

# Spatial Power and Identity Distortion: A Narrative Discourse Study of *The Merchant of Venice*

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**Abstract**—This paper delves into two antithetical spaces of Venice and Belmont which embodied an intricate interplay between early capitalist society and utopian imagination. The exchange hall and courtroom reflect commercial logic and religious discrimination, with Shylock marked as the “other” under ridicule and exclusion; the statutes of the court further expose the merciless discipline imposed by law upon marginalized groups. Belmont, on the other hand, constructs a seemingly ideal atmosphere through gardens, music, and the casket test, yet conceals exclusionary practices toward foreigners and women. Despite Portia’s resourcefulness during critical moments, she still must rely on a male persona to gain a voice; Jessica appears to integrate into the manor but in truth loses her original cultural identity amid conversion and silence. Shylock and Bassanio each traverse Venice and Belmont, yet both face precarious identity transformations: the former is successively pushed to the margins through public humiliation and legal persecution, while the latter is torn between love and friendship, wealth and fidelity. These fates interweave between the severity of Venice and the enchantment of Belmont, with narrative pace and focalization shifting accordingly: tension and confrontation on one side, gentleness and romance on the other, continuously regulating and reshaping characters in their movement and conflict. It follows that the discourses of capital, religion, and law not only propel the plot but also reflect Shakespeare’s poetic meditation on the contradictions of society.

**Keywords**—narrative discourse, identity, alienation, power

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the Renaissance, the concept of “space” has taken on entirely new significance across the social, economic, and cultural dimensions of Europe. As a major center for trade and culture in that era, Venice—by virtue of maritime routes connecting East and West and by means of extensive cross-border commerce—presented to the world a bustling, multifaceted urban tapestry brimming with hidden tensions. When Shakespeare composed *The Merchant of Venice*, London itself was undergoing a dramatic spatial transformation: the rise of stock exchanges spurred commercial prosperity in the metropolis, and capital power found ceaseless avenues of projection into public space. Meanwhile, Jewish communities, despite being crucial to economic exchange, endured widespread discrimination under religious and legal strictures, consigned to the margins of urban life. This confluence of macrohistorical background and the play’s own referential dimensions make *The Merchant of Venice* a compelling lens through which to examine how space and power functioned in the early modern world.

Within the play, “Venice” and “Belmont” emerge as twinned yet contrasting spaces whose tension is continuously ignited by the unfolding of various characters’ fates. The former revolves around commerce, the law courts, and the

public realm, while the latter embodies the utopian narrative of an idealized pastoral estate. Consequently, these two spaces engage in a nuanced, complex interplay between the constructed environment and narrative design. In Shakespeare’s portrayal, Venice is rendered as an urban tableau woven from multilayered power relations and social symbols: merchants, nobles, commoners, and segregated Jewish enclaves all coalesce within the city’s institutionalized structure. Against this backdrop, *The Merchant of Venice* outlines a “dual-spatial” framework, where the interconnected dynamics of “Venice” and “Belmont” are showcased through dramatic and stagecraft techniques, collectively encoding a potent yet inconspicuous power logic that ultimately enforces the regulation and alienation of characters’ identities.

Indeed, the superficially well-ordered courts and manor scenes conceal profoundly paradoxical spatial layers: these venues can be the strictest sites of legal enforcement, while simultaneously veiling illusions or cloaking an internally validated utopian narrative. Characters who traverse such networks of power often find their identities continually reconfigured or alienated; some approach self-negation or interpersonal conflict, reflecting not only the contradictions of an emergent capitalist society, but also Shakespeare’s deeper meditation on the intricate interrelationships among humanity, religion, and the law.

## II. DISCIPLINARY POWER AND IDENTITY SUPPRESSION IN VENETIAN SPACE

### A. Visual Regulation of Power in Commercial Space

Venice’s exchange square is perpetually abuzz with prosperity, with merchants flowing to and from around the Rialto Bridge in a bustling spectacle; yet amid such clamor lies a starkly visualized distribution of power. As Henri Lefebvre’s concept of “perceived space” underscores [1], space encountered in everyday life is never a neutral container but is instead embedded within social structures and discursive biases. Here, racial identity and capitalist standing interweave into an invisible mesh, making every passerby, onlooker, and street vendor a part of the “gaze.” Shakespeare, through Shylock’s experiences, unearths a mechanism of exclusion that operates silently at the level of perception: the Christian merchant Antonio seizes discursive dominance in this public realm, hurling insults at Jews in full view of the crowd—yet incurs no consequences for doing so. “*You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog, and spit upon my Jewish gaberdine... and foot me as you spurn a stranger cur over your threshold.*” [2]. In these words, the repeated labels of “dog” and “misbeliever” amount to a form of Foucauldian micro-violence [3]—there is no need for convoluted legal or

institutional action; with a few pointed words and a public glare, Shylock is branded as a marginal other.

One might say that while the Rialto exchange hall carries the luster of a bustling financial hub, it equally serves as a platform for exposing unequal power. When Antonio openly retorts, his loftily dismissive tone lays bare the prejudice saturating public space. Because the law implicitly endorses the Christian merchant's dominant position, while Jews bear the twin "original sins" of history and religion, there is virtually no counterbalance in this public confrontation. On the square, Shylock can only "patiently shrug it off" and endure such disdain, quietly lamenting *"Still have I borne it with a patient shrug, for suff'rance is the badge of all our tribe."* [2]. Viewed again through Lefebvre's lens, the Rialto in its everyday "perceived space" has already been institutionalized for racial surveillance [1]: social prejudice permeates streets, bridges, and commercial dealings, where the slightest slights or mocking words suffice to regulate the "foreign" ethnic group.

