

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE: THEMES

Justice and Mercy

- Portia's speech in Act 4
 - Mercy is abundant, free, beautiful, a blessing, strong and mighty, above the power of kings
 - "The quality of mercy is not strained/It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven"
 - Comparing justice to mercy, convincing Shylock to give mercy to Antonio instead of trying to pursue justice in the form of the law
 - "Though justice be thy plea, consider this:/That in the course of justice, none of us/Should see salvation"
 - Mercy saves our souls
- Shylock's point of view
 - Law = justice, Antonio does not deserve mercy
 - Reasons
 - His hatred for Antonio: "...can I give no reasons...More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing I bear Antonio"
 - Pound of flesh belongs to him: "The pound of flesh which I demand of him/Is dearly bought". Compares buying the flesh to the purchase of slaves, who are simply many pounds of flesh.
 - Simply following the law and being a good citizen: "If you deny me, fie upon your law: There is no force in the decrees of Venice"
- What happened in the end
 - Portia's hypocrisy
 - She advocated mercy above the law – yet while dealing with Shylock's punishment, she stuck rigidly to the law, while not entertaining any thoughts of mercy. However, she did leave the final decision of Shylock's punishment to the Duke.
 - "The Jew shall have all justice...He shall have nothing but the penalty"
 - Shylock got to keep his life, but half his goods would be taken away by the state, and he had to convert to Christianity
 - Is Antonio really merciful in demanding this from him? Converting to Christianity means stopping usury, which is possibly one of Shylock's primary means for earning.

Appearance vs. Reality

- Caskets
 - Inscription on gold casket: "All that glitters is not gold". Gold thus appears to be valuable and tempting, but ends up to be the wrong choice, and Morocco has to leave Portia and never pursue marriage again.
 - Inscription on leaden casket: "You that choose not by the view/Chance as fair and choose as true." Portia's father is telling the successful suitor that he has not chosen by outward appearance, but by virtue and character. Thus, he is a suitable match for Portia, because one should not love her for her looks.
 - However, it is possible to say that Bassanio needed Portia for her money as well – the first thing he says to describe her to Antonio is "lady richly left", possibly saying that he wanted her for her wealth. Furthermore, he was having this discussion at a time when he was in debt to Antonio, and even told Antonio to consider the bond an 'investment', thus there would be 'returns' in the form of Portia's money.
- Disguises
 - Jessica as a torchbearer
 - Jessica dresses up as a boy to escape from Shylock's house and elope with Lorenzo. She is ashamed of this appearance, because she says that it is lucky that Lorenzo could not see her clearly in the night. However, she does say "Love is blind, and lovers cannot see/The pretty follies that themselves commit."
 - Jessica is actually Jewish, but at heart she is a Christian?
 - Portia/Nerissa as the judge/judge's clerk
 - Portia has to dress up as a man in order to become a lawyer, which is a respectable position in society → patriarchal society.
 - Earlier, Jessica had said that "love is blind", and now Bassanio and Gratiano do not recognize Portia and Nerissa. Possibly, Shakespeare is using irony to make fun of the relationships between them.
- Behaviour of characters
 - Antonio in private vs. Antonio in public
 - Private: Antonio appears to be a continually depressed and melancholy person, starting off the play with "In sooth I know not why I am so sad". He confides in Solanio and Salarino, seeking their advice in finding out what the reason for his depression was.
 - Public: Antonio is a rich merchant. Furthermore, in the court scene, he displays himself as a self-sacrificial hero, telling Bassanio to stop trying to argue against Shylock because his fate was sealed.
 - Shylock
 - Private: Shylock is a caring father. He treats Jessica with tender care, and is paranoid about her safety.
 - Public: Shylock is the hated Jew. He is unmerciful, deriving pleasure from the hurt of Christians, and people are derisive in general towards him, because he is Jewish.

