

## CONTEXTS: MALE FRIENDSHIP

**F**rom the very outset, *The Merchant of Venice* pits male friendship against the claims of marriage. Antonio's circle of male friends includes a number of men—Bassanio, Gratiano, Salerio, Lorenzo, Solanio, but no women. Bassanio's pursuit of Portia, for love or money or both, threatens to weaken the bonds of friendship. For some in the Renaissance, like the philosopher Michel de Montaigne, male friendship is superior to marriage because it offers not the "mad desire" of heterosexual love, but rather "a constant and settled heat, all pleasure and smoothness" (see below). Male friendship can take many forms and this play explores a range of them, including homosocial ties and homosexual longing. Even Shylock has his friend and confidante, Tubal, who goes in search of Jessica in Genoa, a journey that would have been too humiliating and heart-breaking for Shylock to undertake himself. It's such a friend that Francis Bacon has in mind when he writes in his essay "Of Friendship," (from which further passages appear below): "How many things are there which a man cannot, with any face or comeliness, say or do himself? A man can scarce allege his own merits with modesty, much less extol them; a man cannot sometimes brook to supplicate or beg; and a number of the like. But all these things are graceful, in a friend's mouth, which are blushing in a man's own."

Portia is well aware of the close bonds that knit her new husband, Bassanio, to Antonio, and what Antonio says about his love for Bassanio in the courtroom scene can only reinforce her concern that Antonio constitutes something of a threat to her marriage: "Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death, / And when the tale is told, bid her be judge / Whether Bassanio had not once a love" (4.1.271-72). Note that Shakespeare defers the consummation of their marriage until after the second exchange of rings in Act 5—in which Antonio,

who gives Portia's ring back to Bassanio, is bound for Bassanio once more, in a replay of the main plot. He tells Portia that "I'll dare be bound again / My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord / Will nevermore break faith advisedly" (5.1.251-53). Only after the marital bond supplants that of male friendship can the comedy come to a close. And yet in the play's final lines, homosexual desire is obliquely raised again, as Gratiano fantasizes about making love to his wife, Nerissa, while she's dressed as a boy.

### TEXTS:

Concerning marriage, besides that it is a covenant which hath nothing free but the entrance, the continuance being forced and constrained, depending elsewhere than from our will, and a match ordinarily concluded to other ends: a thousand strange knots are therein commonly to be unknit, able to break the web, and trouble the whole course of a lively affection. Whereas in friendship, there is no commerce of business depending on the same, but itself. Seeing (to speak truly) that the ordinary sufficiency of women cannot answer this conference and communication, the nurse of this sacred bond, nor seem their minds strong enough to endure the pulling of a knot so hard, so fast, and durable. And truly, if without that, such a genuine and voluntary acquaintance might be contracted, where not only minds that this entire jovissance, but also bodies, a share of the alliance, and where a man might wholly be engaged. It is certain that friendship would thereby be more complete and full. But this sex could never yet by any example attain unto it, and is by ancient schools rejected thence. —Michel de Montaigne, "Of Friendship," *Essays*, trans. John Florio (London, 1603).

# MALE FRIENDSHIP

## "OF FRIENDSHIP"

A principal fruit of friendship, is the ease and discharge of the fullness and swellings of the heart, which passions of all kinds do cause and induce. We know diseases of stoppings, and suffocations, are the most dangerous in the body; and it is not much otherwise in the mind; you may take sarza to open the liver, steel to open the spleen, flowers of sulphur for the lungs, castoreum for the brain; but no receipt openeth the heart, but a true friend; to whom you may impart griefs, joys, fears, hopes, suspicions, counsels, and whatsoever lieth upon the heart to oppress it, is a kind of civil shrift or confession....

But one thing is most admirable (wherewith I will conclude this first fruit of friendship), which is, that this communicating of a man's self to his friend, works two contrary effects; for it redoubleth joys, and cutteth griefs in halves. For there is no man, that imparteth his joys to his friend, but he joyeth the more; and no man that imparteth his griefs to his friend, but he grieveth the less. So that it is in truth, of operation upon a man's mind, of like virtue as the alchemists use to attribute to their stone, for man's body; that it worketh all contrary effects, but still to the good and benefit of nature. But yet without praying in aid of alchemists, there is a manifest image of this, in the ordinary course of nature. For in bodies, union strengtheneth and cherisheth any natural action; and on the other side, weakeneth and dulleth any violent impression: and even so it is of minds.



The second fruit of friendship, is healthful and sovereign for the understanding, as the first is for the affections. For friendship maketh indeed a fair day in the affections, from storm and tempests; but it maketh daylight in the understanding, out of darkness, and confusion of thoughts. Neither is this to be understood only of faithful counsel, which a man receiveth from

his friend; but before you come to that, certain it is, that whosoever hath his mind fraught with many thoughts, his wits and understanding do clarify and break up, in the communicating and discoursing with another; he tosseth his thoughts more easily; he marshalleth them more orderly, he seeth how they look when they are turned into words: finally, he waxeth wiser than himself; and that more by an hour's discourse, than by a day's meditation.

After these two noble fruits of friendship (peace in the affections, and support of the judgment), followeth the last fruit; which is like the pomegranate, full of many kernels; I mean aid, and bearing a part, in all actions and occasions. Here the best way to represent to life the manifold use of friendship, is to cast and see how many things there are, which a man cannot do himself; and then it will appear, that it was a sparing speech of the ancients, to say, that a friend is another himself; for that a friend is far more than himself. —Francis Bacon, *Essays* (London, 1626).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the nature of the bond between Antonio and Bassanio? Is Antonio in love with Bassanio? If so, what kind of love is this? Is it reciprocated? Compare how the relationship is portrayed in the film with how it comes across in the play text.
2. Compare the friendship of Portia and Nerissa with that of the friendship of the men in the play. What are the main differences? Does marriage change the women's friendships in the play?
3. Why does Antonio call himself "a tainted wether [castrated ram] of the flock," that the community can afford to lose? Is Antonio self-dramatizing or narcissistic in his desire that Bassanio be present to witness his death? If so, why? Does the end of the play adequately end the tension caused by the romantic triangle of Portia, Bassanio and Antonio?
4. To what extent does *The Merchant of Venice* support or call into question the claims for friendship set forth in Montaigne? And in Bacon?
5. What does *The Merchant of Venice* say about the incompatibility of friendship and marriage? Is there any place for Antonio in the community that is formed at the end of the play, or is he, as a single man, excluded?
6. Why is the second exchange of rings—this time with Antonio's participation—so crucial to the resolution of the play? What happens when this scene is acted out that doesn't happen on the page?
7. Think about how Jeremy Irons portrays Antonio: what emotions does he project? Does he elicit your sympathy? Does Irons' interpretation of the role suggest that he is in love with Bassanio, and heartbroken about his friend's marriage?
8. See the film *Death in Venice*, directed by Lucchino Visconti with Dirk Bogarde in the lead (1971), adapted from the Thomas Mann novella. Compare this film, also set in Venice, with this *Merchant*. Think particularly about the use of the setting and about the issue of unfulfilled male longing.
9. Given the centrality of bonds between men in the play and film, discuss the roles of Portia, Nerissa and Jessica. Are the women respected, loved, needed by the men? Are the women commodified? Discuss the ending with regard to the idea of romantic "happy endings" for the three couples.