

ACT II, SCENE i

In Belmont, the prince of Morocco arrives to attempt to win Portia's hand in marriage. The prince asks Portia not to judge him by his dark complexion, assuring her that he is as valorous as any European man. Portia reminds the prince that her own tastes do not matter, since the process of picking chests, stipulated in her father's will, makes the prince as worthy as any other suitor. With a lengthy proclamation of his own bravery and heroism, the prince asks Portia to lead him to the caskets, where he may venture his guess. She reminds him that the penalty for guessing incorrectly is that he must remain unmarried forever. The prince accepts this stipulation, and Portia leads him off to dinner.

ACT II, SCENE ii

Launcelot Gobbo, a servant of Shylock's, struggles to decide whether or not he should run away from his master. Part of him, which he calls "[t]he fiend . . . at mine elbow," wants to leave, while his conscience reminds him of his honest nature and urges him to stay (II.ii.2). Although Launcelot has no specific complaints, he seems troubled by the fact that his master is Jewish, or, as Launcelot puts it, "a kind of devil" (II.ii.19). Just when Launcelot determines to run away, his father, Old Gobbo, enters. The old man is blind, and he asks how to get to Shylock's house, where he hopes to find young Launcelot. Because his father does not recognize him, Launcelot decides to play a prank on him—he gives the old man confusing directions and reports that Launcelot is dead. When Launcelot reveals the deception, Old Gobbo doubts that the man before him is his son, but Launcelot soon convinces his father of his identity. Launcelot confesses to his father that he is leaving Shylock's employment in the hopes of serving Bassanio. Just then, Bassanio enters and the two plead with him to accept Launcelot as his servant. Bassanio takes several moments to understand their bumbling proposition, but he accepts the offer. Bassanio then meets

Gratiano, who asks to accompany him to Belmont, and agrees on the condition that Gratiano tame his characteristically wild behavior. Gratiano promises to be on his best behavior, and the two men plan a night of merriment to celebrate their departure.

ACT II, SCENE iii

Shylock's daughter Jessica bids good-bye to Launcelot. She tells him that his presence made life with her father more bearable. Jessica gives Launcelot a letter to carry to Bassanio's friend Lorenzo, and Launcelot leaves, almost too tearful to say good-bye. Jessica, left alone, confesses that although she feels guilty for being ashamed of her father, she is only his daughter by blood, and not by actions. Still, she hopes to escape her damning relationship to Shylock by marrying Lorenzo and converting to Christianity.

ACT II, SCENE iv

On a street in Venice, Gratiano, Lorenzo, Salarino, and Solanio discuss the plan to unite Lorenzo with Jessica. Gratiano frets that they are not well prepared, but Lorenzo assures the men that they have enough time to gather the necessary disguises and torchbearers. As they talk, Launcelot enters bearing Jessica's letter. Lorenzo recognizes the writing, lovingly exclaiming that the hand that penned the message is "whiter than the paper it writ on" (II.iv.13). Lorenzo bids Launcelot to return to Shylock's house in order to assure Jessica, secretly, that Lorenzo will not let her down. Launcelot departs, and Lorenzo orders his friends to prepare for the night's festivities. Salarino and Solanio leave, and Lorenzo relates to Gratiano that Jessica will escape from Shylock's house by disguising herself as Lorenzo's torchbearer. Lorenzo gives Gratiano the letter and asks Gratiano to read it, then leaves, excited for the evening's outcome.

ACT II, SCENE v

Shylock warns Launcelot that Bassanio will not be as lenient a master as Shylock himself has been, and that Launcelot will no longer be at liberty to overeat and oversleep. Shylock calls for Jessica and tells her that he has been summoned for dinner. Worried by a premonition that trouble is brewing, Shylock asks Jessica to keep the doors locked and not look out at the revelry taking place in the streets. Launcelot whispers to Jessica that she must disobey her father and look out the window for the Christian who “will be worth a Jew’s eye” (II.v.41). Shylock asks Jessica about her furtive conversation with Launcelot, and says that, though Launcelot is kind, he eats and sleeps too much to be an efficient, worthwhile servant. After Shylock has left to see Bassanio, Jessica bids him farewell, thinking that, if nothing goes wrong, Shylock will soon have lost a daughter, and she, a father.

ACT II, SCENE vi

As planned, Gratiano and Salarino meet in front of Shylock’s house. They are especially anxious because Lorenzo is late, and they think that lovers tend always to be early. The garrulous Gratiano expounds on Salarino’s theory that love is at its best when the lover chases the object of his affection, and that once the lover captures his lady and consummates the relationship, he tends to tire and lose interest. Lorenzo joins them, apologizes for his tardiness, and calls up to Jessica, who appears on the balcony dressed as a page. Jessica tosses him a casket of gold and jewels. Jessica descends and exits with Lorenzo and Salarino. Just then, Antonio enters to report that Bassanio is sailing for Belmont immediately. Gratiano is obliged to leave the festivities and join Bassanio at once.

ACT II, SCENE vii

Back in Belmont, Portia shows the prince of Morocco to the caskets, where he will attempt to win her hand by guessing which chest contains her portrait. The first casket, made of gold, is inscribed with the words, “Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire” (II.vii.37). The second, made of silver, reads, “Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves” (II.vii.23). The third, a heavy leaden casket, declares, “Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath” (II.vii.16). After much pondering, the prince chooses the gold casket, reasoning that only the most precious metal could house the picture of such a beautiful woman. He opens the chest to reveal a skull with a scroll in its eye socket. After reading a short poem chastising him for the folly of his choice, the prince makes a hasty departure. Portia is glad to see him go and hopes that “[a]ll of his complexion choose me so” (II.viii.79).

ACT II, SCENE viii

Having witnessed Shylock’s rage upon learning of Jessica’s elopement, Solanio describes the scene to Salarino. Shylock, he reports, railed against the loss of his daughter and his ducats, and he shouted a loud, urgent appeal for justice and the law to prevail. Solanio hopes that Antonio is able to pay his debt, but Salarino reminds him of rumors that the long-awaited ships have capsized in the English Channel. The two men warmly remember Bassanio’s departure from Antonio, wherein the merchant insisted that his young friend not allow thoughts of debt or danger to interfere with his courtship of Portia.

ACT II, SCENE ix

The prince of Arragon is in Belmont to try his luck at winning Portia’s hand in marriage. When brought to the caskets, he selects the silver one,

confident that he “shall get as much as he deserves” (II.ii.35). Inside, he finds a portrait of a blinking idiot, and a poem that condemns him as a fool. Soon after he departs, a messenger arrives to tell Portia that a promising young Venetian, who seems like the perfect suitor, has come to Belmont to try his luck at the casket game. Hoping that it is Bassanio, Portia and Nerissa go out to greet the new suitor.