Money vs. Love

- Antonio and Bassanio
 - Antonio's attitude to Bassanio
 - Possibly in love
 - Deep, caring friendship. Willing to risk even his own life for Bassanio's wants.
 - In the end, in his letter, says that he will be happy if only he could see Bassanio's face before his death.
 - Bassanio towards Antonio
 - Possibly, very business-like attitude
 - During first conversation in Act 1 Scene 1, Bassanio is very defensive, contrasting with Antonio's openness. He uses elaborate metaphors, such as the arrow explanation, to cover up his inability to pay Antonio what he owed him.
 - Asked Antonio to consider the bond as an investment → embarrassed, did not want Antonio to think that his money would go unreturned.
- Bassanio and Portia
 - Portia towards Bassanio
 - Portia loves Bassanio, without any other secondary feelings such as greed
 - So devoted to him that she immediately surrenders all her property and goods to him once their marriage is confirmed
 - Has never met Antonio before, yet extends her sense of duty to him just because he was Bassanio's friend. Goes through a lot of trouble/risk to save Antonio, even though she did not even know who he was.
 - Bassanio towards Portia
 - Possibly loved her for money
 - First word he uses to describe her: "lady richly left", thus he attributes more importance to her wealth than her other qualities
 - At the time when he was explaining his love for Portia, Bassanio was in great debt to Antonio. Shakespeare makes a link between Bassanio's debt and Portia's riches.
 - Describes his plan to go to Belmont as "a warranty...to get clear of all the debts I owe."
- Shylock
 - Is extremely upset when he finds out that Jessica had traded Leah's ring for a monkey
 - Has relationships that he considers important
 - Does not ask for money from Antonio, but pound of flesh
 - Resentment outweighs greed

MERCHANT OF VENICE: CHARACTERS

- Antonio
 - In public
 - Rich merchant
 - Self-sacrificial, acts as a martyr
 - Court scene: considers his fate sealed, tells Bassanio to stop arguing against Shylock
 - In private
 - Depressed, melancholy
 - First line of play: "In sooth I know not why I am so sad"
 - Confides in his friends, trusting
 - To Bassanio
 - Deep friendship, possibly lovers
 - Willing to sacrifice anything for Bassanio's wants, even his own life
 - To Shylock
 - Cruel, makes fun of Shylock, disrespects him
 - Constantly refers to him as the devil
 - However, the moment Shylock has a position of power over him, i.e. Antonio is in jail for forfeiting the bond, he starts pleading, saying "good Shylock" and "I pray thee hear me speak"
- Bassanio
 - To Antonio
 - Business-like attitude
 - Wants Antonio's friendship for the deals they can make
 - Takes advantage of Antonio's love and sacrifice for him
 - However, he does feel guilty when Antonio is going to die because of the bond
 - Defensive of his debt
 - To Portia
 - Brave, caring husband
 - To Gratiano
 - Dislikes Gratiano's tendency to spout nonsense, be vulgar and talk too much
 - However, trusts him enough to send him ahead to Portia's household with gifts and praises

- Portia
 - CONSISTENT
 - Resourceful
 - Can twist restrictions to her advantage
 - Devoted
 - Wife, daughter
 - Extends sense of duty to Antonio immediately, gives up property and wealth to Bassanio, keeps within father's restrictions
 - Saves Antonio with clever use of the law
 - Hypocritical
 - Tells Shylock that mercy comes above justice, but in the end uses the law to severely punish him
 - "The Jew shall have all justice...he shall have nothing but the penalty"
 - Resentful
 - The control that her father had on her
 - "O me, the word 'choose'! I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father."
- Shylock
 - To Christians
 - Hates Christians: "How like a fawning publican he looks! I hate him for he is a Christian."
 - Economically (they bring down the rate of usury), physically ("spit upon my Jewish gabardine"), mentally (the insults, references to him as the "Devil")
 - To Jessica
 - Caring father
 - Paranoid about her safety: during the masquerade, asks her to stay inside and lock the windows, etc.
 - In general: relationships vs. money
 - Is devastated when he finds out the Jessica has traded Leah's ring, a ring given to him when he was a bachelor, for a mere monkey. Leah was probably Jessica's mother.
 - Thus, treats the relationship above the money
 - Does not want money when Antonio forfeits the bond, but his pound of flesh
 - His resentment and hatred for Antonio outweighs his greed for money