

I think Portia gives Bassanio some clever hints about picking the "correct" casket in 3.2. What do you think?

**1.1.** Just why is Antonio so sad? Why doesn't he know what makes him so sad? Or is he just reluctant to admit what makes him so sad? Why are all these guys (Salerio & Lorenzo) so eager to leave Antonio alone with Bassanio (61-62, and 69-70)?

Bassanio is the chief lover in the play's plot. He desires Portia. Why does he desire Portia (127-130, 161-176)? What barriers stand in the way of his desire? How does he plan to overcome them? Does he imagine more barriers than there actually are? Would you lend money to Bassanio (140-151)? Why does Antonio lend money to Bassanio? What interest does Antonio have in lending Bassanio means to court Portia?

**1.2.** Portia, like Antonio, is "weary" of the world (1-2). Why? Is her weariness akin to Antonio's? Portia is a bit like Beatrice in *Much Ado*; she is a witty railer. She mocks all her suitors according to stereotypical prejudices. Most of these prejudices look like typically English attitudes towards others, but note that as a Venetian, she mocks the English suitor also (60-64). Her attitude towards Morocco smacks a bit of racism (109-110).

**1.3.** The scenes switch back and forth between Venice and Belmont. What does Venice represent in this play? What Belmont? Does each location suggest a kind of ethos? Does each have its own kinds of discourse? At the center of Venice is the Rialto and the market. At the center of Belmont is Portia and the caskets.

Does Shylock have a particular way of speaking? Search his speeches for figurative language. What figures of speech is he most apt to use? What stereotypical characteristics has Shakespeare endowed him with? What characteristics appear unstereotypical?

What is the point of Shylock's story about Jacob and Laban (67-93)? How does Shylock interpret the story? How does Antonio? Does the play appear to endorse one interpretation over another? Have a look at the story in [Genesis 30](#) and try to figure out if there is a distinctly "Christian" as opposed to a "Jewish" interpretation. Why does Shylock drop the matter as soon as Antonio challenges him?

Just what sort of a merchant of businessman is this Antonio? He lends money to a proven prodigal (Bassanio) and now he agrees to this bargain with Shylock, a man he calls his "enemy" (130), thinking that "he grows kind" (174). Is Antonio willfully blind here? Is Bassanio blind to Shylock's intentions? Look at the various transformations of the words "kind" and "kindness" in this interchange.

**2.2.** What's in this guy's name--Lancelot Gobbo? Why Lancelot? The scene presents an elaborate farce of mistaken identity, master for servant, son for father.

I think it's worth considering as a kind of farcical allegory of commonplace notions about the relationship between Christians and Jews. Augustine wrote in his *Exposition of the Psalms* 56.9: "The Jew carries a book [the scriptures, revelation], from which a Christian may believe. Our librarians is what they have become, just as it is customary for servants to carry books behind their masters, so that those who carry faint and those who read profit . . . . The appearance of the Jews in the holy scripture which they carry is just like the face of a blind man in a mirror; he is seen by the other, by himself not seen."

Augustine thinks of the Jews as blind, non-reading librarians; they carry the scripture, but cannot read it. They cannot see themselves in it. They are like servants to Christians in that they carry the Bible, but grow old and faint for lack of the ability to see and read the "correct" meaning of their own scripture, which only a Christian can understand. Thus Jews may be the forerunners or "fathers" of Christians, but because they are blind, they have become *servants* to Christians, displaying in themselves the unregenerate "old man" while Christians have been reborn as "new men" in Christ. Thus Old Gobbo is a kind of allegory for the old Jew who does not know his own son, the Christian. Lancelot, in serving as Shylock's servant, represents a man serving under the old covenant of the law (Judaism), and he wants to be transformed "in the twinkling" (151) into a new man serving under the new covenant of grace (Christianity), represented by Bassanio. The allegory is farcically comic, so the likeness hobbles in places, but the general outline suggests that Lancelot thinks of quitting Shylock and joining Bassanio as a kind of conversion experience. Of course his motivations (better clothes, less work, and more food) make a mockery of the whole discourse of conversion.