All the more ironic is that such derision is not limited to quarrels among adults: once Shylock finds that his daughter has eloped, a throng of neighborhood children rush forward, mimicking his cries of *"his stones, his daughter, and his ducats."* [2]. This "chorus of children's voices" is yet another silent assertion of power, thriving in an open urban setting. It twists Shylock's anxiety and grief into an object of ridicule. Not only do merchants and moneylenders clash, even uninformed youngsters can join the collective taunting, transforming this mechanism of identity suppression into a carnival of scorn, gradually eroding the dignity of its target. From a Foucauldian standpoint, the children's jeering is far from trivial; it epitomizes the fine-grained "micro-violence" of the social fabric, unobtrusive yet deeply injurious. For Shylock, such childish catcalls insinuate that, in the eyes of the public, he is but a laughingstock—a hot-tempered Jewish usurer whose loss of daughter or fortune scarcely concerns the mainstream community.

Viewing through a historical intertextual approach [4], the 1516 Venetian Ghetto system indeed excluded Jews from civic rights under the law. Although Shakespeare does not explicitly reference this in *The Merchant of Venice*, the many scenes at the Rialto and on the streets—where Jews are mocked and insulted once they step into public view—already allude to the symbolic extension of being "marked": outsiders are explicitly marked as such and thus become ready objects of monitoring and amusement. Within this institutionalized public space, Shylock is forced to accept an inferior status: each of his appearances draws a crowd of stares, which can erupt into collective harassment without warning. Citizens' jeers and official segregation measures reinforce one another, anchoring Jewish residents at almost the lowest rungs of society.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, commercial activity and public space exceed the function of mere scenic backdrop [5] to instead operate as a vivid platform for the display of power. Whether it be the square or the foot of the bridge, every location is etched with hierarchies of social class and religious bias. Shylock is, in effect, the most palpable "recipient" of this scenario: continually exposed at the center of threatening gazes, and subject to condemnation without official mandate or judicial process. Such a gaze, according

to Lefebvre, pervades the city like air itself, and the "perceived space" concept becomes strikingly tangible. Community members embed racial exclusion into the daily pulse of urban life, so that any resistance put up by the individual is all too easily drowned out in the relentless flood of mockery.

### *B. Contractual Violence and the Disciplining of the Subject in Legal Space*

If the humiliation at the exchange hall is a horizontal, collective pressure, then the courtroom imposes a vertical spatial structure that intensifies the hierarchy of power. In the fourth act of the play, the Venetian court hears Shylock's plea to enforce the contract. Shakespeare provides few details regarding the set design of the courtroom, but following theatrical convention and the symbolism of authority, we can surmise a spatial hierarchy: the Duke (acting as judge) presides at an elevated seat, while Shylock and Antonio stand below, surrounded by onlookers. Such "tiered" spatial design in itself represents an ordering of power: the Duke, who holds judicial and political authority, sits above and renders judgment on individual fates; the litigants, being in the lower tier and forced to look upward at the judge, manifest submission and powerlessness. The same logic applies beyond the stage—real-world court buildings often consciously construct this vertical separation: "The judge's bench is placed at a higher level to ensure the best possible vantage throughout the courtroom, creating the necessary lines of sight and hierarchy". Consequently, in the Venetian courtroom scene, the disparity in height visibly conveys the disparity in power. Although Shylock appears as the plaintiff in law, he remains at a psychological and visual disadvantage: he must look up to the Christian authority of the Duke and to Portia disguised as a judge. During the trial, Shylock is repeatedly ordered to kneel and beg for mercy, which further demeans his status through posture and spatial positioning. Within this solemnly tiered space, Shylock is pinned into the role of the subordinate, thus subjecting a religious minority to renewed subjugation.

The Venetian court adheres to a strictly contractual, businesslike logic of law. In the play, Shylock and Antonio's "pound of flesh" agreement stands at the core of this legal domain: the contract itself is endowed with a sacrosanct, inviolable force, even when laced with brutality. This particular clause is as outrageous as it is chilling—if Antonio defaults on repayment, Shylock is authorized to "cut off a pound of flesh" from his body. As Shylock declares when the agreement is made, *"Go with me to a notary, seal me there your single bond; and, in a merry sport, if you repay me not on such a day...let the forfeit be nominated for an equal pound of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken in what part of your body pleaseth me."* [2]. This contract effectively places Antonio's body into the realm of economic transaction, signifying an extreme objectification of human flesh under the purview of law and commerce. One's body is reduced to collateral, one's life measured as "a pound of flesh." Here, economic rationality reaches an inhuman apex: debt overrules everything, and people are reimagined as dissectible commodities.

The violence implicit in the "pound of flesh" arrangement likewise constitutes a means by which legal space disciplines

the subject. Firstly, its terrifying terms coerce the debtor (Antonio) to obey legal authority without daring to default—indeed, prior to the trial, Antonio still insists he shall not breach the agreement. Secondly, the contract also curtails Shylock's own subjectivity: his fixation on exacting that pound of flesh robs him of compassion, transforming him into both an embodiment and a casualty of contractual logic. When Portia inquires whether he has even a drop of mercy, Shylock maintained that so long as the law permits, he must insist on fulfillment. In effect, the agreement arms Shylock with a tool of vengeance yet cages him within a merciless legal rationale, driving him to forfeit sympathy and humanity. He incessantly repeats words like "law" and "contract," as though no other principle were possible. This unwavering devotion to the contract exemplifies how the Venetian commercial-legal space shapes its participants: whether Jew or Christian, once inside, personal identity and emotional considerations must yield to contractual rules. In this sense, the agreement produces not only violent conflict but also the regulation and molding of the characters' thoughts and behavior: Antonio, who willingly accepts the risk of death to honor his bond, and Shylock, devoid of pity as he demands his gruesome penalty. As one scholar notes, the legal system in *The Merchant of Venice* is ultimately a policy mechanism serving economic interests, rather than a vehicle for universal human rights. Consequently, the "pound of flesh" contract is no emblem of justice—rather, it epitomizes a coldly transactional society, in which the control of bodies and identities reflects the dehumanizing ethos of sixteenth-century capitalist logic.

