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## CONTESTING CONSTANCY IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

MANY critics have noted that *The Merchant of Venice* explores distinctions between law and love, justice and mercy, and Jew and Christian. Each of these discussions usually involves an analysis of Shylock with one or more of the following emphases: (1) the historical or literary sources of the character, (2) Shakespeare's intentions for or attitudes about the character, (3) the structural function of the character, and (4) audiences' responses to the character over the four centuries of the play's performance. Over the years, critics have viewed Shylock as an abused outsider, a villainous hypocrite, or a dramatic scapegoat. The approach of this paper, however, is primarily structural in that it considers *The Merchant of Venice* as a series of oaths and examines Shylock as one of many examples of human inconstancy. The succession of vows and broken vows that dominate the play's speeches, particularize its characters, and advance its plot suggests that Christian society depends more upon the breaking of promises than the keeping of them. Forfeited bonds occasion repentance and forgiveness as well as allow "the reaffirmation of love" (Holmer 130) and the re-establishment of trust, but they are contradictory to legal, mercantile, and religious absolutism, and therefore they necessitate that the parties involved value the intimacy of human relations more than the inviolability of either the spoken or the written word. Shylock, as Shakespeare's Jew, is uncomfortable with a court or a culture that prefers love to law, mercy to method, and effort to effect. Since he operates best by fixed bonds of obligation, not by flexible bonds of affection, he becomes "not well" (4.1.8) after his shocking defeat and forced conversion because he has lost his sureties in law, in trade, and even in religion, and he does not know how to function without them. Shylock is thus Shakespeare's extreme example of someone who professes and practices Hebrew rigidity as opposed to Christian adaptability. However, many other characters in *The Merchant of Venice* also confront and react to these antithetical views and values, to one degree or another, in one situation or another; and their words and actions as well as Shylock's reveal that everyone struggles with inconstancy.

The action of this particular play proceeds through a series of oaths provoked by contests for advantage. As merchants thrive on trade and profit, so lovers flourish on wit and affection. Outdoing an enemy in finance or court corresponds with outdoing an ally in rhetoric or charity. Considering Portia's question, "Which is the merchant here and which

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the Jew?" (4.1.75), Richard Henze rightly observes that each of the major characters, including Antonio, Bassanio, Shylock, and Portia, ". . . is indeed a merchant" (287). In the trial scene, moreover, Portia wins the day and Antonio's life by legal rather than charitable practice. As Alan Dessen remarks, "Portia merely out-shylocks the Jew, meeting and defeating him on his own terms" (241). After leading Shylock to believe her his advocate, she catches him on the literal provision of the bond as well as on his actual status as an alien and accordingly issues punitive orders regarding his family, fortune, and faith. In order to preserve his life and livelihood in the present, Shylock must accept and implement these judicial decisions affecting his future. Portia's victory thus exposes and exploits the danger of an excessive regard for the letter of the law. Previously, Shylock has repetitiously and obsessively asserted,

I'll have my bond; I will not hear thee speak.  
I'll have my bond, and therefore speak no more.  
I'll not be made a soft and dull-eyed fool,  
To shake the head, relent and sigh, and yield  
To Christian intercessors. Follow not.  
I'll have no speaking; I will have my bond. (3.3.13-18)

In this passage Shylock insistently demands the precise terms of the bond, no more and no less. Moreover, he goes on to decline the principal as well as multiple damages, and he refuses to provide a doctor for the relief of the doomed Antonio. Consequently, when Portia holds him to the penalty of "just a pound of flesh" (4.1.336) and "no jot of blood" (4.1.314), she throws him off his guard and off his surety. Shylock then tries to dodge the implications of her reductive absolutism; forfeiting the bond which he has sworn to uphold "by our holy Sabaoth" (4.1.37), he scrambles to make the best deal he can with the options he has left. Portia deftly dismisses each offer of settlement, however; and after capitalizing on the fact that an alien is endangering the life of a citizen, she forecloses on his fortune, occupation, and religion. Portia has indeed one-upped, out-sworn, and out-shylocked Shylock.<sup>1</sup>