Has Bassanio changed his prodigal ways now that he has 3,000 ducats (158-160)? Bassanio describes himself as a "prodigal" in 1.1.129. We should pay attention to this loaded word and the way it alludes to the parable of the prodigal son in the gospels ([Luke 15:11-31](#)). A popular interpretation of the parable in Shakespeare's day understood the prodigal son as the gentiles and the older son in the story as the Jews. When the prodigal returns, he is like a gentile turned Christian who receives all the bounty his father (God) can bestow, even though he once wasted his inheritance. The older son is like the Jew who never left his father, but doesn't understand why the father forgives the prodigal and resents his father's largess, even his celebration. Thus the resentful older son doesn't understand forgiveness, redemption, and unmerited grace, and so he is like the Jew who resents the Christian who has taken his place in God's favor. This interpretation is, of course, dreadfully anti-Jewish.

The play alludes to this interpretation by representing Bassanio as a prodigal trying to redeem himself--"to come fairly off from the great debts/ Wherein my time, something

too prodigal,/ Hath left me gaged." By cloaking Bassanio's venture in the terms of Christian redemption (and also in the terms of romantic love) doesn't the play threaten to subvert those terms? Is all the Christian talk in the play about grace, unmerited favor, largess, forgiveness, just a lot of irresponsible prodigality parading itself as Christian virtue?

When Shylock proposes a "merry bond" (1.3.169) isn't he trying to trick the Christians by appearing to speak their language--a language of forgiveness of debts, a language that seems to him to make "sport" of the law and bonds and contracts? He thinks he's going to drive all these prodigal Christians into a recognition of the law in all its literal severity. Unlike the resentful older brother in the parable, Shylock hopes "to feed upon the prodigal Christian" (2.5.14-15), to have a feast of his own instead of a feast for the younger brother.

**2.5.** A commonplace slur against Jews is that they would way-lay Christians, especially children, kill them, and sometimes eat their flesh. Such stories were popular in England during the medieval and into the early-modern period. Chaucer's 14th-century [\*Prioress's Tale\*](#) recounts one of these popular anti-Jewish stories. At lines 14-15, the play offers a suggestive allusion to such stories if we literalize Shylock's speech. Figuratively, of course, he's simply indicating that he will feed at Bassanio's (the prodigal Christian's) expense. I've often thought it odd that Christians, who believe that they eat the body of Christ in the mass, should be so fond of spreading stories about Jewish cannibalism; it almost seems that they project their worst fears about themselves onto the hated Jewish other. Do some of the characters in this play do this? To what degree does the play endorse anti-Jewish attitudes?

**2.6.** Jessica presents another subplot in which a nefarious deed (running away, eloping, and theft) is couched in the terms of conversion. Graziano swears by his "hood" she is "a gentile, and no Jew" (51). Why does he swear by his "hood," that is, his foreskin? What sort of joke is this?

**2.7.** With Morocco's choice we finally get to see the "text" of Portia's father's wisdom. "Who chooses his meaning," said Nerissa in 1.2.27-30, "chooses you." And, supposedly the sayings on the caskets are designed in such a way that they will "never be chosen by any rightly but one who you [Portia] shall rightly love." So Portia's dad has indeed usurped his daughter's ability to choose, but somehow, says Nerissa, this casket game will weed out those Portia cannot "rightly love." So what's wrong with Morocco's interpretation of the sayings? Why is he one whom Portia cannot rightly love?

**2.8.** It's worth remembering that Salanio's account of Shylock crying in the streets here is the testimony of the most vulgar sort of anti-Jewish sentiment. But the speech Shylock

does make in 3.1.71-81 comes somewhat close to this.

Solanio offers more evidence of Antonio's love for Bassanio (46-53).

**2.9.** Aragon chooses the silver and displays his arrogance. The three "election" speeches--Morocco's, Aragon's, and Bassanio's--are very good candidates for close rhetorical analysis. The speeches reinforce the idea that the trial of the caskets is a kind of trial of character rather than a game of chance. Thus the casket scheme oscillates in its imagery: part game of chance, part soothsayer, part judge, and part rationalization of Portia's desire for Bassanio.

**3.1.** What are Shylock's various reasons for hating Antonio and seeking revenge? Shylock appears in this speech (49-57) to outline a doctrine of common humanity, a doctrine not unlike that Paul preaches in [Galatians 3:27-29](#), with one crucial difference: Paul describes a universalist doctrine based on all being "in Christ"; Shylock eliminates this condition. What's more, having outlined a doctrine of universal humanity, he finishes his speech with a continued reliance on the terms "Christian" and "Jew," the very binary distinction the Christians use to deny his humanity. Paul also, in his discussion of Jew and gentile in [Galatians 2](#) and 3, explains the theological-anthropological difference between Jew and Christian.

