

Act 4

Scene 1 The trial scene in *The Merchant of Venice* is the most famous scene in English drama. It has given a phrase to the English language: people who have never read the play—and perhaps never even heard of it—understand what it means to want one's 'pound of flesh'.

The conversation between the Duke and Antonio, before Shylock comes on to the stage, shows the hopeless resignation with which Antonio faces Shylock's wrath. The Duke makes a further plea for mercy, but Shylock is unmoved. He will admit that his hatred for Antonio is irrational and emotional: just as some people hate cats, or the sound of bagpipes, so (he says)

can I give no reason, nor I will not,
More than a lodg'd hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio.

Antonio is not intimidated, and shows his contempt for Shylock's 'Jewish heart'. Bassanio offers to repay twice the money that he borrowed, but Shylock will not yield, and reminds the court that the pound of flesh is his by law. If the Duke refuses to grant this, it will appear that 'There is no force in the decrees of Venice'. We remember Antonio's words (3, 3, 27–31), and realize that, if the law is not observed, Venice will suffer in its reputation as the centre of international trade.

The Duke has made a final attempt to save Antonio legally. He has asked for the opinion of a famous lawyer, Bellario, and the court waits to hear this man's judgement. Bassanio is optimistic, but the tension of the situation has made Antonio even more resigned to his fate; he almost feels that he deserves to die.

The lawyer's clerk has brought a letter from Bellario, and whilst the Duke reads the letter, Shylock sharpens his knife. Gratiano cannot bear to see this sight, and he begins to abuse Shylock. The Jew appears to be unaffected by his insults, for he knows the strength of his position: 'I stand here for law'.

Bellarion is sick, and cannot come to Venice; instead he has sent a legal colleague, 'a young doctor of Rome', who is fully acquainted with the case. The audience recognizes this 'doctor': it is Portia, and the 'clerk' was Nerissa. The other characters of the play, however, cannot penetrate the disguise.

Portia upholds Venetian law, but she urges Shylock to show

mercy. She describes the 'quality of mercy' as a divine blessing, which benefits both the man who shows mercy and the man who receives it. The petition in the Lord's Prayer, 'forgive us our trespasses', comes to mind when Portia explains how mercy belongs to God; if this were not so, the whole human race would be damned for its sins. But this is Christian doctrine, and Shylock's religion is of the Old Testament, which emphasizes the importance of the law, just as Shylock does now: 'I crave the law'.

Once again Bassanio offers the money; again Shylock refuses it; and once more we are reminded that a general principle lies beneath this particular instance:

'Twill be recorded for a precedent,
And many an error by the same example
Will rush into the state.

The statement is harsh, but it is correct. Portia has earned Shylock's praise 'A Daniel come to judgement'. Daniel was 'a young youth', according to 'The Story of Susanna' in the *Apocrypha*. He was inspired by God to give judgement when the chaste Susanna was accused of adultery by two lascivious 'elders' who had tried to rape her.

Portia continues to win Shylock's approval as she instructs the court about the penalty that Antonio must pay. The knife is sharpened, and the scales are ready; Antonio prepares for death. He speaks a few words of comfort to Bassanio, ending with a wry jest about the debt:

For if the Jew do cut but deep enough,
I'll pay it instantly with all my heart.

The tension is broken, but only for a moment, when Bassanio and Gratiano refer to their wives. The 'lawyer' and his 'clerk' are amused.

Just when Shylock is ready to cut into Antonio's flesh, Portia stops the proceedings. She reveals to Shylock the single flaw in his carefully worded bond: he is entitled to his pound of flesh, but has made no provision for a single drop of blood.

Gratiano exults over Shylock, repeating ironically all the words of praise that the Jew bestowed on the 'learned judge', and agreeing that he is indeed 'A second Daniel'. Like Portia, Daniel was not expected in the court, and the verdict he gave saved Susanna and condemned her accusers. The comparison is more apt now than it was when Shylock introduced it.

