

A comedy of horrors: mercy gone mercenary in the merchant of venice

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There is a method to the madness that is Shakespearean Comedy. Every Comedy has an outline and “The Merchant of Venice” is no exception. This highly social dilemma centers on the pursuit of love and money and concludes with the joyous acquisition of just that. But while beautiful people pursue beautiful things, something dark is going on beneath and made light of through Shakespearean wit. The sources of human identity are probed as a Venetian moneylender transforms into the monster he is pressured to become and a beautiful heiress mutates mercy and justice into wicked trickery. Portia’s plea for mercy in the fourth act is the most poetic and moving speech in all of this play and it is in comparison to this oration that the disturbing undertones of “The Merchant of Venice” become the most apparent. A close reading of Portia’s Mercy Speech (IV, i, 190-212) discloses a tone and rhetoric entirely unlike anything else in this play.” The quality of mercy is not strained./It dropeth as the gentle rain from heaven/Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:/It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.” Portia is speaking with tones of fanciful romance that has in past been reserved only for wooing. She is trying to convince Shylock that mercy is not something that can be enforced by the court, but that it is something more beautiful and nourishing than anything conceived on earth. Portia also wants Shylock to know that mercy in this case will be best for everyone -a subtle hint that she intends to get her way.” “Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes/ The throned monarch better than his crown./ His scepter shows the force of temporal power,/ The attribute to awe and majesty/ Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;/ But mercy above this sceptered sway.” Portia is clearly drawing a comparison between Shylock and the king of men

he will become if he shows mercy. She explains that those who are mighty will show mercy implying that if he does not, he is weak. Portia insinuates that Shylock is the leader of this situation and can use his advantage to awe and frighten everyone in the court, but that his compassion must overrule this desire to dominate.” It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;/ It is an attribute to God himself;/ And earthy power doth then show likest God’s/ When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,/ Though justice be thy plea, consider this:/ That in the course of justice none of use/ Should see salvation.” Portia goes on to show that mercy is a quality of God that can be passed down through the kings of men. Mercy is the only way that men can emanate power the nearest to God’s, especially when it is applied to human-sought justice. The Christian doctrine preaches that because Adam and Eve have fallen into sin, only God’s mercy can provide salvation. Portia implores to Shylock that in his personal quest of justice none will find salvation and that it would be best for everyone involved in he granted mercy instead.” We do pray for mercy,/ And that same prayer doth teach us all to render/ The deeds of mercy.” In the Lord’s Prayer we are to ask God to forgive us “ as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Portia is telling Shylock that if he has ever wished for mercy then he is morally required to give it in turn.” I have spoke thus much/ To mitigate the justice of my plea,/ Which, if though follow, this strict court of Venice/ Must needs give sentence ‘ gainst the merchant there.” Portia has tried to temper with mercy Shylock’s plea for justice but if he insists upon it, the court will have no choice but to see the sentence through. In sum, Portia issues a plea to Shylock for mercy. She speaks of mercy in romantic and heavenly terms as she compares the givers of mercy

to kings. She looks to God as the source of mercy and declares that the closest way we can emulate God's power is to grant mercy ourselves. She insists that it is every human's obligation to grant mercy if he wishes the same treatment for himself. Mercy is the best and only morally upstanding choice, but if Shylock disregards it, she will see the sentence through. This entire speech is ridiculous comedy. The attitude and message of this monologue is contrary to that of the majority of this drama and is designed as a foil to accentuate the circle of cruelty that is "The Merchant of Venice." Circles are a dominant theme within this play. Shylock gains money and then lends it away. Antonio sends out his money hoping that it will come back to him much accompanied. Bassanio makes an analogy between his spending on courtship and his past experiences with arrows where "when I had lost one shaft,/ I shot his fellow of the selfsame flight/ To find the other forth" (I, i, 147-151). Bassanio also wants to send money out in hopes that it will bring more back to him in the form of Portia. There are even physical circles in the play; the rings given to Bassanio and Gratiano. These rings travel a circular path, as they are give, given again, and eventually find their way back from whence they came. The many circles in the play parallel the general circle that dominates the plot: that of cruelty. The Christian Antonio viciously tortures and abuses the local Jew until Shylock is made so crazy with hate that seeks violent revenge. The cruelty circles back to the Christians when Shylock craftily tricks Antonio into signing his life into merchant's hands and then Shylock demands the forfeit of his bond. Portia's Mercy Speech at the trial is the apex of the play as it highlights what ought to be done in the face of all the cruelty that has been wrought. The audience is given the