**3.2.** Portia wants Bassanio; Nerissa likes him too (2.9.100). She wishes she could teach him how to choose (11), but she will not break the letter of the law her father has devised for her. Does she give him clues? Does she give him confidence? Why does she allegorize the situation (53-62) likening Bassanio to Hercules and herself to Hesione? Does she know he's in it for the money rather than for love? What about the little song (63-65)? What if the end-rhymes in the first stanza are emphasized? And doesn't the second stanza suggest that one should not trust one's eyes (for which gold is dazzling) or ears (bells are made of silver)? In any case, Bassanio's speech appears to take its cue from all these suggestions: "So . . ." (73-107).

Lines 97-101 describe almost exactly Bassanio's own self-presentation. He is a bankrupt several times over who appears in Belmont gilded with borrowed wealth, putting on a show that is hardly necessary given the terms under which Portia will be betrothed. He is literally all show and no substance, and fortunately for him, he knows this about himself and uses it as an object lesson in interpreting the casket riddle correctly (with some help from Portia). Is Bassanio the sort of man Portia's father would have chosen? The speeches that follow Bassanio's successful election artfully intertwine the competing rhetorics of Petrarchan praise, prodigal generosity, and market contracts. In Belmont, at least, all these competing rhetorics seem non-contradictory. Why? Even Bassanio is dazzled by her speech (175-183). Amidst all this dazzling rhetoric, however, a very specific bargain is struck, vows are exchanged over the ring, and a contract of life and death is agreed to. Why all the rhetorical ornament for such a plain bargain?

News from Venice spoils all the success (242-289). It seems that Bassanio has taken more than three months to win "the fleece" and Antonio's bond is come due. The world of Venice (contracts, law, authority, and power) has invaded the romantic world of Belmont where law, authority, and power has seemed so light-handed and benevolent.

**3.3.** See Katharine Maus's comment on the commercial and legal status of Venice on pp. 1081-83. Is Venice a "Christian" state or a commercial state? Which value will prove dominant here? Where can one draw the line between commercial interests and "Christian" values? Does Christianity reward prodigals or thrifty merchants? Will forgiveness of debts "impeach the justice of the state"? Is this a state that assumes a universal common humanity, or makes such universalism conditional on being "in Christ," a citizen rather than a stranger?

**3.4.** Lorenzo and Jessica are thieves and outlaws, sought by the state of Venice for larceny. Portia puts them in charge of her household.

Bassanio came to Belmont under false pretences to win "the golden fleece"; now Portia will go to Venice under false pretences, bringing the world of romance, as it were, into the world of finance. She hopes to subvert the world of contracts, commerce, and law by re-interpreting it according to the fashion of Belmont, where games of chance are "wisdom" and "destiny," where commercial adventures are disguised as love quests, where women are lords rather than wives even though they speak a language of submission, where contracts are hedged about with the rhetoric of charmed rings and light oaths. Like Bassanio she is an expert in deploying discourses she can see right through; she is accomplished with that she lacks (62) in more than one sense, for she sees quite clearly the constructedness of discourses of love, law, faith, and promises, and seeing the lack or emptiness they are constructed to obscure, she can manipulate them to her own designs.

**3.5.** Lancelot invokes scripture ([Exodus 34:7](#)) to prove that Jessica must be damned for her father's sins. Jessica invokes [1 Corinthians 7:14](#) to prove that she will not. [Ezekiel 18:20](#) appears to say just the opposite of Exodus 34:7. It seems that not only the devil can cite scripture to his own purposes (1.3.94); anyone can. Does the scripture contradict itself, or can it simply be interpreted to one's liking? Lancelot (like Feste in *Twelfth Night*) is an expert at playing with words and their meanings. If words, intentions, and meanings are undependable (even the words of scripture) what good are bonds and contracts, professions of love, the laws? Will any discourse bend to one's will? Can anyone "for a tricky word/ Defy the matter" (59-60). If so, then the whole world could fall into chaos. The play raises this possibility but must somehow contain it or the play itself is no better than nonsense.