Shylock realizes that he cannot have his pound of flesh, and he tries to take the money that Bassanio is still offering. Now it is Portia's turn to be inflexible, and she insists that Shylock can have 'merely justice, and his bond'. When Shylock proposes to leave the court, Portia calls him back. The law of Venice has a strict penalty that must be paid by any 'alien' — foreigner — who tries to murder a Venetian. Shylock has thus offended, and for this crime his possessions are confiscated and his life is in danger. Antonio, of course, shows his generosity. Half of Shylock's wealth is forfeited to him, but he is willing to renounce his personal share and take the money on loan, keeping it in trust for Lorenzo, 'the gentleman That lately stole his daughter'. He makes two conditions: firstly, Shylock must become a Christian; and, secondly, he must make a will leaving all that he possesses to Jessica and Lorenzo. Shylock is utterly defeated. He asks for permission to leave the court, and indicates his agreement to Antonio's conditions: 'send the deed after me And I will sign it'.

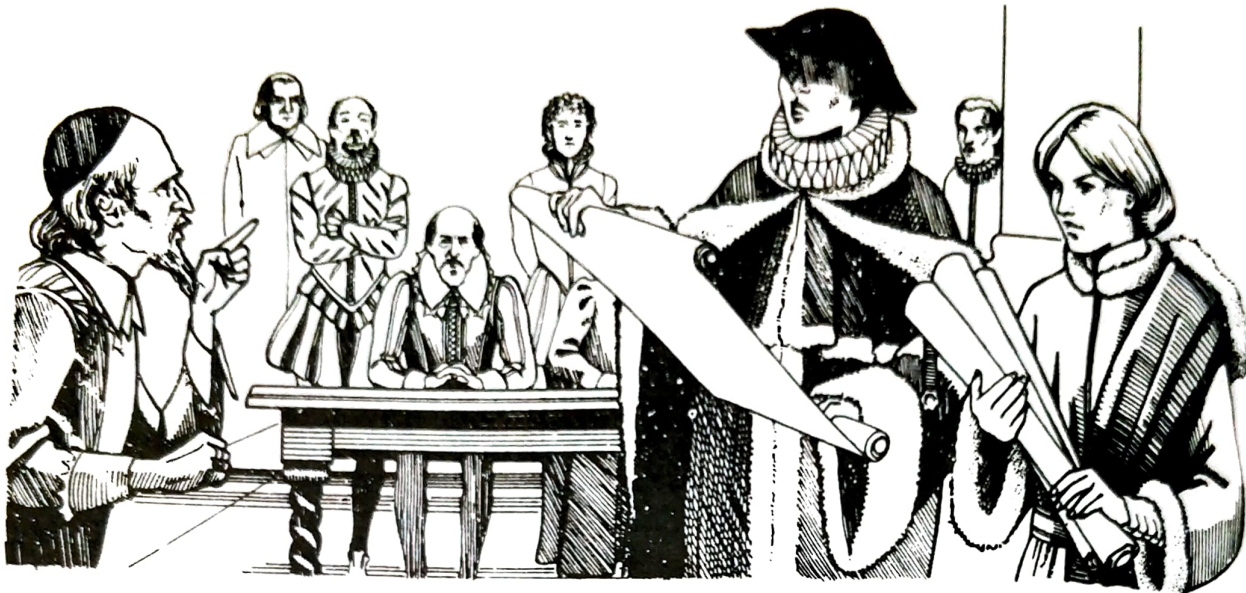
For a long time Bassanio has been silent, perhaps because the events have affected him very deeply and prevented him from sharing in Gratiano's expressions of triumph. Sometimes Gratiano, speeches seem rather cruel, for although Shylock undoubtedly deserves punishment, it is hard that he should lose everything, including his right to believe in the Jewish faith. Gratiano, however, shows the character that Bassanio rebuked him for before the two men went to Belmont — 'bold of voice' and with a 'skipping spirit' (2, 2, 173; 179). Bassanio and Antonio are more dignified in their behaviour.