The primary motive for Portia's actions is, of course, love — directly for Bassanio and indirectly for Antonio, her husband's friend and benefactor. It is not difficult to derive from her language, though, a secondary motive of self-advantage that is based more on competition and trickery than charity and truth. Despite Portia's disclaimer, "This comes too near the praising of myself" (3.4.22), as she plots her purchase of "the semblance of [her] soul / From out the state of hellish cruelty" (3.4.20-21), she obviously relishes the opportunity to one-up her new husband, "her lord, her governor, her king" (3.2.168), who has himself one-upped all rivals for her

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hand. She masterfully plots her disguise, her journey, and her alibi; and deceit rather than trust characterizes her words and plans. For example, she unabashedly fibs to Lorenzo,

I have toward heaven breathed a secret vow  
To live in prayer and contemplation,  
Only attended by Nerissa here,  
Until her husband and my lord's return. (3.4.27-30)

Moreover, she boasts to her accomplice,

And twenty of these puny lies I'll tell,  
That men shall swear I have discontinued school  
About a twelve-month. I have within my mind  
A thousand raw tricks of these bragging Jacks,  
Which I will practice. (3.4.76-80)

Next, Portia indeed uses deceit to defeat Shylock in court when she becomes, in Henze's words, "director of the pageant of life, not merely a player" (296). Still in disguise, she then requests Bassanio's wedding ring, not only to make him choose between *phileo* and *eros*, or between gratitude to his friend's redeemer and fidelity to his wife's trust, but also to occasion an opportunity to "lord" it over him upon his return to Belmont, to exercise her "vantage to exclaim on [him]" (3.2.177). It is as if she foresees all along that her husband will fail her test of constancy, and his willingness during the trial to sacrifice his wife as well as his own life and the world at large in order to redeem Antonio's bond proves that Portia has just cause to doubt his faithfulness. Preparing to return to Belmont herself, she confides her real intention to Nerissa in her aside, ". . . We shall have old swearing / That they did give the rings away to men; / But we'll outface them, and outswear them too" (4.2.17-19).

The reunion scene is indeed one of swearing, outswearing, and forswearing. At issue is not really the degree of love that the men hold for the women but the degree of surety in any bond. Although Nerissa berates Gratiano, "Though not for me, yet for your vehement oaths, / You should have been respective and have kept [the ring]" (5.1.166-67), the ease with which she and her mistress both swear suggests that neither holds much reverence for mere words. Portia thus quickly and cunningly declares of Bassanio, "I dare be sworn for him he would not leave it, / Nor pluck it from his finger, for the wealth / That the world masters. . . ." (5.1.183-85), and to Bassanio, "By heaven, I will ne'er come in your bed / Until I see the ring!" (5.1.202-203) as well as "I'll die for't, but some woman had the ring!" (5.1.221). Remarkably, though, Portia

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accepts Antonio's and not Bassanio's soul as surety for her husband's pledge of future fidelity, and she even has Antonio present the debated ring to his forsworn friend. This mock marriage appropriately follows her mocking rebuttal of Bassanio's excuses for having relinquished the ring to Balthazar. When Bassanio pleads,

Sweet Portia,  
If you did know to whom I gave the ring,  
If you did know for whom I gave the ring,  
And would conceive for what I gave the ring;  
And how unwillingly I left the ring  
When naught would be accepted but the ring,  
You would abate the strength of your displeasure (5.1.205-211),

Portia returns,

If you had known the virtue of the ring,  
Or half her worthiness that gave the ring,  
Or your own honor to contain the ring,  
You would not then have parted with the ring. (5.1.212-15)

When Bassanio then attempts to swear fidelity by Portia's "own fair eyes" (5.1.255) in which he sees himself, Portia tauntingly interrupts,

Mark you but that?  
In both my eyes he doubly sees himself —  
In each eye one. Swear by your double self,  
And there's an oath of credit! (5.1.257-60)

Trying yet again, Bassanio next avows, ". . . by my soul I swear / I never more will break an oath with thee" (5.1.262-63), but Portia evidently doubts either his word or his ability to keep it, for she declines his offer until Antonio adds the guarantee of his own soul for Bassanio's trust. This curious arrangement suggests that if a promise is likely to be compromised, then Portia would rather jeopardize the soul of her husband's friend than the soul of Bassanio himself. In this comedy of inconstancy, Portia's acceptance of Antonio's terms ironically ensures the doom of the same man whom she has gone to such lengths to save from Shylock.

