Irregular Unions
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Irregular Unions: Clandestine Marriage in Early Modern English Literature.

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In this chapter on *The Merchant of Venice* and the next on *Othello*, I am interested in how Shakespeare uses elopement to explore the possible integration of racial and religious outsiders into white Christian society. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare takes the popular stage plot-line of clandestine marriage and gives it a cross-cultural twist when a Jew’s daughter, Jessica, elopes with a Christian, Lorenzo. Of course, Shakespeare portrays clandestine marriages with a noticeable regularity throughout his canon. Due to their versatility as plot devices, irregular unions occur in every dramatic genre, making for great comedy and great tragedy alike. In comedies, clandestine marriages are the natural by-product of a genre that foregrounds female agency within matters of love and courtship. Some clandestine marriages, however, such as the secret consummation between the eponymous lovers in *Troilus and Cressida* or the unsolemnized union between Claudio and Juliet in *Measure for Measure*, trouble the festive tone typically associated with comedy, contributing to the categorization of these works as “problem comedies.”¹ The possibility of a clandestine marriage may give way to a public wedding at the play’s end according to comedic convention (Lysander and Hermia’s attempted elopement in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for instance). Otherwise, clandestine marriages undermine the hallmark of comic closure: the incorporation of a couple back into normative society through Christian matrimony.²
Representations of cross-cultural marriage on the Renaissance stage are inevitably clandestine. As New World exploration expanded along with international trade, however, the possibility must have captivated the early modern imagination. Queen Elizabeth’s “open letter to the Lord Mayor of London” (1596) complaining of the presence of “blackmoors” reveals a concern about the growing number of racialized others in England, even if the numbers remained relatively small. When looking to Shylock’s account of the Jacob and Laban story, Elizabeth A. Spiller observes that “miscegenation is . . . a key theme” in The Merchant of Venice. Launcelot Gobbo’s assertion that the marriage of Jews to Christians will “raise the price of hogs” (3.5.24) suggests the belief that romantic alliances with outsiders were economically destabilizing. The range of ways in which a couple could enter into marriage in early modern England meant that cross-cultural unions, whether with racial and/or religious outsiders, through clandestine means could become a real, even if remote, possibility.

If clandestine marriage troubles comic closure, then it seems cross-cultural clandestine marriage would be more the stuff of tragedy than comedy. The fact that Shakespeare adds the elopement of Jessica and Lorenzo to the familiar tale about a wealthy Jew and a flesh bond, and that it is the only instance of cross-cultural marriage in his comedies, should draw our attention to its significance. In Christopher Marlowe’s Jew of Malta, the relationship between the Jew’s daughter Abigail and her Christian suitor—Shakespeare’s inspiration for the Jessica-Lorenzo plotline—does not allow for a happy conclusion, indicating the near impossibility of a successful cross-cultural marriage on the early modern stage. The closest analogue to the Jessica-Lorenzo plotline in Shakespeare’s other plays, the elopement between Othello and Desdemona (which will be explored in the next chapter), ends disastrously. In The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare finds a way to enfold a plot line seemingly better suited to tragedy into a comedic framework.

Most of the scholarship on Jessica and Lorenzo’s marriage deploys early modern theories on racial and religious difference to determine whether Jessica successfully effaces her Jewish identity to become a full-fledged member of the Christian community. The scholarly focus stems from the belief that Jewishness signified not only a theological difference during the early modern period but a racial difference as well. A person could not convert from Judaism to Christianity without undergoing a literal bodily change. According to Kim F. Hall, Jessica appears to get around this problem as the other characters deny Shylock’s claims of consanguinity with his daughter. M. Lindsay Kaplan further argues that Jessica’s female body does not pose a threat to
bloodlines since popular Aristotelian theory claimed that women did not contribute any of their own biological makeup to their children. However, scholars have stressed that Jessica’s integration into the Christian community at Belmont is not as comfortable as Kaplan suggests. Janet Adelman, for instance, points out that Gratiano’s reference to Jessica as an “infidel” (3.2.218) after her marriage, and the fact that Portia and Bassanio “barely register” her presence, indicates that the Christian characters are not ready to accept Jessica as one of their own. Carole Levin agrees that Jessica appears uncomfortable and isolated after her marriage and conversion. This scholarship, however, does not take the clandestine nature of Jessica’s wedding vows into account.