The plot reaches its climax when Portia, disguised as "a young doctor of law employed by Bassanio," intervenes in the trial. She deftly exercises two stratagems under the auspices of legal procedure. First, under the pretext of "mercy," she tests Shylock's willingness to relent, only to counter him with a literalist reading of contractual language; next, once Shylock has capitulated, she invokes a draconian Venetian statute targeting aliens who threaten the life of any citizen, thereby forcing him into total defeat. These two moves expose the underlying prejudice and inequity in Venetian legal practice. Initially, Portia shrewdly seizes on a textual loophole: when Shylock insists on his right to cut flesh, she abruptly declares that the contract does not mention a single drop of blood because it calls only for "one pound of flesh." Should he draw blood, Shylock himself would incur mortal penalty which implies that if the act causes bleeding, Shylock's own life is forfeit. In that instant, Portia's legalistic maneuver topples his claim, leaving him bereft of damages and faced with possible execution. It appears a triumph of legal ingenuity, but it also underscores the law's chilling detachment: Portia, having previously moved listeners with her "quality of mercy" speech, instantly abandons compassion in favor of ruthless textual interpretation. This swift shift itself reveals that the legal sphere here is less about moral goodness and more about absolute fidelity to contractual literalism. Once Shylock refuses the Christian concept of mercy, Portia uses an even harsher legal tactic to defeat him, illustrating how law becomes a tool of majority bias: mastery of legal nuance prevails, while questions of moral fairness recede.

Even more decisive is the second step, wherein Portia invokes a Venetian law meant to penalize "an alien" who directly or indirectly plots against the life of a citizen. She

intercepts Shylock as he attempts to depart: "*It is enacted in the laws of Venice, If it be proved against an alien that by direct or indirect attempts he seek the life of any citizen, the party against which he doth contrive shall seize one half his goods; the other half comes to the privy coffer of the state, and the offender's life lies in the mercy of the Duke only.*" [2]. Portia accuses Shylock under this statute, forcing him to kneel and beg for clemency. The law plainly discriminates against "aliens" (i.e., infidels or foreigners): native citizens enjoy stronger protection for life and property, while outsiders face far more punitive sanctions. Importantly, the play classifies Shylock as an "alien" even though he was born and raised in Venice, an acknowledgment that, due to his Jewish identity, he is perennially cast as an outsider [5]. This mirrors actual sixteenth-century Venetian practice: "ghetto" laws barred Jews from the civic community, as mentioned above. By incorporating this provision, Shakespeare dramatizes historical fact, forging a telling parallel between the real Venetian edicts and Shylock's predicament: in both instances, Jewish persons are severely curbed the moment they "cross boundaries" and endanger Christians. This equivalence underscores the partiality of Venetian law, steeped in religious and ethnic bias.

Portia's legal strategy thus hands a complete victory to the Christians, but it hinges upon obliterating Shylock's identity: he loses his fortune and is compelled to convert to Christianity. Antonio, naming "immediate conversion" and transferring what remains of Shylock's estate to his daughter as conditions for mercy, presses the Duke to ratify the punishment. Forced conversion robs Shylock of his cultural and spiritual identity, representing the ultimate disciplinary reach of legal space: the state intervenes in personal faith, stripping the individual of even that final bastion of selfhood. In the end, Shylock, lamenting "*You take my life, when you do take the means whereby I live*" [2], stands as a figure of vanquished will. Often lauded as a testament to Portia's brilliance, the courtroom scene can, upon closer inspection, reveal how bias and violence creep through legal channels to uphold the majority's dominion. Indeed, at the trial's onset, Portia dramatically inquires, "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" feigning impartiality toward religion or ethnicity. Critics note, however, that this is an ironic instant the playwright deliberately arranges. In sixteenth-century Venice, legal mandates required Jews to wear conspicuous identifying badges Portia's pretense of uncertainty ironically hints at how law in an ideal world might transcend prejudice, yet the outcome demonstrates her full awareness of who is Jewish, and her merciless exploitation of legal bias against him. The tension between realism and idealism reaches its zenith: the ostensible myth of legal neutrality is shattered, unveiling underlying religious discrimination and the power struggles beneath. Shylock, stripped of everything in a supposedly "perfect" legal framework, sees Venice's repute as an "ideal city" crumble into an unfeeling reality. The Christian victory and Shylock's downfall "highlight the collapse of humanist ideals of equality," as the trial encapsulates the final rupture between humane compassion and the brute force of actual power.

### III. UTOPIAN ILLUSION OF BELMONT AND ITS MECHANISMS OF INDOCTRINATION

#### A. *Constructing the Utopian Space: A Narrative Strategy*

When perusing the text of *The Merchant of Venice*, it is easy to sense the sharp change in tone whenever the story transitions from the hustle and bustle of Venetian courts and exchanges to the idyllic Belmont estate. This spatial shift often corresponds to a modification in narrative voice and perspective. Previously, the focus rests largely on the merchants' monetary pressures, debt entanglements, and public disputes; yet once events move to Belmont, the narrative acquires a lighter accent, accompanied by music and a garden setting, and the dialogue shifts from calculating self-interest to spirited banter and romance. Shakespeare displays remarkable ingenuity by deploying this "scene-switch," creating a space seemingly divorced from worldly rules—an atmosphere of near-magical "Green World" [6] escapes a retreat far from city clamor, replete with nighttime festivities and music that, as critics have noted, functions as a temporary refuge from urban regulations and rational mores.

