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"SHADOWED LIVERY": MOROCCO IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

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Abstract

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia seems relieved when the Prince of Morocco chooses the wrong casket—relieved at least in part because Morocco is black. Much textual evidence, however, suggests that Morocco is the worthiest of the three suitors who choose among the caskets in attempting to win Portia. For example, Morocco is the only one of the three who while deliberating on the caskets refers to Portia by name or by reference, and only he uses the word "love" while making his choice. Moreover, unlike Aragon and Bassanio, Morocco bases his choice on what he considers to be Portia's merits, which he holds in so high an esteem that he mistakenly chooses the gold casket. And while Bassanio's motives are largely mercenary, Morocco is clearly wealthy and so has no need of Portia's money. Although Morocco exits in act two, his presence reverberates later via his association with Shylock and the Moorish woman whom Launce impregnates. Sometimes alleged to exhibit anti-Semitism, *The Merchant of Venice*, as the presentations of Morocco and Shylock demonstrate, actually constitutes one of Shakespeare's most compelling endorsements of the vibrancy which diversity can impart to any society.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Morocco; Portia; diversity; Moor; Bassanio; hazard; Shylock; caskets; anti-Semitism; society.

Relatively little critical attention has been devoted to the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*, and understandably so. He appears only briefly, seems freighted with pomposity, and fails in his attempt to win Portia. Portia expresses relief after Morocco chooses the wrong casket, commenting "Let all of his complexion choose me so" (2.7.79). This remark, however, smacks of bigotry, since Morocco is black. Even before meeting Morocco, Portia states, "If he have

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the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me" (1.2.127-29). In Medieval and Renaissance lore, demons were usually considered to be black in color, [1] and so Portia's reference to "the complexion of a devil" further displays her prejudice—literally a "pre-judgment" in this case. Despite Portia's antipathy, however, Shakespeare indicates that Morocco may well be the worthiest of Portia's suitors; hence, since she clearly manipulates the casket test, her narrow-mindedness causes her to forego a compelling prospect for a husband.

Although in Shakespeare's day the term "complexion" could mean not only "skin color," but also "temperament" or "inclination," and is in fact used in that sense in 3.1. when Solanio says to Shylock "it is the complexion of them all to leave the dam" (28-29), it is now generally understood that Portia intends the racial sense in both of her "complexion" comments (see, for example, Halio 145). Certainly, Morocco himself does so in his first lines when he states to Portia, "Mislike me not for my complexion,/ The shadowed livery of the burnished sun" (2.1.1-2). Like Shylock, who states that he expects the "reproach" of the gentiles (2.5.21-22), Morocco in these lines indicates that he has been conditioned by experience to anticipate mistreatment by white society. This, in turn, suggests that the braggadocio which characterizes much of Morocco's first appearance in the play—"I tell thee, lady, this aspect of mine/ Hath feared the valiant.[ ]. The best-regarded virgins of our clime/ Have loved it too" (2.1.8-11) and so on—constitutes an overcompensation for past indignities.

Morocco differs not only in race from the Italians, but also presumably in religion. Therefore, Portia's enjoining Morocco to go to Belmont's "temple" (2.1.44) to swear an oath seems problematic. In Catholic Italy, the temple would probably not be a mosque, although Morocco is most likely a Muslim (see Hall 296).[2] Morocco's being required to take an oath in an alien religious space and to a god in whom he presumably does not believe is not only morally dubious on Portia's part but also raises the issue as to whether taking an oath in the temple is a requirement for the other two suitors, both of whom would be Catholic. Significantly, no specific mention is made of Aragon's or Bassanio's vowing in the temple, although Aragon does make an oath under unspecified circumstances. Curiously, whereas Morocco's oath as stipulated by Portia entails only a single condition—"swear before you choose, if you choose wrong/ Never

[1] Cf.: Lavatch's comment in *All's Well That Ends Well*, "The black prince, sir, alias the prince of darkness, alias the devil" (4.5.42-43).

