
Trade And Religion Issues in Merchant of Venice

Explore and analyse the ways in which ideas and language often associated with trade and religion are used by William Shakespeare in the early scenes of his play 'The Merchant of Venice'.

The trades first apparent in the early scenes of *The Merchant of Venice* begin with Antonio and Bassanio's relationship. In effect, Antonio buys his time with the man he loves, who uses this money in turn for a very different trade, yet one very much concerned with 'love' on the surface. Money is at the heart of most physical trades, as it is in this and also the most obvious trade in the play: Antonio borrowing money from Shylock, a Jew, the price if not returned being 'a pound of flesh'. Marriage is considered a trade, Portia being the prize of this – to decide her husband is the test of three chests, each of which determine the true value of a man – and a relationship with God is to some extent seen as a trade. Shylock, simply by being a Jew, has traded his life for one of sufferance and hatred by following Jewish teachings, and Antonio is bound by both the restraints of law and religion in his pursuit of Bassanio.

This play is set during the Elizabethan era, although not in London, it is focused around Venice which mirrored England's capital at this time. Shakespeare did this so that he could draw upon direct parallels and criticise or highlight ways of life without it seeming too direct to the audience – much like the idea of a morality play, it teaches a lesson, though it is hidden within the story. Trade is extremely important in Elizabethan life (and in Venice) as it is the only means of requiring certain materials, herbs, spices and products, which make it vital to the people and provide them with income. However, it can also be a gamble, as ships were often lost at sea to 'flats' and 'dangerous rocks' or raided by pirates, so their profits very much relied on luck. Where the play is set, Jewish people were atrociously segregated, forced to live in ghettos and obey rules of curfew – the Christians hated them, and would treat them harshly because of their differing views. Tensions were high between the races, especially seeing as Rodrigo Lopez, believed to be a hidden Jew, was accused of trying to poison the Queen Elizabeth.

Firstly, Shakespeare presents Antonio and Bassanio's relationship. The play begins with Antonio who is very sad, yet claims 'I know not why'. This is immediately revealed as untrue, when his good friend Bassanio arrives and he immediately asks about the 'lady... to who [he] swore a secret pilgrimage', revealing that Bassanio's conquest for Portia has played heavily on his mind. As the first scene progresses, the audience is shown the relationship between these two gentlemen – arguably presented as a very one-sided one. While Antonio inputs money to fund Bassanio's quest, Bassanio admits 'I owe the most in money and in love', proving he gives little of either. This example of unfair trade reflects how it is defined by greed, or the pursuit of profit. Here Bassanio manages to profit greatly from his relationship with Antonio, as Shakespeare is exploring the idea of relationships being harsh trades at heart: people use one another to get what they desire. Bassanio needs Antonio's money to chase after Portia, though his real reasoning behind this move is the wealth of the 'richly left' lady. This is shown as his true desire as he mentions this before any other qualities. Antonio is bound by the restraints of religion, however, and must trade his love for eternal life with God by obeying his teachings – at this time homosexuality was illegal and unholy. Yet from this seemingly unfair trade with Bassanio, Antonio does get to spend time with the man he loves; he also trades his own

affections for Bassanio's happiness – despite his 'eye being big with tears'. Sacrifice such as this is a trade without profit, which Shakespeare proves to be very rare in the world.

Portia's father has died, though he has devised a test to determine a worthy husband for his child. There are three chests, gold, silver and 'base lead'; the suitor must choose which they think contains the picture of Portia. Hence she is bound by flesh and blood, as she must obey her father's instructions and be sold off to whoever took the chest of lead. Nerissa is her lady in waiting, a respected servant who offers advice to her mistress, yet in return for that she is paid. Family is a major focus on trade, as daughters are traded to suitable matches along with dowries, and even in religious context it is considered a sin to betray your flesh and blood. Her hair is, at one point, described as a 'golden fleece' creating a classical allusion to the tale of Jason and the Golden Fleece, where requiring this object is necessary to gain his rightful kingdom. In this way, Portia is presented as little more than an object of trade, and the fact she cannot choose her own husband shows how she cannot negotiate in this trade. Although a key involvement in trade throughout the play, Shakespeare presents her merely as an object to acquire – the profit of choosing correctly, bound by the relationship between her and her father. The suitors each try to win her, such as the Prince of Morocco falling for gold which 'many men desire', and that of Arragon fooled by silver and 'as much as he deserves'. The test teaches that to trade for her, they must be willing to offer all or 'hazard all', rather than seek to profit from her. The other two caskets speak of gain, whereas this one is centred around giving – seemingly an isolated action in these times. Shakespeare shows this type of selfless trade as very rare, and uses the caskets to show this very moral point.