This scene in Belmont further reveals that Antonio has a bit of a "martyr complex" (Cantor 248). He is not, moreover, a silent or an anonymous martyr, for he has built quite a reputation not only on his trading prowess but also on his Christian charity by lending money "gratis" (1.3.38), a practice which has instigated Shylock's enmity. While the ships of fortune

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keep sailing in, Antonio can fund his friends' extravagances and rescue fellow Christians from the penalties of forfeiture. But when the money runs out and Shylock demands his bond, his "pound of flesh," Antonio seeks Bassanio's presence for companionship, not repayment. Before the venture for Portia's hand, Antonio instructs, according to Salerio,

"Slubber not business for my sake, Bassanio;  
But stay the very riping of the time.  
And for the Jew's bond which he hath of me,  
Let it not enter in your mind of love." (2.8.40-43)

But the negatives that actually comprise and the tears that reportedly accompany this exhortation belie any supposed encouragement in courtship. After his ships miscarry, moreover, Antonio writes to his friend in Belmont, ". . . all debts are cleared between you and I if I might but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your pleasure; if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter" (3.2.327-30). And after abandoning his efforts to appease Shylock, Antonio resigns himself to jail and to death with the declaration, ". . . Pray God Bassanio come / To see me pay his debt, and then I care not" (3.3.38-39). Such statements reveal that, if Antonio must forfeit his life, he wants his defaulting friend to witness his magnanimous sacrifice. The Jewish Shylock may feed upon interest, revenge, and flesh, but the Christian Antonio feeds upon self-righteousness, the approbation of his Christian society, and especially the gratitude of his beloved Bassanio.

Since Antonio has been supporting this friend both financially and emotionally, he finds it difficult to accept Bassanio's desire for marriage and his attraction to the Lady of Belmont. Confronting Shylock's knife, Antonio acknowledges a competition between himself and Portia for Bassanio's affection when he entreats,

Commend me to your honorable wife:  
Tell her the process of Antonio's end;  
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. (4.1.281-85)

His subsequent imperative, "Repent but you that you shall lose your friend" (4.1.286), moreover, is less a redress of guilt than a condition of the following line, "And he repents not that he pays your debt" (4.1.287). Antonio thus considers the conscience of his friend and debtor to be the means for preserving their bond of love forever, and Antonio directs Bassanio's emotions as skillfully as Portia dissects Shylock's legalism. Con-

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sequently, Bassanio believes and later claims that he forfeited his wife's ring and trust because of misgivings over his inability to compensate Balthazar sufficiently for Antonio's salvation; as he explains to a supposedly piqued Portia,

I was enforced to send it after him.  
I was beset with shame and courtesy;  
My honor would not let ingratitude  
So much besmear it. . . . (5.1.229-32)

But he forgets that it is only Antonio's urging, "My Lord Bassanio, let him have the ring. / Let his deservings and my love withal / Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment" (4.1.462-64), that causes him to send the token after the person who has already left their company empty-handed. In his acts of charity, therefore, Antonio reveals as much jealousy as generosity. Far from a nameless do-gooder, he craves a martyr's remembrance. Furthermore, in his final offer of his soul for another man's trust (which he has helped prove unreliable), he overreaches both human prudence and scriptural authority by jeopardizing his own eternal life for someone else's temporal life, specifically his married life.