It is only necessary now to pay the 'lawyer', and then Bassanio can take Antonio home to Belmont, to meet his new wife. The 'lawyer' refuses payment, then suddenly catches sight of a ring on Bassanio's finger, and requests this as a keepsake. It is the ring that Portia gave to Bassanio, telling him that if he should ever part with it for any reason, it would 'presage the ruin of [his] love'. Remembering this, Bassanio refuses; the 'lawyer' departs, apparently angry. Antonio begs Bassanio not to withhold the ring, and Bassanio cannot refuse the friend who risked so much for him.

Scene 2 Gratiano hurries after Portia to give her Bassanio's ring. Nerissa, still disguised as the lawyer's clerk, whispers to Portia that she will use a similar trick to get her own ring from Gratiano. The two girls laugh in anticipation of their husbands' embarrassment when they return to Belmont.

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Act 4



Act 4 Scene 1

The Duke asks Shylock to show mercy to Antonio, but Shylock refuses and insists on having his pound of flesh. A young lawyer comes into the court—it is Portia in disguise, with Nerissa as the lawyer's clerk. Portia makes a speech in praise of mercy, but Shylock is unmoved. Portia agrees that he is legally entitled to a pound of Antonio's flesh, and Antonio prepares to die. At the last moment Portia finds a way of escape for Antonio. Bassanio is very grateful because his friend's life has been saved, and he offers to reward the young lawyer. Portia asks for a ring.

- 5 *void*: empty.
- 6 *dram*: a tiny measure.
- 7 *qualify*: moderate.
- 8 *stands obdurate*: remains hard-hearted.
- 11 *arm'd*: prepared.

Scene 1 Venice. A court of justice

Enter the Duke, the Merchants, Antonio, Bassanio, Gratiano, Salerio, and Officers of the Court

Duke

What, is Antonio here?

Antonio

Ready, so please your Grace.

Duke

I am sorry for thee: thou art come to answer
A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch
5 Uncapable of pity, void and empty
From any dram of mercy.

Antonio

I have heard

Your Grace hath ta'en great pains to qualify
His rigorous course; but since he stands obdurate
And that no lawful means can carry me
10 Out of his envy's reach, I do oppose
My patience to his fury, and am arm'd
To suffer with a quietness of spirit
The very tyranny and rage of his.

Duke

Go one, and call the Jew into the court.

Salerio

15 He is ready at the door: he comes, my lord.

Enter Shylock

Duke

Make room, and let him stand before our face.
 Shylock, the world thinks, and I think so too,
 That thou but lead'st this fashion of thy malice
 To the last hour of act; and then 'tis thought
 20 Thou'lt show thy mercy and remorse more strange
 Than is thy strange apparent cruelty;
 And where thou now exact'st the penalty—
 Which is a pound of this poor merchant's flesh—
 Thou wilt not only loose the forfeiture,
 25 But, touch'd with human gentleness and love,
 Forgive a moiety of the principal,
 Glancing an eye of pity on his losses,
 That have of late so huddled on his back,
 Enow to press a royal merchant down,
 30 Ana pluck commiseration of his state
 From brassy bosoms and rough hearts of flints,
 From stubborn Turks and Tartars, never train'd
 To offices of tender courtesy.
 We all expect a gentle answer, Jew.

Shylock

35 I have possess'd your Grace of what I purpose;
 And by our holy Sabbath have I sworn
 To have the due and forfeit of my bond:
 If you deny it, let the danger light
 Upon your charter and your city's freedom.
 40 You'll ask me, why I rather choose to have
 A weight of carrion flesh than to receive
 Three thousand ducats. I'll not answer that,
 But say it is my humour. Is it answer'd?
 What if my house be troubled with a rat,
 45 And I be pleas'd to give ten thousand ducats
 To have it ban'd? What, are you answer'd yet?
 Some men there are love not a gaping pig;
 Some, that are mad if they behold a cat;
 And others, when the bagpipe sings i' the nose,
 50 Cannot contain their urine: for affection,
 Master of passion, sways it to the mood
 Of what it likes, or loathes. Now, for your answer:
 As there is no firm reason to be render'd,

