

ACT IV, SCENE i

In Venice, the Court convenes for Antonio's trial. The duke of Venice greets Antonio and expresses pity for him, calling Shylock an inhuman monster who can summon neither pity nor mercy. Antonio says he knows the duke has done all that he can to lawfully counter Shylock's malicious intentions, and that since nothing else can be done, Antonio will respond to Shylock's rage "with a quietness of spirit" (IV.i.11). The duke summons Shylock into the courtroom and addresses him, saying that he believes that Shylock means only to frighten Antonio by extending this drama to the brink of performance. No one, the duke says, believes that Shylock actually means to inflict such a horrible penalty on Antonio, who has already suffered the loss of his ships. Shylock reiterates his intentions and says that should the court deny him his right, the city's very laws and freedoms will be forfeit. Shylock offers no explanation for his insistence other than to say that certain hatreds, like certain passions, are lodged deep within a person's heart. Shylock hates Antonio, and for him that is reason enough.

Bassanio, who has arrived from Belmont, attempts to argue with Shylock, but Antonio tells him that his efforts are for naught. Hatred and predation, Antonio suggests, come as naturally to some men as they do to the wolf. Bassanio offers Shylock six thousand ducats, twice the amount of the original loan, but Shylock turns down the offer, saying he would not forfeit his bond for six times that sum. When the duke asks Shylock how he expects to receive mercy when he offers none, Shylock replies that he has no need for mercy, as he has done nothing wrong. Just as the slave-owning Christians of Venice would refuse to set their human property free, Shylock will not relinquish the pound of flesh that belongs to him.

The duke says that he has sent messages to the learned lawyer, Doctor Bellario, asking him to come and decide on the matter. News comes that a messenger has arrived from Bellario, and Salarino runs off to fetch him. Meanwhile, Bassanio tries, without much success, to cheer up the

despairing Antonio. Nerissa enters, disguised as a lawyer's clerk, and gives the duke a letter from Bellario. Shylock whets his knife, anticipating a judgment in his favor, and Gratiano accuses him of having the soul of a wolf. Shylock ignores these slurs and states resolutely, "I stand here for law" (IV.i.141). The duke alludes to the fact that Bellario's letter mentions a learned young lawyer named Balthasar, and orders the disguised Nerissa to admit the young man to the court. The duke then reads the letter in its entirety. In it, Bellario writes that he is ill and cannot come to court, but that he has sent the learned young Balthasar to judge in his stead.

Portia enters, disguised as Balthasar. The duke greets her and asks whether she is familiar with the circumstances of the case. Portia answers that she knows the case well, and the duke calls Shylock and Antonio before her. Portia asks Antonio if he admits to owing Shylock money. When Antonio answers yes, Portia concludes that the Jew must be merciful. Shylock asks why he must show mercy, and, in one of the play's most famous speeches, Portia responds that "[t]he quality of mercy is not strained," but is a blessing to both those who provide and those who receive it (IV.i.179). Because mercy is an attribute of God, Portia reasons, humans approach the divine when they exercise it. Shylock brushes aside her pretty speech, however, by reiterating his demands for justice and revenge.

Portia asks whether Antonio is able to pay the money, and Bassanio offers Shylock twice the sum owed. If need be, Bassanio says, he is willing to pay the bond ten times over, or with his own life. Bassanio begs the court to bend the law slightly in order to exonerate Antonio, reasoning that such a small infraction is a little wrong for a great right. Portia replies, however, that the law shall not be broken—the decrees of Venice must stand.

Shylock joyfully extols Portia's wisdom, and gives her the bond for inspection. She looks it over, declares it legal and binding, and bids Shylock to be merciful. Shylock remains deaf to reason, however, and Portia tells Antonio to prepare himself for the knife. She orders Shylock to have a surgeon on hand to prevent the merchant from bleeding to death, but Shylock refuses because the bond stipulates no such safeguard.

Antonio bids Bassanio farewell. He asks his friend not to grieve for him and tells Bassanio that he is happy to sacrifice his life, if only to prove his love. Both Bassanio and Gratiano say that, though they love their wives, they would give them up in order to save Antonio. In a pair of sarcastic asides, Portia and Nerissa mutter that Bassanio's and Gratiano's wives are unlikely to appreciate such sentiments. Shylock is on the verge of cutting into Antonio when Portia suddenly reminds him that the bond stipulates a pound of flesh only, and makes no allowances for blood. She urges Shylock to continue collecting his pound of flesh, but reminds him that if a drop of blood is spilled, then he will be guilty of conspiring against the life of a Venetian citizen and all his lands and goods will be confiscated by the state. Stunned, Shylock hastily backpedals, agreeing to accept three times the sum, but Portia is insistent, saying that Shylock must have the pound of flesh or nothing. When Shylock finds out that he cannot even take the original three thousand ducats in place of the pound of flesh, he drops the case, but Portia stops him, reminding him of the penalty that noncitizens face when they threaten the life of a Venetian. In such a case, Portia states, half of Shylock's property would go to the state, while the other half would go to the offended party—namely, Antonio. Portia orders Shylock to beg for the duke's mercy.

The duke declares that he will show mercy: he spares Shylock's life and demands only a fine, rather than half of the Jew's estate. Shylock claims that they may as well take his life, as it is worthless without his estate. Antonio offers to return his share of Shylock's estate, on the condition that Shylock convert to Christianity and bequeath all his goods to Jessica and Lorenzo upon his death. Shylock consents and departs, saying simply, "I am not well" (IV.i.392)

After Shylock leaves, the duke invites Portia, still in the disguise of a young lawyer, to dinner. Portia declines, saying that she must leave immediately for Padua. As she leaves, the duke tells Antonio to reward the young law clerk, since it was he who saved Antonio's life. Bassanio thanks Portia,

though he does not see through her disguise, and offers her the money he brought with him in order to pay off Shylock. Portia declines the gift and says that having delivered Antonio from Shylock's clutches is payment enough. Bassanio insists that she take some token from him, and she eventually agrees. Portia asks Antonio for his gloves and Bassanio for his ring, which she herself gave Bassanio on the condition that he never part with it. Bassanio pulls his hand away, calling the ring a trifle and claiming that he will not dishonor the judge by giving him such a lowly gift. Instead, Bassanio offers to find the most valuable ring in Venice, but Portia remains firm, and demands the trifle or nothing. When Bassanio admits that the ring was a gift from his wife, who made him promise never to part with it, Portia claims that the excuse is convenient and used by many men to hold onto possessions they would rather not lose. With that, she takes her leave. Antonio urges Bassanio to let the law clerk have the ring, saying that he should value Antonio's love and the gentleman's worth more than his wife's orders. Bassanio gives in and sends Gratiano to run after Portia and present her with the ring. Antonio and Bassanio then leave for Antonio's house to plan their trip to Belmont.

ACT IV, SCENE ii

Meanwhile, Portia sends Nerissa to Shylock's house to ensure that Shylock signs the deed that will leave his fortune to Lorenzo and Jessica. Portia observes that Lorenzo will be happy to have this document. Once they complete this task, the disguised women plan to leave for Belmont, which will ensure their arrival a full day before their husbands'. Gratiano enters, offers Bassanio's ring to Portia, and invites her to dinner. Portia accepts the ring, but declines the invitation. Portia asks Gratiano to show Nerissa to Shylock's house, and Nerissa, before leaving, tells Portia that she will likewise try to convince Gratiano to part with his ring. The plan satisfies Portia, who imagines how Gratiano and Bassanio will swear up and down that they gave their rings to men, and looks forward to embarrassing them. Nerissa turns to Gratiano and asks him to lead her to Shylock's house.