
The Trial of The Rings Scene and Why it is a Climax of a Conflict

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play that reveals its scaffolding. Behavior and motive are explained for comic consistency and unity, almost as if the playwright did not trust our capacity to intuit them. This is seen most starkly in Act V, Scene I, the "play within a play," in which the rude mechanicals stage a play for the benefit of Theseus and the company of lovers. The exposed cues are dropped by the mechanicals for comic effect, as in Pyramus's verbal repetition of his visual act on stage: "I see a voice: now will I to the chink / To spy an I can hear my Thisby's face" (5.1.192-93). It does not take long for the audience to begin to conform to the charade. After Wall announces his departure, Theseus picks up the cue, anticipating Moonshine's entrance and speaking in his stead: "Now is the moon used between the two neighbors" (5.1.207-8). Shakespeare's insistence on exposing the structure of the internal play suggests the untrustworthiness of the play's audience, that is, the aristocrats of Theseus's court and citystate; their struggle to comprehend motive and behavior invests *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with a pervasive feeling of unnaturalness that goes beyond the play's dreamscape of enchantment.

Like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice* exploits the mechanism of the stage and staged dramatizations to criticize the play's characters. The parallel trial scenes can each be viewed as a "play within a play." As performances staged to bring about a specific action, the first two trials (the trial of the caskets and the trial of Shylock) work to eliminate outsiders (Portia's unwanted suitors and the villain Shylock) from the comic realm in order that the play's ends can be attained. However, the third trial of the play, the trial of the rings, more robustly resists and challenges our deconstruction. It occurs among insiders, and after the main dramatic action is completed. As the final act and scene of the play, the trial of the rings is a performance staged by Portia that works to complicate the conclusion of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Act V opens with an exchange of dialogue between Jessica and Lorenzo. It is standard banter between lovers trading examples of archetypal lovers in archetypal nights, moving from general and distant (Troilus and Cressida, Aeneas and Dido) to specific and personal (Lorenzo and Jessica). We are reminded of the exchange between Thisbe and Pyramus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which the lovers compare themselves favorably against their mythic counterparts. But as this progression occurs in *The Merchant of Venice*, something strange happens; Jessica and Lorenzo begin to compete with each other. After their string of "In such a nights," Jessica tells Lorenzo, "I would outright you, did nobody come; / But hark, I hear the footing of a man" (5.1.23-4). More significantly, Jessica and Lorenzo begin to hint at the other's

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

unfaithfulness. To counter Jessica "In such a night / Did Lorenzo swear he loved her well, / Stealing her soul with many vows of faith / And ne'er a true one," Lorenzo responds, "In such a night / Did pretty Jessica, like a little shrow, / Slander her love" (5.1.17-22). Even as witty repartee, why do the lovers insist on portraying their love as not idealized but founded on deceit? While the details of their elopement are a bit sordid, are we not at least to trust that their love is true?

The dialogue between Jessica and Lorenzo holds to the pattern of speech and communication we have observed throughout the play. From the beginning, speech has performed a largely negative performative task. That is, it serves to reveal by what is not said. To illustrate, let us look at the play's first line, Antonio's melancholic "In sooth I know not why I am so sad," and what immediately follows from it (1.1.1). Antonio's utterance is met by a company of wits that attempts to articulate an answer. Why is Antonio sad? Salerio takes a stab at it, suggesting that Antonio "mind is tossing on the ocean," where his fortunes are uncertain; thus Antonio "is sad to think upon his merchandise" (1.1.8, 40). When Antonio denies this, Solanio then suggests, "Why then you are in love" (1.1.46). This in turn rejected, Solanio, Salerio, and later Gratiano begin to mock him, arguing in effect that he is sad because he is "not merry," or because he willfully elects this role to gain a reputation of "wisdom, gravity, profound conceit" (1.1. 48, 92). But even early on in the play we know this is not the answer, and that there is no real one, as Antonio's opening line is not a question, designed to elicit an answer, but a statement and a one-line character sketch.

Antonio does not trust in speech's ability to articulate the unknown, and we can argue that Jessica and Lorenzo do not either; they celebrate their love by expressing what it is not, suggesting that what it is? "like Antonio's melancholy?" is something more elevated. Like the music of the spheres, the harmony cannot be heard by those closed into bodily forms, the "muddy vesture of decay"(5.5.64). The exchanges between Antonio and the Venetians and Jessica and Lorenzo are also similar because both conform to a pattern of interrupted speech. In the earlier scene, before any real conclusions can be reached, Bassanio arrives with the request for Antonio's help that sets in motion the play's plot. We are left knowing only what does not make Antonio unhappy. This pattern of interruption also informs the dialogue between Jessica and Lorenzo, as marked by the messenger who comes bearing news of Portia's return to Belmont.