Nevertheless, this escape remains an "enclosed space" shaped by artistic idealization. On its surface, Belmont advertises an ethos of "unbounded generosity and forgiveness" in vivid contrast to Venice's cold, profit-driven principles. In practice, however, it remains materially reliant upon Venetian commerce. The "fairy-tale" charm is continually offset by the trifling, penny-pinching realities of Venice, indicating that Belmont's utopian shimmer is by no means secure. In the final scenes, once the story moves back to this seeming paradise from a Venice mired in conflicts of interest, the facade of a happy reunion takes shape. Yet Belmont's affluence and ease ultimately derive from maritime trade revenues and a dismissive stance toward urban economics. What proclaims itself a "Peach-Blossom Spring" inevitably casts the shadow of real power behind it, with its allure concealing most of the underlying tensions.

The "casket test" stands at the core of Belmont's utopian narrative framework. According to the late father's will, each suitor must choose the correct casket containing Portia's portrait to win her hand in marriage. The gold, silver, and lead caskets, each bearing an exaggerated inscription, illustrate a clash between material pursuits and moral virtue. The glimmering gold casket is emblazoned with, "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire," while the unremarkable lead casket promises, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath." The disparity between exterior and inscription already hints at a moral creed: anyone wishing to enter Belmont's domain must "discard vanity in favor of deeper worth." Bassanio puts aside his shrewd calculations and worldly ambitions, selecting the lead casket, confirming his superior inner qualities over rival suitors. By contrast, the Prince of Morocco, believing that "so precious a jewel (Portia) can never rest in something as base as lead," opts for gold, only to fail miserably—ostensibly a misjudgment of superficiality but, in essence, underscoring exclusion of the foreign. Shakespeare's depiction of the Moorish prince as an individual overly fixated on wealth and appearances resonates with Elizabethan-era stereotypes regarding people of color. When Portia derisively remarks, upon his departure,

"Let all of his complexion choose me so," her veiled racism becomes obvious, unveiling that this so-called utopia, in fact, refuses universal access.

Moreover, whenever the plot switches to Belmont, the narrative's tempo grows more lyrical and unhurried, frequently enriched by characters' soliloquies or dialogues of a reflective nature. In contrast to Venice, with its crowded gatherings and incessant mercantile jargon, Belmont's setting is steeped in musical tones and floral motifs; here, so-called traditional rules can be momentarily suspended, just as the nocturnal garden abounds with private meetings and romantic overtures. Yet this ostensible harmony is not truly "inclusive": while the utopian tableau flaunts moral virtue, it covertly perpetuates biases against foreigners or any "outsiders." In terms of "narrative focalization" [7] Shakespeare's approach invites the audience to watch how various suitors are tested or rejected in Belmont, thereby reinforcing its moral stance; but this process relegates "failed casket-pickers" from foreign lands to near sidenotes, satisfying the audience's fascination or scorn, while discouraging deeper reflection on their possible complexity. Put differently, from a narratological perspective, Shakespeare deftly manipulates the text: once Belmont appears, its aesthetic brightness is magnified, its romance and idealism take center stage, while critiques of exclusion—particularly racial or class-based—remain muted. Consequently, viewers easily celebrate the happy outcome without pausing to consider any hidden social or racial inequalities.

In consideration of this, Belmont is akin to an otherworldly idyll, resplendent with music, gardens, and nighttime revelry in the tradition of classic comedic "Green Worlds." On one hand, it temporarily emancipates audiences from the strife and capitalist constraints of Venice; on the other, the casket ritual contrives a moral high ground that credits humility over ostentation as the sole path to "true love." Yet this same "romantic fantasy" subtly underpins a gatekeeping mechanism targeting "the alien." When the Prince of Morocco fails due to his fixation on outward opulence, the play's subtext reads like a punitive fable—"not of our race, thus inevitably misguided"—deeply mirroring popular Elizabethan prejudices. Belmont is therefore fraught with paradoxes: both an emancipatory fantasy and a bastion of exclusion. Although its outward tone is joyous and enchanting, the true beneficiaries of that bliss form a selective circle; whether foreign identity or a moral stance at odds with the mainstream, it poses a challenge to fully entering Belmont's utopia.

To put it differently, Belmont's space might be likened to an enchanting bubble. It asserts a code contrary to Venice's norms, wielding that distinction to exhibit moral refinement and moral cleansing; at the same time, it covertly reaffirms boundaries that exclude "the other." Shakespeare orchestrates these alternating settings—Venice and Belmont—so that narrative pace and perspective direct the audience's gaze between "harsh reality" and "romantic illusion," cloaking unresolved contradictions in comedic guise. The dazzling Belmont, in the final reckoning, draws sustenance from Venice's economic foundations; its purported ideal of virtue simultaneously underscores latent prejudice. Through this clever interplay of dual spaces—seemingly incompatible yet mutually dependent—the narrative ensures that shifting

fortunes and personal journeys continually illuminate the tension between commerce and idyll.

### *B. Gender and Racial Indoctrination: A Narrative Concealment*

Portia may inhabit Belmont's "utopia," apparently endowed with wealth and authority, but her fate is constrained at the outset by her father's patriarchal design. Her deceased father's will stipulates the casket test, virtually converting her marriage into a predetermined lottery, akin to an otherworldly mandate ruling this outwardly free and romantic estate. Belmont, though ostensibly lauding love and delight, is fundamentally shaped by paternal law: despite being its titular mistress, Portia cannot surmount her father's decree, and must passively await the correct "lead casket" suitor. In other words, even this utopian sheen belies a deeper structure of order and domination. When the plot shifts from her estate to the Venetian court, Portia's proactive intervention proves momentarily striking. Disguised as "Balthasar," she enters the legal arena with sharp wit and legalistic cunning to rescue Antonio—a seeming demonstration of female empowerment. Yet her triumph, ironically, hinges upon acquiring male identity, underscoring the entrenched power of patriarchy in public spaces. Although she salvages the Christian male community from Shylock and subdues that foreign father, she does not truly topple any core hierarchy; once the trial concludes, Portia discards her disguise and returns to Belmont, staging the ring test for her husband's loyalty, smoothing out every remaining conflict, and concluding the play in a triumphant comedic note. Critics note that she subverted paternal constraints only briefly, ultimately yielding to social expectations of womanhood. In the final tableau, she radiantly reclaims her role as wife, upholding what appears to be a tranquil home, never fundamentally threatening patriarchal foundations.

