance at these scenes, comparing, looking for how the conversations showcase features of the speakers' relationships.

Critic Lori Schroeder Haslem sees Portia and Nerissa's relationship being strengthened through conversation; for the women, "the ritualized process of naming the selected man is more central than is an actual debate over the merits of several men" (125). Another critic, Bruce Smith, says of male relationships in Shakespeare that "masculine identity of whatever kind is something men give to each other[;] it is not achieved in isolation" (60). For both men and women it is what Haslem calls "catechized ritual" (130) that binds them together; the question and answer, back and forth, both displays and builds rapport. This practice of communication and communion enables them to navigate their world and synthesize their value systems. It is as compatriots in day-to-day exchanges that they discover their roles in their world.

These opportunities for interchanges also allow the characters to temporarily let down their guards, to expose weaknesses and insecurities in a safe environment. Haslem reads many of

the scenes between Portia and Nerissa as opportunities to practice roles they will later drop or adapt to public circumstances (132). In a similar way, it is only before Antonio that Bassanio can expose his inner thoughts and discuss his plans to assume the role of the suitor, the Jason in search of golden rewards (I.1), as he describes it—which you can see for yourself on page 3 of your handout. Again, please examine the two scenes on this page. The second scene I have reproduced for you, Act II, Scene 3, reveals that this helpful, supportive variety of friendship is not unique to the Venetian Christians.

Jessica, the Jewess, is spurred to leave her father Shylock's house by the loss of her fellow-sufferer, Lancelot Gobbo. Faced with the prospect of a friendless existence, she declares her intention to "end this strife" (II.3.20) by seeking the jovial, amiable world outside her father's house. This short conversation displays a relationship forged in response to a common threat, and even as Lancelot prepares to leave, they continue to express their unity by voicing their inner emotions (II.3). Jessica fears she cannot survive in Shylock's house if she is alone because she is aware of her need for a friend to ease the burden of hellish tediousness. As comrades-in-arms, the characters can provide sympathy and strength to each other.

These relationships—the young Venetians, Portia and Nerissa, Bassanio and Antonio, Jessica and Lancelot—are built on mutual respect and good-fellowship using the tool of conversation. The characters are pleased to be useful to each other, but that springs from their devotion to each other, not vice versa. In contrast, Shylock is presented very rarely in tandem with anyone. He has only one confidante in the play, his fellow-Jew, Tubal, but in the few scenes they have, Shakespeare sketches a very different approach to friendship. Like their Christian counterparts, they discuss events and plan future interactions, as in Act III, Scene 1 where Tubal

delivers news of Jessica and Antonio and Shylock strengthens his will to prosecute his borrower, which you can examine on page 4 of your handout.

Shylock can appear vulnerable and unconfident before Tubal, who will not betray him and before whom he does not have to act; however, Shylock ultimately seems to approach even this single friendship with a self-centered end in mind. He values Tubal above all because he is wealthy and obliging; it is very rarely that Shylock will value anyone for any quality besides their service or serviceability to him; his decision to prosecute Antonio is motivated by future commercial gain, as seen in l. 119-120. His momentary regret at the loss of Leah's keepsake seems to betray a nobler feeling for his wife, but the remembrance of his treatment of Jessica and Lorenzo quickly halts the germination of any concept we might have of Shylock as a family man. He may be capable of amiability and love in the abstract, but he cannot actively perform those virtues in live situations.

The social segregation that Shylock enforces in his household is sustained by both parties to the pound-of-flesh contract. Right from the beginning of their business relationship, the Venetians and Shylock have agreed to remain hostile. I again invite you to examine your handout; page 5 contains the next section I wish to discuss. At line 130, Antonio displays a double standard; Bassanio has often taken large amounts of "barren metal" from him, but Antonio cannot stomach the thought of establishing a relationship with Shylock through those means. The difference in the two types of loans consists in what could be called their subtexts: Antonio wishes to support a friend and show his love for him through that support, while Shylock, as always, is thinking of the various kinds of profit he can make through the relationship. He will not participate in friendship the way the Venetian Christians do, by

“eat[ing] with you, drink[ing] with you, [and] pray[ing] with you” (I.3.35), but will only do what is necessary to successfully conclude the business they have together.