The interludes of the three caskets are also occasions that question human constancy. Portia, lacking confidence in herself and faith in her father's prescience, flirts with breaking her oath neither to choose nor to refuse a husband but to let the lottery of the caskets determine her mate. She admits, "I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done than to be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching" (1.2.14-15), as well as confesses, "I will do anything, Nerissa, ere I will be married to a sponge!" (1.2.85-86). John Klause maintains that Portia is both "conscientious" and "devious" with respect to her father's proscription to avoid becoming "forsworn" (3.2.11) (99). Grace Tiffany agrees by asserting, "While numerous scholars have suggested that Portia cheats and helps Bassanio win the wooing game, she does not cheat but hints, thus upholding the letter if not the spirit of her father's law" (391). Interestingly, it is only after Portia's beloved Bassanio wins "the lottery of [her] destiny" (2.1.15) by correctly distinguishing between ornament and substance that "the will of a living daughter [is no longer] curbed by the will of a dead father" (1.2.21-22), and Portia is transformed into a self-assured, witty, and resourceful woman. It is worth noting, though, that despite her protests against an imposed and unpredictable fate, her tedious task of entertaining unsuccessful suitors is only temporary by the laws of probability, while the spouseless situations of the losing courtiers are supposedly permanent by their own oaths to honor the conditions of

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the lottery. However, although these hapless men promise to uphold their vows and suffer their misfortunes, the play never traces their efforts and adventures in attempting to do so, but it implies that they may prove no more trustworthy than the many other characters exposed as inconstant. For example, after taking "a tedious leave" (2.7.78) from Portia, the Prince of Morocco has only to return to the "best regarded virgins of [his] clime" (2.1.10) who, as he has claimed, have already loved his dark "complexion" (2.1.1). It is certainly conceivable and indeed probable that he will honor only the letter and not the spirit of the lottery's prohibitions just as Jacob fulfills only the letter and not the spirit of his contract with Laban, a practice much admired and commended by Shylock (1.3.73-87). In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare devises neither oaths inviolate nor swearers unforsworn, and there is no reason to believe that the disappointed princes are, in their words or in their persons, exceptions to this rule.

The winner of the lottery, moreover, fails the test of integrity repeatedly. Despite unpaid debts to Antonio, Bassanio requests additional funds to provide him the means to repay all by marrying Portia. During his courtship, though, he fails to mention his outstanding obligations until Antonio's letter forces a confession. Noting Bassanio's sudden paleness, Portia ironically deems him a "constant man" (3.2.253), rightfully upset by tragic news. The problem, of course, is that Bassanio is not a "constant man"; if he were, he would never have won his wife, but since he is not, he must struggle to keep her despite his other engagements, directly with Antonio and indirectly with Shylock. Bassanio's subsequent forfeiture of his wedding ring at Balthazar's request and Antonio's recommendation proves that the prodigal is faithful only in his unfaithfulness. The question then becomes whether changeability or unreliability is a virtue or a vice. The answer to this question, of course, depends on the situation and the people involved; and regardless of the circumstances or the players, inconstancy is the inherent condition of humanity.

Indeed, most characters in *The Merchant of Venice* tend to sacrifice moral or social standards for immediate convenience. Antonio, for example, is willing to take a bond upon interest from the very man whom he has publicly berated for the practice of usury. Ignoring Shylock's friendly but hypocritical greeting, "Rest you fair, good signior, / Your worship was the last man in our mouths" (1.3.54-55), Antonio comes right to the point of their meeting in his initial address,

Shylock, albeit I neither lend nor borrow  
By taking nor by giving of excess,  
Yet to supply the ripe wants of my friend  
I'll break a custom. . . (1.3.56-59)

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Shylock, who has castigated Antonio for lending money "gratis" (1.3.38), converts in turn and agrees,

I would be friends with you and have your love,  
Forget the shames that you have stained me with,  
Supply your present wants and take no doit  
Of usance for my moneys. . . . (1.3.136-39)