Examined through Michel Foucault's notion of "heterotopia" [8], Belmont might be read as an "experimental space outside standard society": it claims superiority over Venice's austere mercantile ethos, seemingly pushing tolerance and romance to their limits, even allowing Portia's momentary display of savvy. Yet, in reality, this surface placidity often conceals an undercurrent of power. When all is said and done, paternal authority remains intact through wills and religious dictates; Portia's capacity to "cross gender lines" is permissible only in certain circumstances [9]. Once the flurry ends, conventional marriage structures and social tiers reassert themselves, so "heterotopia" rarely yields genuine emancipation—it may simply operate more discreetly, mesmerizing and entrancing the audience with a veneer of elegance that discourages deeper questioning of patriarchy and mainstream discourse.

Nowhere is this kind of "subtle indoctrination" more apparent than in Jessica's narrative arc. Unlike Portia's ephemeral "star turn" in the courtroom, Jessica's "escape" is almost intentionally minimized in the text: Shylock's daughter swiftly flees with his wealth (and her Jewish identity tucked away) to Lorenzo's side, converting to Christianity in a few scant lines of dialogue. The play effectively "omits" her potential turmoil and emotional struggles; once Jessica arrives in Belmont, the celebratory tone swiftly embraces her, and she appears to harbor no pang of self-examination or

remorse. Yet when she barter away the ring Shylock once gave her mother—exchanging this treasured heirloom for a monkey—Shylock is devastated, recalling the precious token that bound him to his late wife. That ring encapsulates deep familial memories and cultural ties, now forsaken for a trivial novelty, laying bare how Jessica has effectively severed her past. Though Shakespeare offers no extensive depiction of her inner turbulence, careful reading suggests she does not so readily cast aside her heritage as it may seem.

In the final nighttime scene, music drifts through the air as couples bask in celebration, but Jessica remains conspicuously reticent during the communal singing. She confides that she never feels joy upon hearing sweet strains of music, betraying a sense of dislocation. Immersion in Belmont's presumed bliss should have triggered delight, yet this dissonance instead reveals lingering bewilderment over her identity, implying that conversion and a life of privilege cannot erase the hidden ache of sundered origins. By orchestrating Jessica's quiet discord in the comedic finale, Shakespeare indicates that hers is no simplistic resolution of "best of both worlds," but rather a cost-laden assimilation that highlights the exclusive dimensions of Belmont's utopia. Jessica is ostensibly welcomed if she discards her old identity; only by relinquishing her ancestral faith and roots does she gain entry to the estate's revels. In effect, "integration" demands her total effacement, turning her into a near-silent "obedient figure," stripped of her mother's ring and of her original religious ties.

Thus, the radiant visage of Belmont is akin to a thin veil, its essence still reflective of dominant religion and patriarchal order [9]. Portia and Jessica articulate two distinct "othered" positions: the former can briefly subvert paternal constraints by masquerading as a man, while the latter undergoes near-unspoken conversion and is quietly repressed. Each path, however, culminates in reaffirming the established system: Belmont's apparent idyll does not necessarily stand for genuine liberation. It grants a picturesque stage for the happiness of a select few and also leaves ample room for the designs of entrenched authority. In Shakespeare's depiction, this land—ostensibly a pastoral haven—echoes Foucault's paradox of "heterotopia": outside the spheres of court, city, and family arises an ostensibly broad-minded, festive domain, yet it enacts implicit strategies to discipline women and outsiders. This is how Belmont sustains the outward façade of utopia: with soft elegance and courtesy, it subtly excludes dissent, while employing ritual and etiquette to "reform" or "co-opt" those beyond its norms, leading onlookers to believe all conflict has been tidily dispelled in a celebratory haze.

## *IV. ALIENATION NARRATIVE OF IDENTITY THROUGH SPATIAL TRANSITION*

### *A. The Tragedy of Shylock's Identity: Static Space and Isolation Narrative*

Shylock's initial predicament was largely determined by sixteenth-century Venice's policies of spatial segregation targeting Jews: curfews and strict demarcations in the Jewish ghetto placed him by default at the margins of society, fixed as an "other." Each time he stepped beyond that enclosed residential area and ventured into the Rialto's commercial bustle, he effectively entered a public sphere dominated by

Christian merchants. This invisible boundary line cut across everyday life: if Shylock moved too close to the Christian epicenter, he was met with insults and rejection. In the endless, daily routine of being peripheral, he found himself ceaselessly branded as a “Jew,” an unalterable marker.

Antonio’s “pound of flesh” agreement can be seen as Shylock’s attempt to “strike back,” using commercial regulations as a weapon—he seeks legal authority to assert “bodily control” over Antonio, thus avenging the constant insults he endures. Yet once the courtroom scenes arise, the power dynamic drastically reverses. The Duke, along with high officials and nobles, encircles him in a domain of unchallengeable authority, and Shylock’s imagined “contractual leverage” disintegrates in an instant. Portia (in male disguise) delivers the fateful line—“*shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more than just a pound of flesh*”—thereby erecting an unmentioned but lethal legal constraint. Should Shylock attempt to repay the principal and withdraw from the contract, leaving him no way back. These powerful legal discourses nullify Shylock’s hopes of revenge at the very moment he aims to strike.