expectation that finally the circle of cruelty will be broken, that something charitable and decent might actually be afforded to the antagonist. It doesn't. In context with the entirety of the play, Portia's Mercy Speech is hilarious in that it is quite comical to think that any creature in this work is actually capable of doing the moral, merciful thing. The characters are all given the opportunity to choose the humane path and every one of them forsakes it. Portia begins her speech with a romantic notion of delights pouring down from heaven. Her quixotic tone serves to highlight the absolute lack of romance in the play. Every relationship in Venice seems gilded not with love, but with money. Bassanio seeks out Portia because she is incredibly wealthy and even Lorenzo's pockets benefit from his elopement with Jessica. These characters know nothing of romance as a husband is chosen from a casket, cruel tricks are played on newlywed husbands, and grooms are willing to give away their wedding rings to near strangers. There are even further examples of how Portia's speech directly contrasts how the characters actually act. Portia speaks of the kingliness of mercy highlighting the tricks that are used throughout the play by Shylock and by Portia herself to gain what is in their best interest. At the conclusion of her Mercy Speech, Portia promises that the court will grant Shylock what he wants when in actuality she intends to do the exact opposite. Portia speaks of how a commitment to the Lord requires mercy while she shows Shylock no mercy at the end of the trial. Directly after her plea she robs Shylock of half his estate instead of showing him the mercy that she originally prescribes. Gratiano and Antonio join her in her Christian hypocrisy as Gratiano demands that Shylock " must be hanged at the state's/ charge" (IV, i, 182) and

Antonio intends that Shylock “ presently become a Christian” and that “ he do record a gift...of all he dies possessed/Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter,” (IV, i, 403-406) the very people who most betrayed and wronged Shylock. After preaching the necessity of mercy the Christians trick Shylock out of the justice he deserves and torture him further by robbing him of his fortune. This component of the play is dominated by a tone hungry bitterness. When Portia asks Antonio what mercy he will afford Shylock, Gratiano cannot stop yelling for a “ A halter gratis, nothing else, for God’s sake!” (IV, i, 395) He will only be pacified by a hanging. Antonio mocks the concept of mercy when he agrees to “ quit the fine for one half of his goods,/ so he will let me have/ The other half” (IV, i, 397-399). Antonio does not deserve this money, but he will take advantage of Shylock regardless. But why does Shylock receive ultimate punishment while the Christians get to go home happy? These merciless Christians are only saved by the strict format of Comedy itself. Comedy demands that the play end in happy marriage and the audience would most like to see their own kind remain victorious. Still, Shakespeare can please the crowd and yet leave them with a subtle message. The end of the play, though true to comedic fashion, is a bit dark and cloudy on the horizon. Jessica, who has just run off with the man she loves -much to the expense of her father- remarks that she is “ never merry when [she] hears sweet music” (V, i, 77) while the moonlight reminds her of stories about tragic, betrayed love. Perhaps she realizes that she is only happily wed because she was willing to conform, and paid handsomely to do so. The marriages of Bassanio and Gratiano start out rocky as their wives play cruel tricks on them and they fail the tests of their love. These final

images of happiness and harmony are precarious, leaving the audience with the feeling that all is not well and the circle of cruelty is likely to continue.