4.1. The Duke, who is appointed judge in this case, has already decided that Shylock is "inhuman" (3), though he won't say so to Shylock's face (62). Antonio, however, is more than willing to betray his sense of the Jew as an inhuman beast, incapable of either reason or mercy (69-79). But doesn't Shylock show much reason when he argues that so-called Christians keep slaves and think nothing of it (89-97)?

Does Antonio rather like the idea of sacrificing himself for Bassanio's happiness (113-117)?

Who is "the merchant" of Venice designated in the title--Antonio or Shylock (153 and 169)?

Bassanio would have the law abridged in this case, "To do a great right, do a little wrong" (210-211), but Portia has a plan that will subvert the law and yet leave it intact, unabridged. Knowing she has such a plan in mind, a plan that will go very hard on Shylock, what must we make of her lovely speech about mercy (179-192)? Portia skillfully urges Shylock to an ever greater commitment to the "letter" of the law and the bond, knowing full well that she can catch him in his naive trust in literalism (247-49, 252-57). She knows (as do even Lancelot and Lorenzo) that to push the literal sense of words is to push on a tottering wall, because there is no dependable literal sense to any word; all words mean only by convention, agreement between mortals.

Before he has even consummated his vows to Portia his wife, Bassanio is ready to break them, to sacrifice her on the altar of his love for Antonio . . . or is he just talking, already certain his offer will not be accepted (277-282)? "These be the Christian husbands," say Shylock, prodigal even with the lives of their wives!

Only flesh, no blood. Is there some perverse joke on kashrut here? Is it impossible for Shylock to get a bloodless, and therefore koshered, pound of flesh from this Christian? Or is Christian flesh, like the flesh of pigs, not kosher anyway? Does Venice have a law against shedding human blood, or specifically Christian blood? Or, like Paul's doctrine in Galatians 3:28, does a sense of universal humanity depend on being "in Christ," that is, Christian? Cannot a Jew who refuses to convert not be human under such a law and such a doctrine?

Oh, and Venice has yet another law that specifically targets "aliens" (344 and following). In 3.3.26-31, Antonio spoke as if the laws of Venice were a model of transnational universalism designed to protect the commercial interests of strangers as much as of Venetians. It seems, however, that he has misinterpreted both the spirit and the letter of the law, or that the law was designed to appear other than what it is, maintaining special statutes to protect Venetians from "strangers."

Bassanio's ring gets invested with more and more meaning as the scene goes on. First it symbolizes his vows to Portia, sworn on penalty of his life. Now it is made to stand for

his obligation to Portia as she is a lawyer in disguise. And finally Antonio makes it symbolize the competing obligations of love Bassanio owes to him and to his wife. One might say Bassanio has truly overcommitted himself. He has sworn too many contradictory oaths too lightly and too broadly. Indeed, his life should now be forfeit to Portia, though she should also be his wife and therefore his subordinate.

**5.1.** With the business of the rings, Portia has arranged that a bit of the quarrelsome ethos of Venice be imported to the romantic world of Belmont. All its otherworldly magical lightness will now be ballasted a bit by the language of promise, law, and contract (134-145). The ring may be but a trifle, but Graziano's oaths have invested it with much value (146-157); giving it away raises suspicions of adultery. Some nice irony in 192-207. Portia is playing the merciless presser of oaths and bonds here, a kind of faux Shylock. Why? How does this work to re-install the virtually bankrupt discourse of promises, oaths, and bonds? Appeals to "shame," "courtsey," and "honor" make no way against Portia's sense of justice here (215-232).

Perhaps the lesson is that there should be no more swearing (240-244). Bassanio is so used to swearing oaths that they no longer have any credit, yet he tries again anyway, and Antonio offers to back him up, this time offering his *soul* as collateral (245-52). One is tempted to steal a phrase from Shylock (with modifications) "These be the Christian businessmen!" What sort of bond now is this where Antonio, for whose love Bassanio broke his promise to his wife, now becomes "surety" for Bassanio's keeping his word to his wife, thereby breaking Antonio's heart?

When Lorenzo says that Portia drops "manna" (293), he says more perhaps than he means, for Lorenzo shall indeed feed upon this archtypical Jewish food as he spends Shylock's wealth and sleeps with his daughter. Does heaven rain blessings only on the Christians, or just on Christians who behave like mercenaries and make their own good fortune in the world?