This same man who has declared to Bassanio, "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following. But I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you" (1.3.30-33), changes his mind, accepts an invitation to supper, and goes ". . . in hate to feed upon / The prodigal Christian" (2.5.15-16). While Shylock breaks the code of hospitality, Jessica breaks the bond of filial obedience and the convention of female modesty by eloping in the disguise of a boy in the company of a Christian husband and in possession of her father's jewels and ducats.<sup>2</sup> She confesses, "Alack, what heinous sin is it in me / To be ashamed to be my father's child!" (2.3.15-16), and ". . . I am much ashamed of my exchange. / . . . Cupid himself would blush / To see me thus transformed to a boy" (2.6.36-40). When Shylock learns of Jessica's actions, he repudiates all fatherly concern as well as ancestral reverence and exclaims, "The curse never fell upon our nation till now. I never felt it till now: . . . I wish my daughter were dead at my foot and the jewels in her ear!" (3.1.71-75). He then transforms his bond made in "merry sport" (1.3.144) with Antonio to a bond bearing "a lodged hate and a certain loathing" (4.1.61). Even the Duke of Venice, who must uphold civic law and freedom and thus cannot "alter a decree established" (4.1.223), threatens, ". . . I do recant / The pardon that I late pronounced here" (4.1.402-403), unless Shylock records the deed of gift to Jessica and Lorenzo. These multiple breaches of word, honor, or custom suggest that everyone in this society of inconstancy is much too apt to abandon personal integrity and social precedent.

*The Merchant of Venice* contains so many examples of actual or potential falsehood that parallels begin to emerge, parallels which emphasize even more the frequency, indeed the inevitability, of inconstancy. William Babula points out that Jessica and Lorenzo's "references at the beginning of Act V" to Troilus and Cressida, Dido and Aeneas, and Jason and Medea place the romantic infidelities of *The Merchant of Venice* in the historical and literary traditions of "loves destroyed by broken faiths" (32). This series of "[o]minous allusions" (Keefe 219) effects such an impression of inevitable betrayal that Jessica continues, "In such a night / Did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well, / Stealing her soul with many vows of faith, / And ne'er a true one" (5.1.22-25). Lorenzo challenges this very unromantic rendering of their courtship, but then he ends the "feigned quar-



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rel" (Holmer 130) by forgiving his wife for having spoken such fatalistic "Slander" (5.1.28).<sup>3</sup> Importantly, though, Jessica and Lorenzo's contest to "out-night" one another in anecdotes (5.1.29) immediately follows Portia's outwitting of Shylock and immediately precedes the reunion in which the wives make good on their promises to "outface" and "outswear" their husbands (4.2.19). Moreover, Jessica is not the only female character to don male attire for purposes of deception; Portia and Nerissa, of course, do so in order to appear in court with a false letter of introduction. Furthermore, as Portia considers breaking her oath to her father and is saved from doing so by Bassanio's correct choice of casket, Launcelot hosts a debate within himself between his "fiend" and his "conscience" (2.2.1-26) over fleeing his master and is spared from a decision by Shylock's unexpected preferment of him to Bassanio. And, as Bassanio fails to repay his debt to Antonio, Antonio is himself unable to live up to his obligation to Shylock, which he has promised to pay in his defensive rebuke, "Why fear not, man — I will not forfeit it" (1.3.155). In addition, Gratiano's bequest of Nerissa's ring to the lawyer's page begs comparison to Bassanio's gift of Portia's ring to Balthazar, and these husbands' subsequent and nearly simultaneous offers of their wives' lives for the life of Antonio constitute as grievous an offense against conjugal love as Shylock's wish for Jessica's death does against paternal affection. Shylock's exclamation, "These be the Christian husbands!" (4.1.303), reveals that, irrespective of his own obsessive malice, he aptly recognizes ungentleness in others; consequently, he becomes a device for disclosing the inconstancy of all the play's characters and, by extension and implication, of all mankind.<sup>4</sup>

Many critics, such as John Cooper and Alan Dessen, view the two settings of the play, Venice and Belmont, as opposites: While Venice is the site of legalism and mercantilism, Belmont is the scene of romance and reconciliation. However, no such easy distinction of the settings is possible. All of the primary characters, except Shylock, appear in both places; and Shylock's influence certainly extends to the rural retreat, through Antonio's letter and through Shylock's own deed of gift. The major themes of the play, moreover, including love, money, and especially integrity, pervade both locales, which consequently become more correlative than contradictory. Accordingly, Gratiano's "swearing till [his] very roof was dry / With oaths of love" to Nerissa (3.2.207-208) is no more credible than Shylock's oft-repeated profession, "I'll have my bond" (3.3.5, 13, 14, 18), against Bassanio; for everyone, everywhere, is vulnerable to overstating his case and thus to losing his case. So, while Cooper notes, "Even with Shylock's conversion, all is not well in Venice" (124), it is also true that all is not well in Belmont either.<sup>5</sup> Despite Portia's concluding promise, ". . . we will answer all things faithfully"