Immediately following Antonio’s speech, Shylock protests that he is offering to be kindly and neighborly to the Venetians, but the audience is led to doubt him by his earlier speech in I.3.38-49, reproduced at the top of page 5 on your handout. Here, he recites his grievances in an aside. Though he seems to be unable to sustain personal relationships, Shylock desperately craves interaction; it is with this device—the aside—that he tries to create a relationship with his auditors, the audience. Shylock asks us to take his side, to become the confidante that he will not allow Tubal or Jessica to be, to engage in the dialog defines a friendship. Shylock’s only attempt at bridging the chasm of social segregation is the audience’s opportunity to explore their own complicated relationships with the social groups of Venice.

The very activity of the plot distinguishes the characters’ approaches to friendship. The various Venetians barely make a move without at least one friend tagging along: Bassanio and Antonio go together to visit Shylock (I.3); later, Bassanio goes a-wooing with Gratiano (II.3, II.6); Lorenzo recruits a whole cavalcade to assist him in his elopement (II.6); and there is only one scene that contains an entrance for Portia without one for Nerissa (it’s II.7). In contrast, Shylock acts alone, and calls on Tubal for help when others are not present. Compared to the general conviviality among the Venetians, Shylock appears misanthropic, and it is this misanthropy that drives part of the action of the play and directly threatens, in various degrees, most of the relationships in the play, both marital and convivial.

This social, familial, racial, and personal tension comes to its climax in Act IV, the trial scene. By threatening his daughter’s well-being and Antonio’s life, Shylock has roused the indignation of the community against himself, and they all are now seeking for any way to pacify

or contain him. He places himself outside of what critic C. L. Barber calls “the easy bonds of community” (56) when he rejects the summons in Portia’s famous mercy speech to “graciously...live together in a humanly-knit group” (40). While this failed reconciliation is saddening, it should not be surprising, given our previous experience of Shylock. He rejected the call to join the community every time he commanded Jessica to “stop my house’s ears” (II.5.34) against the sound of the social events of Venice or refused to invite Tubal to be a confidante; he was not interested in employing these building blocks of unity. The assembled friends, through their representative Portia, are at least able to overcome the physical threat to the continuance of their relationships posed by Shylock. Only after he is removed can they focus on another important issue, in a conventional comedy at least: the transition from a group of friends to a group of married friends.

The friend-relationship has been the more important one in the play until the beginning of Act V, even stronger than the romantic relationships: Bassanio and Gratiano both give their wedding gifts to new friends (IV.2) and Jessica found in Lorenzo the solace of a new friend, a “masqueing mate” (II.7.59) who brought her into the revelry of the community. The circle of friends has benevolently expanded to include her, and now, in the final act of the play, it must alter itself again to accept the new role that the three women will require of the men. When they were in disguise, it was easy for the women of Belmont to participate in the circle of Venetian friends because their physical and psychological differences were not readily apparent. Lancelot’s jokes earlier in the play, in III.5, made it apparent that it is as hard for the opposite gender to join this circle of friends as it is for a different race or religion. In that scene, Lorenzo negotiates between Jessica and Lancelot, and in Act V, Antonio intervenes between Bassanio and Portia. Please examine both of these scenes, reproduced on page 6 of your handout. We must

remember that the tension between the genders, illustrated by Lancelot and Jessica's exchange, occurred in a physically safe environment; when not faced with the overwhelming threat posed by Shylock, it was harder for the friends to maintain the amiable relationship. A third party was necessary to create their original bond, and a negotiator was needed to reconcile the two antagonists. Similarly, when Portia and Bassanio's relationship seems close to dissolution, Antonio reconciles their opposition and restores harmony. Friends and lovers must be conscious intermediaries between couples and groups to promote the integration of new individuals and new roles into established social structures.

In The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare reconciles many dichotomies into a comedic unity: party boy and businessman, Jew and Christian, male and female, socialite and misanthrope. Through the course of the play, the sociable world of Venice must adapt itself to unfamiliar individuals that threaten the continuance of its relationships. The group of friends is successfully united in Acts IV and V by a discomforting, exterior force, in the former, that of the angry creditor, and in the latter, that of the newly-made, newly insistent wives. By defeating the first and assimilating the second, the Venetians can reconcile their recent experiences and new roles by affirming the strength of their own bond of amity.

Works Cited

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