[2] But see also Janet Adelman, who remarks, "Morocco's own religious affiliation is left hauntingly unspecific: he asks for the guidance of 'some god'—presumably not the Christian one—as he makes his casket choice, but his choosing speech is rich in allusion to Catholic belief and practice" (85).

to speak to lady afterward/ In way of marriage" (2.1.40-42)—Aragon must observe three, to which "injunctions," according to Portia, "*everyone* doth swear" (2.9.17, my emphasis). This conjures the specter not only of Portia's lying but also of her engineering the rules governing the casket choice. No precise sanctions are stated on stage for Bassanio if he fails to make the right choice—although Portia does say that in Bassanio's "choosing wrong,/ I lose your company" (3.2.2-3)—nor is there any specific mention of his having taken an oath.

Bassanio gushes a good bit about his affection for Portia while speaking with her prior to making his choice, using the word "love" three times in seven lines (3.2.29, 31,35), but notably during the actual decision process he never once mentions "love" nor does he even refer to Portia either directly by name or indirectly by reference. Indeed, she seems not even to cross his mind at this critical juncture. The same is true of Aragon during his deliberations. Morocco, however, while considering the caskets refers to Portia by name twice (2.7.43, 47), mentions her as "the lady" thrice (2.7.28, 31, 38), and speaks of his "love" (2.7.34) for her. Moreover, rather than applying the impersonal abstractions about the unreliability of appearances or corruption in law and religion which govern Aragon's and Bassanio's casket choices, Morocco bases his decision primarily upon his perception of Portia's merits:

> One of these three contains her heavenly picture.
> Is 't like that lead contains her? 'Twere damnation
> To think so base a thought; it were too gross
> To rib her cerecloth in the obscure grave.
> Or shall I think in silver she's immured,
> Being ten times undervalued to tried gold?
> O sinful thought! Never so rich a gem
> Was set in worse than gold. (2.7.48-55)

That the scroll contained in the gold casket chastises the chooser for relying upon appearances is ironic in context, since Portia disparages Morocco on the basis of his skin-color (see also Adelman 86). Bassanio, on the other hand, is deemed worthy because he is strikingly handsome. As Nerissa says, "He of all the men that ever my foolish eyes looked upon was the best deserving a fair lady" (1.2.115-17).

What Nerissa does not realize, however, is that Bassanio's motives are mercenary. In 1.1 while speaking to Antonio, Bassanio describes his courting of Portia as a potential means of resolving his economic indebtedness, a damning admission for a prospective wooer. Moreover, judging from the "childhood proof" (1.1.144) that he offers to Antonio, this is not the first time that Bassanio

has borrowed money from Antonio to pursue a rich woman. Bassanio compares his getting the Portia loan from Antonio to shooting arrows as a boy:

> I owe you much, and, like a willful youth,
> That which I owe is lost; but if you please
> To shoot another arrow that self way
> Which you did shoot the first, I do not doubt,
> As I will watch the aim, or to find both
> Or bring your latter hazard back again,
> And thankfully rest debtor for the first. (1.1. 146-52)

Assuming, as seems sensible, that the phrase “that self way” means “for the same purpose,” the woman implied in the reference to the first arrow shot, the first sum Bassanio borrowed for the purpose of procuring a wife, is clearly not Portia, since he did not win the woman. Also, the comments of Portia and Nerissa in 1.2. indicate that Bassanio’s previous visit to Belmont was brief, and his being at that time “in company of the Marquess of Montferrat” (1.2.112) would imply that the high-ranking Marquess was the potential suitor. On that short visit, though, Bassanio did meet Portia, and as Nerissa notes it was “in [Portia’s] father’s time” (1.2.110-11). Thus, it is entirely possible that Portia’s father devised the casket contest precisely to keep the gold-digger Bassanio and others of his ilk away from Portia.

Morocco, unlike Bassanio, is no moneygrubber: he is not only a prince but evidently a wealthy one, entering in 2.1 with “three or four followers” and in 2.7 with his “train” (see also Stone). Moreover, in Shakespeare’s day, Moorish nobility were renowned for their wealth. In *The Jew of Malta*, for instance, Barabas waxes extravagant in detailing the riches of the generic “wealthy Moor,” who

> Without control can pick his riches up,
> And in his house heap pearl like pebble-stones;
> Receive them free, and sell them by the weight,
> Bags of fiery opals, sapphires, amethysts,
> Jacinths, hard topaz, grass-green emeralds,
> Beauteous rubies, sparkling diamonds
> And seldseen costly stone of so great price
> As one of them indifferently rated,
> And of a carat of this quantity,
> May serve in peril of calamity
> To ransom great kings from captivity. (1.1.21-32)

Consequently, unlike Bassanio, Morocco has no need of Portia’s money.