Crucially, the courtroom is not a neutral arbiter but a “striated space” firmly governed by the Christian community [10]. Shylock’s pleas and protestations go unheeded, drowned out by the consensus of the dominant faction. Thus, rather than resolving Shylock’s pain, the “pound of flesh” arrangement reopens and deepens his spiral of despair. In a private setting—Act III, Scene 1—he at last poses that wrenching question, “*Hath not a Jew eyes? ... if you poison us, do we not die? ... if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?*” [2], giving the audience a glimpse of a flesh-and-blood resister calling out for justice. Yet his very invocation of revenge proves self-destructive once he steps into that public zone of state power: upon Shylock’s arrival in the court, judges and religious authorities force his conversion and seize his property, imposing a merciless “reterritorialization” into Christian society [10]. He is thus stripped of the final vestiges of Jewish identity. In that climactic moment, Antonio spells out the harsh terms—“He presently become a Christian” and “bestow his property on Lorenzo”—pressing Shylock to respond with a feeble “I am content,” losing not only assets but also his paternal stature, commercial role, and Jewish dignity in the narrative.

At this juncture, Shylock’s tragedy transcends personal misfortune, revealing the broader mechanisms by which spatial segregation and legal frameworks synergize to crush an “othered” subject. Initially, the walled-off ghetto condemns him to the “outsider” label; the limited acceptance granted him in the public marketplace never dissolves Christians’ prejudices toward a so-called “usurious Jew”; and the court’s overwhelming authority ultimately robs him of retribution. In the course of these shifting spaces, he moves from marginalization to demonization, and finally to forced “reform”—exhausting every avenue of resistance and exiting the “civilized order” in utter defeat. The proposition made by Deleuze, namely that “mobility within walled confines can still run afoul of iron bars,” finds dramatic embodiment in Shylock’s experience: though he roams about attempting to exploit gaps in commerce and law, the strictures of a “striated” social order inexorably close in, layer after layer divesting him of identity, until nothing remains but a broken shell.

## B. Bassanio’s Uncertain Identity: Nomadic Space Flow and Anxiety Narrative

Bassanio’s identity swings between the profit-driven milieu of Venice and the opulent, seemingly romantic sphere of Belmont—an existence fraught with contradictions. He first appears saddled with heavy debts, yet still harbors ambitions to marry well and thus reverse his fortune, or in the original, “*O my Antonio, had I but the means to hold a rival place with one of them, ... I should questionless be fortunate!*” [2] which underlines how, in the Venetian context, Bassanio self-defines as an economic actor, acknowledging that material capital is indispensable for competing in the realm of courtship. This discloses a worldly dimension to his love pursuit: obtaining wealth and paying off debts are at the heart of his quest. Yet once he steps into Belmont’s distinctly different ambiance, he transforms into a passionate suitor. In this newly romantic setting, Bassanio is obliged to exhibit a moral quality beyond practicality to gain Portia’s affection. Such a spatial transition invests him with an adaptive identity: on one side, he is a debt-ridden playboy in Venice; on the other, the heroic lover in Belmont. Notably, during the casket test, he rejects gilded allure in favor of the lead casket, thereby winning Portia. This suggests that in Belmont’s sphere, he readily dons the role of an ideal romantic partner, relinquishing any overt pursuit of wealth. But is this shift a heartfelt epiphany or a performative ploy to align with Belmont’s values? That question becomes thorny when a letter from Antonio interrupts his marriage celebration, spurring Bassanio to reveal a deep sense of obligation toward his friend, placing loyalty above his honeymoon. In leaping between these two spaces with such speed, he signals an internal conflict of identity: he wishes to be a devoted husband yet cannot forego the roles of both companion and debtor. From a Deleuzian perspective, Bassanio embodies a “nomadic subject,” traversing the commercial metropolis and the aristocratic enclave, his identity in constant flux [10]. This fluidity, however, does not quell contradictions; instead, it burdens him with multiple expectations, creating a perpetual quandary.

The ring episode throws into dramatic relief the conflicting contract cultures of Venice and Belmont, thus heightening Bassanio’s identity crisis. In Belmont, he and Portia exchange rings and vows, a symbolic covenant grounded in love and trust. Within Belmont’s context, this ring symbolizes a sacred commitment. But when the story returns to Venice—specifically, the courtroom environment defined by law and transactional relationships—that same ring unexpectedly becomes embroiled in a different sort of contract test. Disguised as a lawyer, Portia, having just saved Antonio, demands Bassanio’s ring as recompense. Torn between his vow to Portia (a personal bond of love) and his newfound obligation in Venice (an external, legal-cum-transactional bond), he initially demurs that this ring is bound up with other attachments, referencing his vow and Portia’s gift. Yet the disguised Portia taunts him for miserliness, implying a rational wife would not object, and his dear friend Antonio further urges him, “Let his deservings and my love be valued ‘gainst your wife’s commandment.” Under dual pressure, Bassanio capitulates, dispatching Gratiano to deliver the ring. In that moment, the ring’s contractual significance is spatially inverted: in Venice’s rationalist, law-centric culture, repaying

a life-saving favor to a crucial ally supersedes a mere token of affection [11]; from the Belmont perspective, relinquishing the ring amounts to a breach of fidelity and an affront to one's marital identity. By yielding up the ring, Bassanio effectively chooses friendship or debt over romantic devotion. The tension thus distills into a conflict between "the legal-friendship contract" of Venice and "the love-trust contract" of Belmont. Following Deleuze's insight, Bassanio vacillates between contrasting value systems, as though propelled by two different "flows"—one valuing duty and negotiation, another valuing emotion and commitment. When these collide, his "flowing identity" ruptures and becomes unstable [10].