18-19 *thou . . . act*: you intend to carry
 on with this show of cruelty until the
 last moment.
 20 *more strange*: which will be more
 strange.
 21 *apparent*: as it appears now.
 22 *exact'st*: insist on having.
 23 *loose the forfeiture*: refuse to
 accept the penalty that Antonio should
 pay.
 26 Allow him to keep a part of the
 original sum he borrowed.
 29 *Enow*: enough.
 30 *royal*: noble.
 31 *commiseration of*: sympathy for.
 32 *brassy bosoms*: hearts as hard as
 brass.
 33 *stubborn*: unfeeling.
 34 *train'd . . . courtesy*: taught to
 behave with gentleness.
 35 *possess'd*: informed.
 36 *Sabbath*: the seventh day of the
 Jewish week, which was the holiest day
 (Genesis 2: 3).
 37 *due . . . bond*: the proper penalty
 for not repaying my loan.
 38 *light*: descend.
 39 *charter*: the document by which
 Venice was granted independence
 ('freedom').
 41 *carrion*: rotten.
 43 *it is my humour*: because I
 want it.
 46 *ban'd*: poisoned.
 47 *a gaping pig*: a pig's head,
 roasted, with the mouth open.
 49 *sings i' the nose*: drones.
 50-2 *affection . . . loathes*: prejudice is
 stronger than any emotion ('passion'),
 and directs our emotion to love or hate
 the objects of our prejudice.

54-6 *he . . . he . . . he*: this man . . .
that man . . . the other man.

56 *woollen bagpipe*: the bag of the
pipes was covered in woollen material.

56-8 *but . . . offended*: but when he is
himself offended, he is compelled
(forced) to react in such a shameful
way that he must give offence to
others.

60 *lodg'd*: deep-rooted.

62 *A losing suit*: a legal case where
I must lose money.

64 *current*: outpouring.

68 A single offence is not a cause
for hatred.

70 *think . . . Jew*: remember that
you are arguing with the Jew.

72 *main flood*: ocean tide.
bate: reduce.

73 *use question with*: ask.

76 *wag*: wave.

77 *fretten*: blown.

82 But as quickly and simply as
you can.

87 *draw*: accept.

Why he cannot abide a gaping pig;
Why he, a harmless necessary cat;
55 Why he, a woollen bagpipe, but of force
Must yield to such inevitable shame
As to offend, himself being offended;
So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
60 More than a lodg'd hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio, that I follow thus

he hates Antonio
A losing suit against him. Are you answer'd?
Bassanio *don't give any excuse*
This is no answer, thou unfeeling man, *you*
To excuse the current of thy cruelty. *behaviour*

Shylock

65 I am not bound to please thee with my answers.

Bassanio

Do all men kill the things they do not love?

Shylock

Hates any man the thing he would not kill?

Bassanio

Every offence is not a hate at first.

Shylock

What! wouldst thou have a serpent sting thee
twice?

Antonio

70 I pray you, think you question with the Jew:
You may as well go stand upon the beach,
And bid the main flood bate his usual height;
You may as well use question with the wolf,
Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb;
75 You may as well forbid the mountain pines
To wag their high tops, and to make no noise
When they are fretten with the gusts of heaven;
You may as well do anything most hard,
As seek to soften that — than which what's harder? —
80 His Jewish heart: therefore, I do beseech you,
Make no more offers, use no farther means;
But with all brief and plain conveniency,
Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will.

Bassanio

For thy three thousand ducats here is six.

Shylock

85 If every ducat in six thousand ducats
Were in six parts, and every part a ducat,
I would not draw them. I would have my bond.

well agreed

Duke

How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none?

Shylock

What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?

90 You have among you many a purchas'd slave,
Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,
You use in abject and in slavish parts,

Because you bought them: shall I say to you,
'Let them be free, marry them to your heirs?