In his reflections before choosing a casket, Morocco devotes roughly the same amount of time to each of the caskets. Aragon, by contrast, dismisses the lead casket with a single sentence, and then gives about equal consideration to the gold and the silver, before wrongly choosing the latter. Bassanio focuses almost all of his remarks, however negative they may be, on the gold: of the thirty-five lines in Bassanio's speech, he does not even accord the silver a full sentence, and he gives the lead just one. Nevertheless, after a lengthy internal disputation, Bassanio opts for the lead casket, which has garnered him praise from many commentators. Just one illustration is Alan Dessen's claiming that "Bassanio chooses the leaden casket, thereby demonstrating his willingness to venture all he has in a love that transcends gain and possession" (259).

However, such adulation neglects to note not only that Bassanio's remarks while choosing indicate that he is patently most attracted to the gold casket, but also that his selecting the lead results from the many hints Portia supplies; in Bassanio's words, Portia "Doth teach [him] answers for deliverance" (3.2.38).[3] For example, as many have noted, the ending words of the first three lines of the song Portia orders to be performed for Bassanio as he prepares to make his choice rhyme with "lead." She also uses the word "hazard" in conversation with Bassanio (3.2.2), as she had earlier with Morocco and Aragon. Not by coincidence, the lead casket includes the word "hazard" in its exterior inscription, which is quoted three times in the play: "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath." (2.7.9; 2.7.16; 2.9.21). David Lucking maintains that "Portia seems indeed to offer a similar chance to all her suitors, for the crucial word 'hazard' is artfully and democratically inserted in the preliminary comments she makes to Morocco (2.1.45) and Arragon (2.9.18) as well as Bassanio (3.2.2). If the former two remain deaf to her hint, that is hardly her fault" (375). This seems true enough for Aragon. Immediately prior to Aragon's approaching the caskets, Portia not only says "hazard" (2.9.18) but also mentions her "worthless self" in the same line, both pointers to her portrait's residing in the lead casket.[4] Despite these hints, Aragon makes the wrong choice, thereby provoking Portia's ire. Just after he leaves, Portia exclaims, "Oh, these deliberate fools! When they do choose,/ They have the wisdom by their wit to lose" (2.9.80-81).

Lucking's formulation regarding the "democratic" distribution of hints, however, overlooks the fact that the timing and tenor of the single hint given to

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[3] This of course assumes that Portia herself knows which casket contains her picture, as is suggested by her early comment to Nerissa about avoiding the German suitor's advances by placing a glass of Rhenish wine on the wrong casket (1.2.94).

[4] It is worth noting here that Bassanio's arrival at Belmont is announced only after Aragon departs, so Portia's preference for Bassanio would not at this point have prevented her from supplying hints to Aragon.

Morocco differ very significantly from the multiple tips provided to Aragon and Bassanio. Whereas Portia uses "hazard" just shortly before Aragon and Bassanio choose, she does so only in passing to Morocco *before* both their going to the temple *and* their having dinner prior to Morocco's choosing. Consequently, Portia's use of "hazard" in this instance seems more like cruel fun, a kind of private joke at Morocco's expense, than like a genuine clue.

Portia is certainly not above making crafty and unkind jokes during her brief interaction with Morocco. After Morocco delivers his "Mislike me not for my complexion" speech in which he asks her to consider his merits despite his skin color, Portia responds,

> But if my father had not scanted me,
> And hedged me by his wit to yield myself
> His wife who wins me by that means I told you,
> Yourself, renowned prince, then stood as fair
> As any comer I have looked on yet
> For my affection. (2.1.17-22)

Portia's innuendo here is double. First, as the audience knows from 1.2, Portia felt nothing but contempt for her previous suitors, the "comers" upon whom she has already looked, so standing "as fair" in her estimation as they did is slight praise indeed. Secondly, Portia's statement includes a play on words in that "fair" means not only "attractive" but also light in skin-color; Morocco does not seem "fair" to Portia in either sense of the word. In fact, it is primarily because he is not fair in complexion that he does not appear fair to Portia in the sense of being good-looking. Shakespeare also incorporates a somewhat different double-meaning of "fair" in the Morocco scenes. When making his choice, Morocco refers to "fair Portia" twice (2.7.43, 47), which in retrospect smacks of irony on Shakespeare's part; although Portia is light-skinned and lovely—"fair" in both of those respects--she is not fair in the sense of "just" in the manner in which she regards Morocco before, during, and after his visit.