Bassanio's ambition to forge a new self through oscillation between Venice and Belmont—rising from a bankrupt youth to the privileged son-in-law of a wealthy estate—grants him a certain malleability. He can exploit alliances in the mercantile realm and display courtly finesse in aristocratic circles. This plasticity, however, by no means guarantees resolution of deeper conflicts. Returning to Belmont in the final act, after Portia and Nerissa (disguised respectively as lawyer and clerk) unmask the ring affair, Bassanio confronts his fundamental predicament: he must prove to Portia that he remains a trustworthy spouse yet is wracked by guilt, admitting his "transgression in balancing friendship and marriage." His vow at Belmont is thus exposed as fragile, undone by events in Venice. Proclaiming regret and promising never again to be unfaithful, he reveals the precariousness of his role. From a wider viewpoint, Bassanio cannot wholly extricate himself from Venetian constraints: financial strain and indebtedness to Antonio cast shadows even in the pastoral environment, circumscribing his emotional freedom. The limitations of his "nomadic identity" underscore the premise that while spatial movement enables one to assume varied roles, internal contradictions persist. The text repeatedly depicts him "hurrying" from place to place, as though performing a Deleuzian "nomadism," but in every location, local rules and norms partially fix his behavior—he must practice mercantile ethics in Venice and vow marital loyalty in Belmont. Such provisional, fluid selfhood supplies him with opportunities yet also constitutes a latent risk. Lacking a stable, integrated sense of self, he finds the roles he adopts in these disparate domains difficult to reconcile [12].

## V. NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AND THE REINTERPRETATION OF SPATIAL POWER

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the dualistic spatial framework not only manifests in characters' choices but also emerges in the shifts of narrative rhythm and the allocation of focal attention. As notions of "narrative pace" and "focalization" suggest [7], a novel or play can manipulate settings in time and space, dialogue density, and vantage points to shape the audience's reception—thereby, perhaps unwittingly, fixing characters' identities, instilling biases, and orchestrating power relations. Within this play, the contrast in narrative pacing between the two principal spaces, "Venice" and "Belmont," is striking: the former is typically fast-paced, peopled with numerous figures, and characterized by intense verbal conflict; the latter, by contrast, tends to feature smaller groups, emotional reflection, music, and moonlit evenings.

Such a disparity not only yields distinct dramatic atmospheres, but also directly influences whose voice is heard on stage and how each character's identity is portrayed.

### A. *The Encoding of Power Through Spatial Pace and Focalization*

All Venetian scenes unfold with a sense of compressed urgency. Usually, a crowd of characters appear together—Antonio, Salerio, Solanio, Bassanio, Gratiano, along with Shylock, and any number of bystanders—who continuously enter or exit. On stage, a flurry of group dialogues intertwine, conveying large amounts of information at a frenetic pace, what Genette calls an "accelerated narrative drive" [7]. Various strands—lost merchant ships, debt negotiations, racial tensions—collide simultaneously. Rapid exchanges of short lines, along with abrupt switches in who is speaking, imbue the audience with a heightened sense of impending crisis.

For instance, Act I, Scene 1, though lacking an explicit conflict at first, hints at tension through Antonio's inexplicable melancholy, Bassanio's financial problems, and the incessant questions from friends. The tension deepens in Act I, Scene 3, where Shylock and Antonio debate "three thousand ducats for three months," with cutting remarks about Shylock's Jewish identity. The audience senses a "potentially explosive" social friction. Antonio's lines often burst forth without much setup. Surrounded by multiple onlookers, the conversation is repeatedly interrupted; the audience is swept along by the turbulence, bracing for an imminent showdown. From Genette's perspective, this technique shortens the process of narration, quickening the advance of conflict, perfectly aligning with Venice's representation in the play as practical and profit-oriented. Furthermore, the Venetian court scenes employ similarly rapid dialogue to underscore the mounting pressure of authority. In Act IV, when Shylock sues Antonio over the pound of flesh, the Duke, nobles, and spectators encircle the stage. Portia (disguised as a lawyer) arrives, along with Shylock's gruesome terms, Antonio's response, and bystanders' pleas, all concentrated into a tense, concise timeframe. Conversations escalate at breakneck speed, with another speaker responding almost as soon as one has finished, leaving audiences scant time to process. Each instance of Shylock's attempt to collect his flesh is rebuffed by fierce condemnation—take the sudden "no drop of blood" constraint introduced by Portia, which sparks an uproar. This rapid-fire "focal shift" and the swirling interplay of characters convert the courtroom into a cauldron of conflict, revealing, in stark tempo, the legal system's "legitimate violence" toward vulnerable figures.

Regarding "focalization" [7], Venetian scenes primarily exhibit "external focalization" or "zero focalization." The audience sees outward displays of hostility or bargains but little of the protagonists' inner complexities. We only glean fragments: Antonio's melancholic cause remains obscure, overshadowed by surface-level talk; Shylock's impetus for exacting a pound of flesh—whether religious vengeance, commercial revenge, or personal pride—lacks in-depth interior monologue. By using minimal interior disclosure and a barrage of external confrontations, the playwright harnesses Venice's brisk pacing to heighten conflict and sustain

audience alertness. In effect, “multi-character, multi-dialogue” scenarios echo the bustle of a capitalist society, forging the most concentrated hotspots of tension and perpetually reminding us that violence and bigotry lurk just beneath the veneer of civility [13, 14].

In marked contrast, Belmont typically features fewer characters, with the script allowing enough “breathing room” for thought and imagery. Portia and Nerissa’s interactions in the estate feel markedly gentle; the casket scenes usually progress one suitor at a time: a prince or a gentleman attempts to interpret the caskets’ inscriptions, the pace calmer, and the mood more ceremonial. There is seldom the noisy scramble of an entire crowd cutting each other off. Instead, the drama uses intimate, smaller-scale dialogue to underscore Belmont’s independence and grace. Such an approach aligns with the strategy of slowing or decelerating of narrative. For instance, each suitor carefully reads the casket’s text, ponders its meaning—like Morocco, who deliberates before choosing gold; or Bassanio, who utters poetic lines to explain why he rejects outward splendor in favor of lead’s humble authenticity. The narrative thus slows, granting audiences time to savor the verse and reflect on thematic lessons. Even the moment Bassanio chooses correctly can involve staged music or dance, emphasizing the “romantic enchantment” typical of a stately countryside.