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(5.1.299), Belmont will never be a blissful refuge for requited love and uncompromised fidelity since it, too, "is subject to the conditional negotiations of wills and vows" (Scott 299), which, despite Sigurd Burckhardt's claim to the contrary, can never be "absolutely binding" (243).

Regardless of setting, the many contests for advantage and betrayals of trust throughout *The Merchant of Venice* expose the following paradoxes of the "universal human condition" (Keefe 213), including Christian belief and practice: (1) faith is an essential but inevitably unreliable basis for interpersonal relationships, (2) charity is often uncharitable because it can be self-interested and sometimes injurious to third parties, and (3) less is more, lead is gold, and the last shall be first. In using Shylock to contrast Hebrew rigidity with Christian adaptability, Shakespeare conveys that everyone proves inconstant sooner or later, and thus all must learn to favor love over law, mercy over method, and effort over effect. Ultimately, the structure, the language, and the characterization of this Shakespearean play prove that in this "naughty world" (5.1.98) there is no haven against humanity, no escape from inconstancy. Consequently, the abundance of broken oaths in *The Merchant of Venice*, with all of their Judeo-Christian implications, prompts consideration of Christ's directives in the Sermon on the Mount just after he addresses the issue of divorce:

Againe, ye have heard that it was said to them of olde time, "Thou shalt not forswear thy self, but shalt performe thine othes to the Lord." / But I say unto you, Swear not at all, nether by heave[n], for it is [the] throne of God: / Nor yet by the earth: for it is his fote stole: nether by Jerusalem: for it is the citie of the great King. / Nether shalt thou swear by thine head, because thou canst not make one heere white or blacke. / But let your communication be, Yea, yea: Nay, nay. For whatsoever is more the[n] these, commeth of evil. (*The Geneva Bible*, Matthew 5:33-37)

In essence and effect, Christ is exhorting his audience to try to control their tongues because they cannot control much of anything else. Comparatively speaking, Shakespeare is communicating the same message through different means; and whether on the stage or on the page, both through Shylock and beyond Shylock, *The Merchant of Venice* dramatizes the commonality of inconstancy for us all.

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### Notes

1) In discussing Shakespeare's dramatic purpose in staging such a confrontation, John Gross asserts, "It is only after the claims of mercy have been exhausted that she [Portia] is ready to fall back on the claims of strict liability; and when she does, she demonstrates that if she has to, she can beat Shylock at his own game" (82).

2) Commenting on this scene, William Kerrigan maintains, "Unlike Portia, Jessica feels herself under no obligation whatever to her father or his faith" (112). Robert Hapgood distinguishes "Portia's poetic license from Jessica's simple license" by noting that Portia "transcends" while "Jessica defies" a "father's will" (31).

3) James Shapiro proposes that this dialogue has a different implication: "the possibility that the obedient and converted Jewess who had to disobey one man and one set of religious principles to embrace another might revert to her true Jewish nature" (159). Shapiro's reading of this passage is intriguing, but unconvincing, at least to myself and to Martin Yaffe (18).

4) Although analyzing "alimentary imagery" rather than inconstancy, Maryellen Keefe reaches a similar conclusion: "Too large a person and playwright to focus narrowly on any one stereotype, Shakespeare rather provides, through the lens of Shylock's character, a glimpse at the universal human condition. Like Shylock, all the characters are flawed, as are all the readers and/or spectators" (213).

5) Speaking figuratively, Gross rightly observes that by the end of *The Merchant of Venice* ". . . there is a permanent chill in the air, even in the gardens of Belmont" (352).

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