

-The Merchant of Venice-

"Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice is still relevant today because it deals with issues which still affect us. Show how two of those issues are discussed in the play."

Throughout the play a distinction is made between how things appear on the outside and how they are in reality, or on the inside. The issue of appearance versus reality is demonstrated in varied ways, mainly by the use of real-life situations. The first representation of this is Shylock's generosity with his money and eagerness to make friends with Antonio when he says, "I say, to buy his favour, I extend this friendship," when all he wants is to take a pound of Antonio's flesh and end his life, "If I can catch him once upon the hip, I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him." Shylock pretends to want to be friends with Antonio, but only wants revenge against the Jew-hater.

The choosing of the three caskets is used as the main explanation of appearance versus reality. The suitor of Portia must choose either a gold, silver or lead casket, where the right choice will allow the suitor to marry her. The Prince of Morocco, on choosing the beautiful gold casket with the inscription, "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire," sees the message, "All that glisters is not gold," and is thus turned away by Portia. The Prince of Arragon, on choosing the silver casket with, "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves," receives a fool's head, and is told that that is what he deserves. Bassanio however, on correctly choosing the lead casket with the inscription, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath," says, "The world is still (constantly) deceived with ornament." He chooses the lead casket so as not to be fooled by the dull appearance, and receives the beautiful Portia and all her wealth who, in reality, contrasts with the ugly lead. The two princes, however, were deceived by the ornament of the gold and silver caskets.

Another way that Shakespeare discusses appearance versus reality is with the use of Portia and Nerissa in disguise, plotting to take Bassanio's ring, the former dressed as a Doctor of Law and the latter as a Clerk. They save Antonio and Bassanio from their problem with Shylock, and Portia (Doctor of Law) asks for Bassanio's ring because she knew he had promised, "When this ring parts from this finger, then parts life from hence." Bassanio, after some encouragement from Antonio, reluctantly parts with his ring. When they arrive home, Portia pretends to be angry at Bassanio for losing the ring but then explains what has happened and forgives him. Bassanio was deceived by appearance of Portia as a Doctor of Law and her apparent good intentions to take the ring as a payment for her services.

The issue of racial discrimination is mainly displayed through Shylock, a Jew who is proud of his religion. The play was written at a time when there was much fear, distrust and ill-feeling against the Jews, and therefore Shylock experiences much discrimination, chiefly from Antonio. Jews were banned from most occupations and were there for usurers (lenders of money in exchange for interest on the loan). This only made Christians hate Jews even more, because usury was a practice looked down upon in those days.

Antonio believes that the only true faith is Christianity, and he constantly tries to convert Shylock to Christianity. As Shylock conceals his feelings about Antonio, he finally reveals his true feelings to Salerio when talking about the taking of a pound of Antonio's flesh in his bond, "If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies, and what's his reason? I am a Jew."

Shylock has been abused so much by Antonio that all he wants is revenge against Antonio, "And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction."

The discussion of racial discrimination reaches a climax when Shylock says, "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?" In this, he makes a comparison between Jews, a rejected minority, and Christians, an accepted social class. He shows that Jews, Christians, and all people are equal.

The issues of appearance versus reality and racial discrimination are surely two issues which are still relevant today. They are discussed mainly through the characters' interactions with one another throughout the play. Appearance versus reality is explored when Shylock pretends to be Antonio's friend, with the choosing of the caskets, and when Portia and Nerissa go to court in disguise to help out Antonio and Bassanio. Racial discrimination is shown in depth with the confrontations of Antonio and Shylock. Overall 'The Merchant Of Venice' explores both appearance versus reality and racial prejudice, which are two issues that still hold importance in present-day society.