Likewise, in Act V, after the tense court verdict in Venice, the play returns to Belmont’s garden under nightfall, accompanied by a serene musical interlude for the lovers. Dialogue becomes sparse, moments of silence and pause expand, orchestrating a soothing nocturnal aura. This shift allows the audience to unwind from the prior confrontations. Belmont’s slower rhythm “cures” the tension, as though bridging the comedic form’s need for temporary reconciliation.

From a focalization angle, Belmont frequently shifts toward “internal focalization” or “subjective viewpoints.” Characters more readily voice emotional or introspective revelations—Bassanio, for instance, soliloquizing about surface vs. substance when choosing the casket, or Jessica and Lorenzo sharing sentiments on music and love under the moonlight. These close perspectives invite the audience into the protagonists’ mental states, experiencing the “tranquility of the manor” and emotional harmony. Yet one must note Belmont’s unspoken exclusionary structures: for instance, once the Prince of Morocco fails, he promptly exits. The text provides no prolonged self-reflection or emotional closure for him—only a fleeting mention of Portia mocking his skin tone and misguided choice. While Belmont’s calm pace often foregrounds its favored characters (Bassanio, Portia) in gentle detail, it subtly omits or glosses over the interiority of those who fail to assimilate. This arrangement evidently caters to the audience’s desire for a “satisfying love story,” marginalizing or obscuring the fates of less acceptable figures.

#### B. *Implicit Complicity and Narrative Irony in Space*

By comparing Venetian scenes with those set in Belmont, one sees the play’s technique of controlling narrative tempo and focal distribution—one ensures a heavy crisis-laden realism, the other ensures a dreamlike evasion. This dual approach not only bolsters the “conflict vs. utopia” theme but also enforces a kind of stealthy discipline upon the characters’

destinies. Venice’s frenetic group dialogues thrust Shylock, Antonio, and Bassanio swiftly into collisions—social prejudice and monetary burdens blaze across intense lines of speech—while Belmont’s slowed pace, limited cast, and romantic mood conjure a sense of “pristine escape.” As Genette argues, how the narrative edits scenes and allocates focal points embodies underlying value judgments. In *The Merchant of Venice*, foreign or non-Christian characters, and certain women as well, are deliberately cast into abrupt or overshadowed sequences, giving the viewer primarily those story arcs that reinforce mainstream ideals.

For example, in the climatic Venetian trial, Shylock attempts multiple times to articulate his anguish and oppression, yet constant interruptions from Portia’s legal tactics or the Duke’s menacing decrees overshadow him. The audience, bombarded by Shylock’s frustration and obstinacy, rarely has a chance to empathize with his deeper pain. Meanwhile, Portia’s illusions of brilliance—both in Belmont’s measured, lyrical dialogues and in the courtroom’s dramatic reversal—grip the audience’s admiration, deflecting scrutiny of her own ruthlessness in defending Antonio’s social circle. Once the scene shifts back to Belmont, the knives and judgments vanish into the night’s melodies and comedic resolution, as though Shylock’s downfall no longer matters. In effect, the change in pace and viewpoint promptly dissolves any lingering issues of racial or religious bias behind a veneer of final-act happiness.

Such decisions—who is granted speaking time, who is told to exit swiftly or remain silent—reaffirm how the play’s narrative actively sculpts identity. As Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical model in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* suggests, self-presentation is not merely a function of individual intention, but rather is mediated by the spatial arrangements of the stage and the anticipatory gaze of the audience; it is, in essence, a microcosm of broader social interaction [15]. Within *The Merchant of Venice*, the privileged characters—Bassanio, Portia, and Antonio—are afforded expansive narrative space, slower pacing, and greater access to what Goffman terms the “front stage”: a public arena in which identity may be performed with rhetorical force and emotional complexity. In contrast, racial and religious “Others” such as the Prince of Morocco and Shylock are consigned to scenes of heightened dramatic tension, largely confined to the “back stage,” where their identities are passively constructed through stereotype, denial of narrative voice, and reductive character framing.

The more limited the temporal and discursive allocation, the more susceptible these marginalized figures become to simplification, demonization, or comic caricature. Such narrative structuring compels us to ask: who is permitted the freedom to articulate a fully realized self, and who is denied the chance to narrate their own complexity? The answer reveals not only a differential access to speech, but also a systemic foreclosure of imaginative empathy—where certain characters are rendered legible through richness of voice, and others silenced into narrative opacity. All of this suggests that through its control over narrative tempo and the deliberate distribution of focus, the play ultimately determines who is given space to speak, who is silently cast as the Other, and whose suffering is permitted to be overlooked. Beneath the surface-level plot and character conflicts lies an “invisible



directorial hand” that, through pacing, dramatic structure, and the careful calibration of roles, renders these divisions of identity seemingly natural and inevitable. The performance space is never merely a neutral stage. It becomes, to a significant extent, a mirror that reflects the dynamics of power allocation and the construction of social identity.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In drama, the demarcation of space and the manipulation of narrative pace serve not merely as a background design or formal technique: they shape characters’ fates and mold values. The boundary between Venice and Belmont is made palpable by differences in tempo and emotional pitch, rewriting the rules whenever the scene shifts. Once commercial and legal discourse intervenes, demands of emotion or identity may be downgraded; even Belmont’s seemingly peaceful setting cannot be wholly insulated from social prejudices and patriarchal codes. By strategically allocating “discursive power” in each location and adjusting the momentum of the plot, the play ultimately depicts a world that rejects true equality for any “other,” reinforcing mainstream order. Crossing one domain into another may offer short-lived opportunities yet often ends in silence or co-optation. Even under a seemingly radiant comedic finale, an undercurrent of disparity remains. Shakespeare’s theatrical vision is ceaselessly open-ended, prompting ongoing reflection on the paradoxes of space and identity, authority and humanity.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest

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