

# Covenants in the merchant of venice

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In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare explores the concept of covenants through several motifs including marriage, inheritance, filial piety, and justice. While revenge is personal, justice intends to right societal wrongs, but *The Merchant of Venice* makes a mockery of justice. Jessica not only steals away in the night, but steals what she and her cohorts can carry. The unorthodox contract between Antonio and Shylock along with Portia fraudulently acting the part of a Doctor of Laws at court further derides the notion of justice. Antonio and Shylock serve as the protagonist and antagonist, but it is not always clear which one is which. Two scenes in particular highlight the ambiguous nature of justice in the play: Jessica breaking her familial bond with her father and stealing Shylock's wealth depicts a covenant bound in tradition and loyalty rather than the law; while the contract between Antonio and Shylock for a "pound of flesh" is an example of a legal, albeit an unorthodox and even unethical, contract. Shakespeare weaves interconnections between the characters in *The Merchant of Venice* not only through their relationships to one another, but through contracts, agreements, and pledges. Contracts play an apparent role: Bassanio is bound to Antonio when he repeatedly borrows money from him, Antonio is bound to Shylock when he offers his own flesh as collateral to secure a loan, Portia is bound by her father's unconventional stipulations for her marriage, Bassanio and Gratiano are bound to Portia and Nerissa not only through marriage but by the rings the women present to the men, and Jessica is bound to Shylock because she is his daughter. Shakespeare writes of other pledges in the play: Gratiano and Nerissa answer to Antonio as his servants and cannot marry without his permission, Launcelot is tied in

servitude to Shylock, Portia's suitors are obligated to never marry if they open the wrong casket, and Shylock is restrained by his status as a Jew and non-citizen of Venice and the sentence meted out by the Venetian court. Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo and the courtroom scene where Antonio and Shylock meet to settle the terms of their contract elucidate facets of justice using "flesh" as both a metaphorical and a literal commodity. "My own flesh and blood to rebel!" exclaims Shylock when he relates Jessica's flight from him (3. 1. 30). In taking Jessica, Lorenzo has stolen much more from Shylock than ducats and jewels; he has stolen his daughter—his flesh. Not only does Shylock lose his daughter in this exchange, but his family line and ability to bestow his faith on subsequent generations is subverted. Jessica reveals misgivings about her treachery when she tells Lorenzo, "I am glad 'tis night, you don't look upon me,/ For I am much ashamed of my exchange" (2. 6. 35-36). On the surface, Jessica appears to be embarrassed by her appearance in boys' clothing, but Jessica could also be expressing compunction for the disloyalty toward her father. It is this loss of his flesh and blood in the form of his daughter and the authority's inability to recover his possessions that heightens Shylock's resolve to enforce the contract against Antonio. Antonio's friends are sure that Shylock will not take Antonio's flesh if he forfeits the bond because the flesh has no value. Shylock tells them that he will use the flesh as fish bait. "If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge," he says (3. 1. 47-48). Shylock, glad when he hears news of Antonio's losses, is certain that the Duke will enforce the legal contract and provide Shylock with his revenge in the form of a pound of Antonio's flesh. While these two scenes establish a connection with "flesh"

as a central element, there are marked differences between them. Jessica and Lorenzo abscond with Shylock's valuables in the dark of the night and with Jessica in disguise. Not only does Lorenzo fail to ask Shylock's permission for his daughter's hand in marriage, but he escapes with her under concealment. Shylock, on the other hand, demands Antonio's flesh in open court, saying, " I stand here for law" (4. 1. 145). Shylock has a legal contract and seeks the court's assistance in enforcing it, where the elopement seeks to circumvent the covenant between Shylock and his daughter. Lorenzo and Jessica are assisted by their friends in the elopement, and the friends come together again in the courthouse to support Antonio, but Shylock is left in his house and is again alone in court. Shakespeare uses rings to further draw parallels and delineate distinctions in these scenes. When Jessica flees, she takes her mother's turquoise ring and then trades the ring for a monkey. Shylock laments the loss of this ring, a sentimental gift from his wife, saying, " I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys" (3. 1. 108-109). Portia tests Bassanio by asking for the ring she has given him. While in disguise as the lawyer Balthazar, Portia seeks the ring as a token of gratitude for her legal services. At first, Bassanio refuses to part with the ring, telling the lawyer: " Good sir, this ring was given me by my wife,/ And when she put it on, she made me vow/ That I should neither sell nor give nor lose it" (4. 1. 456-458). Bassanio relents and turns over the ring when his friend Antonio beseeches him to, " let him have the ring./ Let his deservings, and my love withal,/ Be valued ' gainst your wife's commandment" (3. 1. 464-466). Gratiano, ever the shadow of Bassanio, presents Nerissa's ring to the lawyer's clerk. Shylock loses Leah's ring

through no fault of his own, Bassanio chooses to give away Portia's ring in a show of loyalty to Antonio, and Gratiano gives away his ring from Nerissa because of his desire to emulate Bassanio. As a further mockery of justice, Bassanio's and Gratiano's rings are returned to them while Shylock's ring is located, but never repatriated. Bassanio offers Shylock 6, 000 ducats to repay the original 3, 000 borrowed, but Shylock refuses and instead insists on the pound of Antonio's flesh. Portia, incognito and acting as a lawyer when she is not sanctioned by the court to do so, reveals a loophole in the law that not only spares Antonio's life, but releases him from repaying the principal borrowed. The voidance of the contract for a pound of flesh and loss of the principal would be, in modern times at least, a just outcome of such a ludicrous agreement, but Portia turns the law on Shylock, claiming that the agreement is tantamount to a threat on Antonio's life. Shylock's attempt to gain recompense for the loss of his flesh and blood by taking a pound of Antonio's flesh backfires. The court metes out a sentence that further compounds the loss and humiliation Shylock suffered at Jessica's elopement. Portia stipulates terms that require Shylock to forfeit half of his wealth, name Lorenzo his heir, and convert to Christianity. Giving that Shylock has already lost a significant amount of money in the elopement, requiring more in the form of a fine is a harsh blow. By demanding that Shylock name Lorenzo as his heir, the court is forcing Shylock to legally acknowledge the marriage between his daughter and the interloper. The conversion to Christianity is perhaps the harshest punishment imposed by the court. As a Christian, Shylock would no longer be able to participate in his career of usury. In addition to this loss of income, as a Jewish man, Shylock's eternal soul is

placed in jeopardy. Justice is ambiguous in this scene. Shylock has lost everything—his daughter, his wealth, his inheritance, and his religion—but to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, this ending could be construed a happy one where Shylock is forced to find an ethical means of making money, the family is reunited through the court-dictated relationship, and Shylock's soul is saved with his conversion to Christianity. Using covenants to explore different facets of justice, Shakespeare does not seem to come to any conclusions, but would rather the audience members explore their own beliefs. Antonio is neither the hero nor the villain, Shylock is detestable and sympathetic at the same time, and the justice system cannot be relied upon to right society's wrongs.