And this despite the fact that Morocco seems the most devoted of the three suitors: as Allan Bloom noted in passing some years ago, Morocco "seems sincerely attached to the beautiful Venetian" (67). This attachment becomes apparent in the manner of Morocco's leave-taking. The respective attitudes of Aragon and Morocco after having selected wrongly illustrate fundamental dissimilarities in their personalities and in their attitudes towards Portia. Aragon is furious, exclaiming "The portrait of a blinking idiot [...]. How much unlike my hopes and my deservings! [...]. Did I deserve no more than a fool's head?/ Is that my prize? Are my deserts no better?" (2.9.54-60). In accordance with his oath, Aragon must depart immediately, but he also wants to exit straightaway because he feels embarrassed as well as angry: "Still more fool I shall appear/ By the

time I linger here" (2.9.73-74). Agreeing to leave promptly was apparently not part of Morocco's oath, yet he does depart at once, although not in embarrassment and chagrin like Aragon but as the result of a profoundly-felt sorrow: "Portia, adieu. I have too grieved a heart/ To take a tedious leave" (2.7.76-77).

Just earlier, as Morocco begins to choose, he pleads, "Some god direct my judgment!" (2.7.13). On the surface he seems to pray his gods in vain (to paraphrase Kent in *King Lear*), but perhaps some god does in fact respond with compassion precisely by guiding Morocco to the wrong casket. Assessments of Portia differ, but it is incontestable that by the end of *The Merchant of Venice* she holds the upper hand in her relationship with Bassanio. And she lets him know it, partly through the proliferation of those disquieting double entendres she makes in act five regarding adultery which, among other considerations, intimate that Bassanio's future as a husband will be less than roseate.

Morocco's avoiding such a fate may well be seen as providential, especially because of Portia's clear aversion to him—an aversion she also exhibits towards Shylock in the "trial scene" (4.1). For example, Portia refers to Shylock time and again as "Jew," even though she knows his name, as is firmly established shortly after her entrance to the court. In the scene immediately preceding that which features the regrettable treatment of Shylock during the trial, Shakespeare recalls Portia's negative attitude towards Morocco via Lorenzo's mentioning that Launce impregnated a Moorish woman and is utterly nonchalant about having done so. That the woman is twice referred to as a Moor (3.5.37,38) and that Launce twice puns upon that designation with regard to its homonym "more" (3.5.38,40) recalls Morocco; furthermore, as R. W. Desai intriguingly remarks, this woman may have "belonged to Morocco's retinue" (314).[5] Additionally, Portia's choice of "Balthasar" as her pseudonym for the trial scene would recall for many in Shakespeare's audience the Balthasar (also elsewhere spelled "Balthazar") from Christian tradition who was one of the three wise men who visit the Christ child in the manger and who is typically represented in Christian iconography as being a black man.[6]

And because Shakespeare carefully aligns Morocco and Shylock, Portia's offensive treatment of Morocco anticipates her later objectionable attitude towards Shylock. Morocco and Shylock are in fact discreetly paired throughout *The Merchant of Venice*. Both are considered aliens to the Venetian state, Morocco by his nationality, Shylock by law, as Portia points out during the trial scene. Both are also demonized by the white, Christian culture. As we have seen, Portia links Morocco's skin color to that of the devil, and Shylock is often

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[5] Coen Heijies links Morocco, Shylock, and the Moorish woman as three manifestations of "the Other."