95 Why sweat they under burdens? let their beds
Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates
Be season'd with such viands?' You will answer,

'The slaves are ours'. So do I answer you:

100 The pound of flesh which I demand of him,
Is dearly bought; 'tis mine and I will have it.

If you deny me, fie upon your law!

There is no force in the decrees of Venice.

I stand for judgment. Answer—shall I have it?

Duke

Upon my power I may dismiss this court,

105 Unless Bellario, a learned doctor, *lawyer*
Whom I have sent for to determine this,
Come here today.

Salerio

My lord, here stays without

A messenger with letters from the doctor,
New come from Padua.

Duke

110 Bring us the letters: call the messenger.

Bassanio

Good cheer, Antonio! What, man, courage yet!
The Jew shall have my flesh, blood, bones, and all,
Ere thou shalt lose for me one drop of blood.

Antonio

I am a tainted *tainted* wether of the flock,

115 Meetest for death: the weakest kind of fruit
Drops earliest to the ground; and so let me.

You cannot better be employ'd, Bassanio, *engraved*
Than to live still, and write mine epitaph. *on the grave*

Enter Nerissa, dressed like a lawyer's clerk

Duke

Came you from Padua, from Bellario?

90 *purchas'd slave*: slave that you
have bought.
92 *in abject . . . parts*: for lowly and
servile tasks.

97 *Be season'd . . . viands*: be treated
with the same food as your own.

101 *fie*: shame.
102 *force*: power.

104 *Upon my power*: with my
authority.

107 *stays without*: waits outside.

114 *tainted wether*: diseased ram.
115 *Meetest*: most suitable.

118 *live still*: go on living.

- 121 *whet*: sharpen. Bassanio's comment in line 123 shows that Shylock is using the sole of his shoe for sharpening the knife.
- 128 *inexorable*: relentless.
- 129 Let justice be said to be guilty that you are alive.
- 131 *hold opinion*: agree.
Pythagoras: a Greek philosopher who believed (as Bassanio explains) that the souls of men and of animals passed into other bodies.
- 132 *infuse*: pour.
- 133 *currish*: like a cur—a mongrel dog.
- 134 *hang'd for human slaughter*: this was in fact a means of destroying killer animals.
- 135 *Even*: directly.
fell: cruel.
fleet: speed away.
- 136 *unhallow'd*: unsanctified (because non-Christian).
dam: mother.
- 139 *rail*: shout.
- 140 *offend'st*: trouble.
- 142 *cureless*: incurable.
- 145 *hard*: near.

- 148 *give him courteous conduct*: lead him politely.

Nerissa

120 From both, my lord. Bellario greets your Grace.
[Presents a letter]

Bassanio

Why dost thou whet thy knife so earnestly?

Shylock

To cut the forfeiture from that bankrupt there.

Gratiano

Not on thy sole, but on thy soul, harsh Jew,
Thou mak'st thy knife keen; but no metal can,
125 No, not the hangman's axe, bear half the keenness
Of thy sharp envy. Can no prayers pierce thee?

Shylock

No, none that thou hast wit enough to make.

Gratiano

O, be thou damn'd, inexorable dog!
And for thy life let justice be accus'd.
130 Thou almost mak'st me waver in my faith
To hold opinion with Pythagoras,
That souls of animals infuse themselves
Into the trunks of men: thy currish spirit
Govern'd a wolf, who, hang'd for human slaughter,
135 Even from the gallows did his fell seal fleet,
And whilst thou lay'st in thy unhallow'd dam,
Infus'd itself in thee; for thy desires
Are wolfish, bloody, starv'd, and ravenous.

Shylock

Till thou canst rail the seal from off my bond.
140 Thou but offend'st thy lungs to speak so loud:
Repair thy wit, good youth, or it will fall
To cureless ruin. I stand here for law.

Duke

This letter from Bellario doth commend
A young and learned doctor to our court.
145 Where is he?

Nerissa

He attendeth here hard by,
To know your answer, whether you'll admit him.

Duke

With all my heart: some three or four of you
Go give him courteous conduct to this place.
[Exeunt Officers]
Meantime, the court shall hear Bellario's letter.