Shylock is the subject of a lot of anti-Semitic hatred and abuse by the Christians in this play – they 'spit upon [his] Jewish gaberdine' and 'foot [him]' like a dog, and Antonio himself is seen to 'void his rheum' on Shylock. This highlights religion as a trade – he must endure all of this in return for his beliefs. Yet his relationship with Antonio is by far the worst of all – they have a deep hatred of one another, and Antonio is forced to come to his enemy for help in order to aid Bassanio (once again showing how great his love for this character is). Shylock is a usurer, a practice banned by Christians involving the lending and reclaiming of money, so like Antonio trade is central in his life. His daughter, Jessica, is bound to him by the tie of 'family', though this bond is broken early in the play. She leaves him for a Christian, Lorenzo, therefore disrupting her links of both a familiar and religious nature. When he discovers her disappearance, Solanio describes his passion as 'confused', for he was unsure whether to worry more about his money or his child: 'O my ducats! O my daughter!' This account may be exaggerated due to the hatred of Jews, but if it is true, it shows that Shylock, at least on the surface, cares more for his earnings than for Jessica. She has betrayed his religion and gone against the bonds of family, breaking two metaphorical ideas of trade by running away. Not only has he lost his wife and his servant, he has now lost his child – in life Shylock appears to have made a loss in profits, and as trade is all he knows, he is determined to reclaim his losses. Shakespeare presents the idea that when dealing with trade, it is possible for it to consume one's life – then everything becomes a matter of profiting from one's actions. Although not looking to better his life here, he has lost nearly all he has, and will therefore be very desperate to recover. However, despite being defined by trade, Shylock still is a very human character – 'if you prick us, do we not bleed?'

There are two main trades which the play is set around. Firstly, between Antonio and Shylock. If these three thousand borrowed ducats are not returned, then Shylock is permitted 'a pound of flesh' from his enemy – a legal way of killing someone. Shylock has been mistreated and

abused by the Christians due to his faith, and he tells Salarino 'if a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge'. For him this is not an unfair trade, despite not making any financial profit, he gets the revenge he always desired. Antonio receives the money he needs to make the love of his life happy, proving that both make more of an emotional gain than a physical one from their deal. Shakespeare uses this to reveal the depth of trade – on the surface it can appear one-sided, or about money, but beneath that there are other profits and losses to be had. As Venice is used to symbolise London, this is used to identify how trade becomes a way of life and most actions of life are in trade. Much as one's religion will define them, the constant desire to better or to gain will also. In this way both are very similar and very powerful. Secondly, Portia is involved in physical trade, through the casket test. Whoever successfully completes the test wins her, though many fall by seeking profit through the dowry. Her father ensures only a good man will marry her as the poor suitors are distracted by the wealth, without seeing the metaphorical wealth they will acquire in Portia. Shakespeare's design of the casket test, although failing with Bassanio, is meant to question the reason behind a decision (such as choosing someone to marry) and whether it is truly as people claim. It is crafted to teach those seeking to gain, whom the play is revolved around, that to give can often bring greater rewards.

In conclusion, Shakespeare shows that trade is often much more than the physical examples shown – trade is at the heart of every human action, and gain is often the desire. Where some seek 'as much as [they] deserve', and others 'what many men' want, Shakespeare suggests that one must value the true prizes in life over materialistic goods, or they will never truly gain. Such is shown by the test of the caskets. Referring to religion, faith appears to be both positive and negative – while intending to lead men on good, kind lives it simultaneously causes tension, segregation and abuse where views differ. Shylock is heavily driven by his religion, and being different to Antonio, the rivalry between them grows to enmity. If not for this there would be no need for the 'pound of flesh' trade, which represents the hatred and lust for revenge in this Jewish character. Religion also binds Antonio from freely acting out of love for Bassanio, as does society, proving that although faith is a good thing, where two ideas contradict it can create terrible circumstances.