[6] Perhaps relatedly, a servant whom Portia addresses by name in 3.4 is called Balthasar.

referred to as a devil, for instance in Antonio's statement about Shylock that "The devil can cite scripture for his purpose" (1.3.96). Solanio, Launcelot, Gratiano, and Bassanio also identify Shylock explicitly as a "devil." A structural link between Shylock and Morocco emerges in that 1.2 ends with a discussion of Morocco's approach; immediately thereafter, in 1.3, Shylock first appears in the play; and Morocco's initial speech opens the next scene (2.1); thus, the audience's introduction to Shylock is framed by Morocco. Further, the oath that Morocco takes in the temple casts forward to Shylock's oath sworn "by our holy Sabbath" (4.1.36) regarding his exacting the penalty upon Antonio; it also anticipates Shylock's being forced to convert to Christianity later. Morocco says to Portia, "Bring me the fairest creature northward born [...]. And let us make incision for your love/ To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine" (2.1.4-7). This comment, as others have observed, resembles Shylock's rhetorical question, "If you prick us [Jews], do we not bleed?" (3.1.60-61), said in defense of his essential humanity despite racial difference—precisely the motivation for Morocco's comment. And both Morocco and Shylock, although for different reasons, take a "grieved" leaving of Portia and of the play.

Shylock exits from the play in act four, as Morocco had in act two, and so both are absent from act five which, especially after the crackling energy of the previous acts, seems markedly flat. It is not, however, that Shakespeare lost imaginative engagement with the text, but rather that he presents in act five the vacuity of the essentially homogenized society which the Christians in *The Merchant of Venice* have in effect been fostering from the start. All the major figures onstage in this final act, including the recently-converted Jessica, are Christian; most (with the notable exception of Antonio) are married; all are wealthy or about to become so; and all are also at least in some sense male in that each of the three female characters present has at one point disguised herself as a man.[7] Hence, there is no diversity.

It is fitting, therefore, that in act five, Shakespeare deftly alludes to the diminishment inherent in an exclusionary society. In the discussion which opens the act, Lorenzo explains to Jessica the theory of the music of the spheres:

> Sit Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
> Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.
> There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
> But in his motion like an angel sings,
> Still choiring to the young-eyed cherubins.
> Such harmony is in immortal souls,
> But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
> Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it. (5.1.58-65)

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[7] Shakespeare here is undoubtedly playing upon the fact that the actors playing the women in *The Merchant of Venice* would have been male.

In the cosmic order, then, all creation, even "the smallest orb," contributes its unique tone, and the celestial symphony would be less resplendent without it. Shakespeare thereby implies that our fallen world would better imitate the heavenly if a given society like Venice or Belmont—or England, for that matter—included diverse voices, such as those of Shylock and Morocco, in a harmonious counterpoint.

In a somewhat similar manner, shortly after Portia enters in this scene, while speaking of the music playing from within her house, she says, "Nothing is good, I see, without respect" (5.1.99). By "respect" Portia means "context," but Shakespeare seems also to invoke the more standard meaning of "respect," as in "to show regard or consideration for." He thereby underscores the mainstream society's unfortunate treatment of Shylock and Morocco, both of whom expect and receive reproach rather than respect. Portia adds, "How many things by season seasoned are/ To their right praise and true perfection!" (5.1.107-108). Although "season" here primarily refers to time or occasion, it can also, especially when paired with "seasoned," designate seasoning in the sense of adding contrasting ingredients to the main dish in order to give it zest, with the implicit corollary that by enfolding varied elements into its fabric a society can achieve a vitality which it would otherwise lack; it can, in other words, be "seasoned" to its "true perfection."

These seasonings, these contrasting elements, are notably lacking from the homogeneous society of Belmont and from act five of *The Merchant of Venice*, so it is perhaps appropriate that the entire act is set outdoors in the dark, since the remaining figures are so benighted with regard to the makings of a vibrant culture. Most notably, Morocco's double, Shylock, is missing, and so the dramatic heart of the play has been cut out, since so much of the preceding action was catalyzed by religious and racial difference. In part due to the absence of Morocco and Shylock, act five's humdrum nature signifies in a negative manner Shakespeare's implicit assertion that variety—in race, religion, class, gender, and culture—bestows upon a society its dynamism and verve. Thus, it is both ironic and tragic that *The Merchant of Venice* is currently banned from some educational curricula due to a misguided belief in the play's lack of sensitivity to matters of diversity.[8]

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[8] This view differs from that represented by Hazelton Spencer, who "rejoices in the fact that 'many secondary schools have wisely removed the play' from their courses of study" (qtd. in Grebanier 202).

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