

Wheadon 1



Wheadon 1 English 3205 Dr. Lois Sherlow Matthew Wheadon Oct. 23, 2012

Justice and Mercy in The Merchant of Venice In the court room scene of The Merchant of Venice, justice is handed back and forth between the Christians and Shylock, unlike mercy. Shylock is unable to feel any remorse for Antonio and the Christians because of the hate he has for them. Stubbornness and hatred can cause misfortune; the morally superior have a right to justice. As the trial scene begins, the Duke speaks about Shylock as an inhuman wretch, incapable of mercy (4. 1 3-6). The Christians think of Shylock as stubborn and cruel and will only refer to him as "the Jew". Shylock does not receive respect and has never received respect from the Christians, so therefore, Shylock is not merciful toward the Christians. Despite what the Duke had just said about Shylock, when Shylock enters the court the Duke tells him that everyone expects Shylock to show mercy and not take Antonio's flesh (15-34). But, Shylock went to court ready to take Antonio's flesh that he is entitled to according to the contract. Shylock does not want to be paid with ducats, not even three times as much as what he lent to Antonio. Shylock just wants from the Christians what was promised to him by law. Bassanio offers Shylock six thousand ducats on top of the three thousand ducats, so that Shylock does not go through with taking a pound of Antonio's flesh. Bassanio is trying to protect Antonio and bring him to justice because Antonio had no control over the crashing of his ships. Bassanio said that he is willing to pay ten times what he already offered and put his hand, head and heart on the line as collateral (204-07). Although the Christians do not speak Wheadon 2 respectfully to Shylock, they are vulnerable and completely at his mercy. But Shylock does not feel any reason to show mercy. In response to Shylock's refusal of Bassanio's offer, The Duke asks

Shylock "How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none" (87)? Shylock does not think he is doing anything wrong. He is just taking what is rightfully his, what is legal. Shylock compares defending his contract with the Christians defending their right to treat slaves however way they feel. Shylock said: what if he were to tell the Christians not to work their slaves so hard and let them marry their daughters and let them eat the same food, what would the Christians say? Shylock said that they would say "the slaves are ours", meaning that the Christians believe that they are free to treat the slaves however way they feel because they own them. Shylock feels as though he has the same right to have his contract with Antonio and said that if he is refused his right then the laws of Venice have no authority (88-102). The Duke sends for a judge from Padua for further insight on the case of this contract. Stepping in for that judge is a recent visitor of his, Balthazar, who is actually Portia disguised as a man to try to help Antonio. However, even though she is on Antonio's side, it appears as though she is being fair to Shylock. When Bassanio asks the Duke to bend the law so that Shylock does not get his way, Portia interjects, saying that that is not possible because a decree cannot be changed because that would lead to many bad legal decisions. To this Shylock responds "A Daniel come to judgement, yea, a Daniel! O wise young judge, how I do honour thee" (218-19)! Shylock is referring to a wise judge named Daniel from the Bible and he means that the judge comes with justice. Portia also entitles Shylock to the pound of Antonio's flesh because the money was not payed back in time but she insists that Shylock show mercy and to take the money instead. Wheadon 3 Shylock will not show mercy, he only wants his contract to be fulfilled, "By my soul I swear there is no power in the tongue of man to alter me. I stay

here on my bond" (235-37). In response to Shylock's stubbornness, Portia warrants him to take a pound of flesh from Antonio's bosom, and Shylock's reactions to her verdicts are childish because he gloats as if the judge is on his side saying such things as: " So says the bond, doth it not, noble judge? ' Nearest his heart'-those are the very words" (248-49). He clearly expresses his hate for Antonio. Shylock even questions Portia's order to have a surgeon take care of Antonio's wound so that he does not bleed to death asking does the contract call for a surgeon? Portia just believes it to be human decency, so that Antonio does not die but Shylock only responds with, he can't find it in the bond (252-257). Shylock is very pleased with how the case is going in his favour and although on the other side of the knife, Antonio is handling the verdict admirably. Antonio does not complain or speak with hatred to Shylock. He even thinks of his death as fortunate because he does not have to live the rest of his days in poverty like most unlucky men do after losing their wealth (261-67). Antonio even tries to comfort Bassanio so that he does not feel guilty for Antonio dying for being unable to pay back a debt on Bassanio's behalf. Antonio said that he does not regret paying for Bassanio's debt, he said, " For if the Jew do cut but deep enough, I'll pay it instantly, with all my heart" (275-76). Fortunately for Antonio, his humility will reward him. Portia tells Shylock that he will get more justice than what he hoped for, " Thyself shalt see the act; for as thou urgest justice, be assured thou shalt have justice more than thou desir'st" (310-12). Portia said this to Shylock after telling Shylock that the contract does not permit Shylock to have any of Antonio's blood. So if Shylock were to shed any blood, his land would be taken from him by the state of Venice (305-07). If this be the law, Shylock submits to Wheadon 4 taking the money (three times the loan) and letting

Antonio go. Bassanio agrees with giving the money but Portia tells Shylock that he is not entitled to the money anymore because he had already refused it publicly (333-34). Shylock is told that he must now go through with the contract and collect the flesh, but he can only take one pound exactly, no less, no more, not even a fraction of an ounce or Shylock will be killed and his land taken (319-327). So justice has turned in the favour of Antonio and Bassanio now. Portia also tells Shylock that since he had intention to kill Antonio, Antonio's obligated to half of Shylock's property, while the other half will go to the state and Shylock's life is in the hands of the Duke (342-58). The Duke, contrary to Shylock's lack of mercy, pardons Shylock's life and depending on Shylock's co-operation, he will reduce the sentence of giving the state half of Shylock's property to just a fine (363-67). Antonio also shows mercy. Antonio is willing not to take half of the property, instead give his half of Shylock's property to Shylock's son-in-law and daughter. As part of Antonio's deal Shylock must become Christian and put his son-in-law in his will to possess Shylock's property when Shylock dies (375- 85). Antonio has no problem showing mercy. Beforehand, Portia even asks of Antonio if he will show any mercy towards Shylock. The Christians do seem morally superior to Shylock, but what Portia had done may not have been honest. Portia could have been making up the law about Shylock not being able to shed a drop of Antonio's blood. How else would you take flesh without shedding blood. The court and Portia was going to allow Shylock to cut Antonio before Antonio spoke courageously and Humbly (259-76), around the time when Portia said get a surgeon to make sure Antonio didn't die. So Portia could have very well made shedding no blood up, as well as the law about giving up land because of intention to kill. She might have made up

the law that Shylock will die if he Wheadon 5 takes any less or more of a pound of flesh. The law that Shylock must follow through with the contract because he already refused the money might have also been made up. Anyone would have done the same thing if they had Portia's quick wit but it is still not moral. She cheated Shylock's justice for Antonio's. Shylock ended up getting nothing in the end, he was only able to keep his life and half of his land, so long as he got baptized a Christian and gave over his property to someone he would not want to give it to. He could have gotten three times the loan in the beginning but his stubbornness and hate kept him from giving in. Instead Portia disguised as a lawyer fooled Shylock into getting nothing. The Christians did show Shylock mercy when Shylock showed none but there is not honesty in their actions. So they are not morally superior to Shylock, only merciful. Wheadon 6 Works Cited Greenblatt, Stephen, Cohen, Walter, Howard, Jean E., Maus, Katharine Eisaman. *The Merchant of Venice* (4. 1). 2008. *The Norton Shakespeare*. (Based on the Oxford Edition). Second Edition. New York & London: W. W Norton & Company, 2008. 1159-68. Print.