150 Your Grace shall understand that at the receipt of
your letter I am very sick; but in the instant that your
messenger came, in loving visitation was with me a
young doctor of Rome; his name is Balthazar.
I acquainted him with the cause in controversy
155 between the Jew and Antonio the merchant. We
turned o'er many books together. He is furnished with
my opinion; which, bettered with his own learning—
the greatness whereof I cannot enough commend—
comes with him, at my importunity, to fill up your
160 Grace's request in my stead. I beseech you, let his lack
of years be no impediment to let him lack a reverend
estimation, for I never knew so young a body with so
old a head. I leave him to your gracious acceptance,
whose trial shall better publish his commendation.

Enter Portia, dressed like a doctor of law

165 You hear the learn'd Bellario, what he writes:
And here, I take it, is the doctor come.
Give me your hand. Come you from old Bellario?

Portia

I did, my lord.

Duke

You are welcome: take your place.

Are you acquainted with the difference

170 That holds this present question in the court?

Portia

I am informed throughly of the cause.

Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?

Duke

Antonio and old Shylock, both stand forth.

Portia

Is your name Shylock?

Shylock

Shylock is my name.

Portia

175 Of a strange nature is the suit you follow;

Yet in such rule, that the Venetian law

Cannot impugn you as you do proceed.

[To Antonio] You stand within his danger, do you
not?

Antonio

Ay, so he says.

Portia

Do you confess the bond?

Antonio

180 I do.

cause: matter.

controversy: dispute.

turned o'er: looked through.

is furnished: has been given.

bettered: improved.

importunity: earnest request.

in my stead: instead of me.

let . . . estimation: do not think

poorly of him because he is young.

whose . . . commendation: try him,

and you will see how much better he is
than my praise.

169-70 the difference . . . court: the
dispute that is at present on trial in
this court.

171 throughly: thoroughly.

176 in such rule: so correctly.

177 Cannot find any fault in your
proceedings.

178 within his danger: in danger from
him.

181 On . . . I: what will compel me
and force me to do it?

182 *is not strain'd*: cannot be forced
(constrained).

186 'Tis . . . *mightiest*: both 'mercy
is seen at its most powerful in the men
with most power', and 'mercy is the
most powerful weapon that the most
powerful men possess'.
becomes: suits.

188-9 The king's sceptre symbolizes
his earthly ('temporal') power, which is
the proper characteristic ('attribute') of
a royal man ('majesty') who commands
respect ('awe').

191 *this sceptred sway*: this world that
is ruled by men with sceptres.

193 *attribute to*: quality belonging to.

195 *seasons*: moderates.

196 *Though . . . plea*: although you
are asking for justice.

197-8 *in . . . salvation*: if we were all to
get what we deserve, in the strict
course of justice none of us would be
saved.

201 To ask you to soften your
demand for justice.

203 *Must needs*: is compelled.

204 *My . . . head*: I will take the
responsibility for what I am doing.
crave: ask for.

206 *discharge*: repay.

207 *tender*: offer.

209 *be bound*: make a legal promise.

212 *bears down*: overcomes.

213 *Wrest*: twist.

once: on this one occasion.

to: with.

215 *curb*: restrain.

Portia

Shylock

Then must the Jew be merciful.

On what compulsion must I? tell me that.

Portia

[The quality of mercy is not strain'd;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice bless'd;
185 It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest:] it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
190 Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings:
But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
195 When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
200 The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
To mitigate the justice of thy plea,
Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant
there.

Shylock

My deeds upon my head! I crave the law,
205 The penalty and forfeit of my bond.

Portia

Is he not able to discharge the money?

Bassanio

Yes, here I tender it for him in the court;
Yea, twice the sum: if that will not suffice,
I will be bound to pay it ten times o'er,
210 On forfeit of my hands, my head, my heart.
If this will not suffice, it must appear
That malice bears down truth. And, I beseech you
Wrest once the law to your authority:
To do a great right, do a little wrong,
215 And curb this cruel devil of his will.