Throughout *The Merchant of Venice*, the speech act is seen as unfulfilling, a way to play verbally without arriving at answers or understandings. Shylock characterizes this well during his stumbling trial scene in Act IV; he can give no reasons for his passions, and tells the court, quite astutely, "I am not bound to please you with my answers" (4.1.64). The use of the word "bound" in this line is significant because it exposes the failure of the contract founded on words to constrain motive and behavior. There will always be something that will evade the domain of

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

the contract, and here, that is a satisfactory, sympathetic relationship between human beings. Portia's trial of the rings in Act V of *The Merchant of Venice* performs the task of challenging the idea of the verbal contract. Unlike the earlier two trials of the play, both founded on verbal contracts and tackled through speech, this is a trial that cannot be settled through verbal skill.

The first trial of the play, the trial of the caskets, consists of the suitor's choice when confronted by the several caskets of Portia's inheritance. The use of this trial to determine Portia's husband has been ordained as a contract between Portia and her father, so that now "the will of a living daughter" is "curbed by the will of a dead father" (1.2.24-5). This trial is an entirely verbal one of epigrams and scrolls and song; it is founded upon a riddle to which only the privileged are able to answer. Looking at the exchange between Portia and Bassanio directly leading up to Bassanio's choice, we see the language of speech and its inadequacies constantly pushing to the forefront: "I speak too long, but 'tis to peize the time"(3.2.22); "Confess / What treason there is mingled with your love"(26-27); "None but that ugly treason of mistrust, /Which makes me fear that? enjoying of my love"(28-29); and "Ay, but I fear you speak upon the rack, / Where men enforcd do speak anything" (32-33). This exchange between Portia and Bassanio, playfully withholding trust as to one's lover's motives, anticipates the exchange between Jessica and Lorenzo in Act V of the play. Bassanio selects correctly, but a correct choice says nothing about motive and nothing about love. The trial ends unsatisfactorily through verbal trickery and a fundamental asymmetry of knowledge, and before the love between Portia and Bassanio can be proved or consummated, Bassanio is called away to Venice.

Like the trial of the caskets, Shylock's trial in Act IV is concluded through words and the loopholes that can be found within them. The motives that separate Shylock from the Venetians cannot be reconciled through the language of appeal or argument, traditional idioms of the court, and so the trial comes down to Portia's clever literalization of Shylock's bond. She prepares for her climatic victory through a series of parallel statements that show off the ornamental and rhetorical power of language: "pound of that same merchant's flesh is thine. / The court awards it, and the law doth give it," followed by "The law allows it, and the court awards it"(4.1.298-9, 302). But just as Shylock's heart lifts with praise for Portia's abstract observance of justice put into such fine rhetorical form, she changes direction:

Tarry a little; there is something else.

This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood;

The words expressly are "a pound of flesh" (4.1.304-6).

Portia makes literal the conditions set by Shylock's bond as it invalidates his desires, displaying the insidious flexibility of language to fit any form. As Bassanio has aptly said in the trial of the

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

caskets, there is no "damnd error" that someone will not be able to "approve ... with a text"(3.2.78-9). Like the casket trial, Shylock's trial ends on an unsatisfying note, exploiting asymmetries of knowledge to find a solution without arriving at true understanding of another human being's motives.

Portia plots the trial of the rings as a counterpart to these trials, revealing their insufficiencies brought on through over-dependence on verbal argument. As the third trial of *The Merchant of Venice*, it would seem to serve no purpose besides the comic ones that allow Shakespeare to insert his cross-dressing and cuckold jokes through the test of a lover's faithfulness to his bond. But the way this trial is resolved is significant for the play's message. As Portia welcomes her husband Bassanio and his friend Antonio to Belmont after their journey from Venice, we hear, offside, Gratiano and Nerissa arguing over Gratiano's missing ring, which symbolizes a claim by Nerissa and an oath by Gratiano. The absence of Bassanio's ring, and the respective betrayal of his oath to Portia, only surfaces through this interruption to the rites of hospitality, as plotted by the two women. Bassanio and Portia then exchange paired defenses of their positions, in which the word "ring" is the prominently repeated end word: Bassanio tells 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" to which Portia responds, "If you had known the virtue of the ring, / Or half her worthiness that gave the ring," and so forth (5.1.193-208).

This recalls the type of verbal exchange that dominates the other two trials of the play and the play's modes of communication as a whole: clever patterning that finds incomplete resolution, revealing through negatives. But Portia breaks this pattern by cutting off Bassanio's oath as he attempts to swear a second time never to break an oath to her; she presents him with the ring instead, interrupting him, "In both my eyes he doubly sees himself, / In each eye one. Swear by your double self, / And there's an oath of credit" (5.1.244-46). The failure of language as a mode of communication in *The Merchant of Venice* has, I think, something to do with this motif of doubling. While Portia is alluding to and criticizing Bassanio "double self" as a type of Janus-character, she is also alluding to the duality of the marriage bond that makes, as it makes two people one, also one person into two. It is only through a person's ability to become "double" to see through 'another's eyes" that true motives can be understood and true "bonds" can be formed that have not been ordered and structured by language. The ring trial, as a test of Bassanio's faithfulness, is staged by Portia against the other trials of the play; Bassanio's failure in light of it exposes the failure of language as a regulator of human relationships and at the same time paves the way for a new type of society between the Venetians.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP