

THE TRIAL SCENE (ACT 4)

This is one of the most gripping scenes in all of Shakespeare. The arrangement of the court is central to this scene.

1. How does Shylock enter, and what are we to make of his props—especially his knife and his scales to weigh Antonio's flesh?
2. How are we to react to Shylock's speech about Venetian hypocrisy: that they keep among them "many a purchased slave" (4.1.90) but would never consider giving them their freedom or marrying them to their children?
3. Does Shylock really intend to cut a pound of Antonio's flesh from the outset of this scene, or does he merely intend to terrify him?
4. What is the effect of the knife-sharpening scene (which in the eighteenth century Macklin did so terrifyingly that a young man reportedly fainted at the sight)?
5. Is Portia's line—"Which is the merchant and which the Jew"—supposed to be funny?
6. How much does it matter that Portia's and Nerissa's disguise is perfect? Are we supposed to think of them as young men in this scene or remain conscious that they are young women?
7. At what point does Portia figure out how to defeat Shylock? Has she known what she is going to do all along?
8. How is a modern Portia to avoid the problem of the "Quality of mercy" speech sounding like a sermon she has memorized? Should her lines be addressed to Shylock or to the court?
9. Should Shylock pause before responding to Portia's call for mercy? Some Shylocks have responded instantaneously; others, like Henry Goodman in the 1999 production at the National Theatre in London, let half a minute elapse before responding. Is Shylock at all persuaded by Portia's words?
10. Though defeated by the law, is Shylock still tempted to kill Antonio? Should he, as in some productions, have to be restrained from doing so?
11. How are we to respond to Shylock being convicted as an "alien" threatening a citizen's life, but punished as a Jew, being forced to convert?
12. How sincere are Shylock's words agreeing to convert: "I am content"? Is this resolution merciful? Does anyone in the court express sympathy for Shylock? Does he deserve sympathy?
13. What is on Shylock's mind as he exits?
14. In the late nineteenth century, Edwin Booth chose to end the play with Shylock's exit. What is gained or lost by doing so?

THE ENDING (5.1.300-307)

The film ends with a series of poignant images: Jessica, staring out at a fisherman wielding a bow and arrow, and then the gates of the ghetto closing on Shylock. Discuss the symbolism of these powerful shots. What is going on in the minds of these characters? What emotions are being expressed by these shots—regret, loss, abandonment? How does Jessica feel about her marriage, and about what has happened to her father?

The play ends on a similarly ambivalent note, with Gratiano's final speech:

Let it be so. The first inter'gatory
That my Nerissa shall be sworn on is:
Whether till the next night she had rather stay,
Or go to bed now, being two hours to day.
But were the day come, I should wish it dark,
Till I were couching with the doctor's clerk.
Well while I live, I'll fear no other thing
So sore, as keeping safe Nerissa's ring.

Elizabethan playgoers would have been well aware that the play ends with a stale dirty joke, popularized in François Rabelais's classic sixteenth-century work, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Rabelais' version of "keeping safe one's wife's ring" relates how a jealous husband is told in a dream by the Devil that the only way he can be absolutely sure that his wife remains faithful is to wear the ring that is on his finger. And when the jealous husband wakes from his dream, he realizes that he has his finger inside his wife, and she wakens and pulls away.

But onstage and in the new film, the play does not end with these lines and the silent action that follows is crucial to the play's resolution. Some productions have those onstage open a bottle of champagne and celebrate. Others have darker stage actions, including the film, which shows us a pensive Jessica and then a converted Shylock who is banished from the Ghetto but clearly not accepted by Christian Venetians.



QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. What does the film's ending say about its view of the resolution of Shakespeare's story? What is going on in the minds of these characters? Is it more comic or tragic?
2. What are we to make of the fact that the play ends in the liminal space between dark and dawn? How hopeful an ending does this suggest?
3. What is resolved at the end of the play and what is left unresolved?
4. How much hope do you have for the various marriages of Portia and Bassanio, Nerissa and Gratiano, and Jessica and Lorenzo?
5. What happens to the feistiness of the cross-dressing heroines now that they are back in women's clothing?
6. To what extent does the ending foreground the complicated issue of homosocial and homosexual bonds? Why, for example, does Gratiano want to make love to his wife imagining she is still dressed as a young man?
7. Have students write about what happens to the various characters after the end of the play. What will happen to each of the marriages? What is in Antonio's future?
8. On whom should the final scene focus? For much of the twentieth century, the spotlight was on Antonio. More recently, the play has ended with Jessica, though she has no lines at the end of the play. This new film, by returning to Shylock, hearkens back to an older tradition of ending with the focus on him (Henry Irving and others had cut all of Act 5 in order to do so).