By refocusing the scholarly conversation on Jessica and Lorenzo’s elopement away from the ambiguities of the female Jewish body and onto the issues at stake in Shakespearean comedy—female agency within courtship and marriage—we can better understand how the couple fits into the play’s comedic framework. The Merchant of Venice does not end with a grand wedding according to convention, because the couples all exchange their wedding vows offstage in the previous acts, making it one of the few comedies in which Shakespeare explores the marriages that come after the courtships. Up to this point in the critical conversation, scholars have not fully attended to the clandestine (as well as the cross-cultural) nature of Lorenzo and Jessica’s marriage and the implications of this for Jessica’s integration into Belmont society. The break from generic tradition allows us to compare the complications surrounding Jessica and Lorenzo’s secret union with Portia and Bassanio’s public one. Shakespeare illustrates that those who elope automatically put themselves into the position of outsider by violating social norms.

Shakespeare does not solve the problem of cross-cultural clandestine marriage in The Merchant of Venice by neutralizing or even erasing Jessica’s Jewish identity (an impossible feat as the contradictory scholarship on the subject has shown). Instead, he recuperates Jessica’s domestic identity as a responsible householder. Since establishing a household was one of the primary goals of early modern marriage, her initial inability to establish a domestic identity after her elopement becomes at least as devastating as her converted Jewish one. To make this argument, I first explore how elopement undermined the ideal of the early modern household, and then how Shakespeare portrays Portia’s running of her Belmont estate as representing this ideal. Portia’s domestic acumen contrasts with Shylock’s own poor household management, which precipitates Jessica’s elopement. In light of the emphasis on the proper rule of the domestic space in the play, I further demonstrate how Jessica’s elopement
hinders her ability to enter into the Belmont community. The other characters’ efforts to establish a domestic identity for the cross-cultural couple prevent them from falling into the tragedy of Othello.

Domestic Identity and the Problem of Elopement

Establishing a domestic identity was one of the main purposes of early modern marriage. As William Gouge observes of the marriage ceremony, “by it men and women are made Husbands and Wives. It is the onely lawfull means to make them Fathers and Mothers. It is the ordinary means to make them Masters and Mistresses.” Such new identities as masters and mistresses of households came with a new list of responsibilities. David Cressy describes the nature of the transformation: “Through marriage . . . [a couple’s] relationship to domestic authority became transformed. As single and dependent persons they had followed orders, but as married householders they issued instructions. . . . Their authority proceeded from their condition.” Husband and wife ruled the household together, but within a hierarchical relationship that defined the husband as the head of household. Domestic handbooks present the woman’s recognition of her husband’s superiority as a choice: “The Voluntary subjection is that dutifull respect which inferiours carry towards those whom God hath set over them.” The wife thus ruled the rest of the household through an “extension of patriarchal power.” Despite this limitation of female authority, however, women did perform significant tasks, including the management of the household’s complex day-to-day affairs and financial matters.

To help husbands and wives better understand their new responsibilities, the early modern handbooks explain household obligations in elaborate detail. Even though William Perkins claims that “the Holie Ghost in the booke of the Scriptures, hath in great wisedome commended both Rules for direction, and examples for imitation, to Husbands and Wives, to Parents and Children, to Masters and Servuants,” the number of early modern handbooks that provide guidelines for domestic order betrays an anxiety concerning the subject. Gouge’s Of Domesticall Duties, for instance, is almost 700 pages long, providing explicit information concerning the duties of different household members—husband, wife, parents, children, servants—and their responsibilities to each other, all within the context of Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians. The ordering of the household was not something that even Puritan preachers wanted to leave to personal exegesis.
This interest in the household takes on increased significance when one remembers the early modern commonplace that the domestic space was supposed to be a “seminary for the church and commonwealth.” In his own domestic handbook, Robert Cleaver observes that the household “is as it were a little common wealth, by the good government wherof, Gods glorie may be aduaunced, the common wealth which standeth of severall families, benefited, and al that liue in that familie may receiue much comfort and commoditie.” The domestic space thus became responsible for the grooming of public citizenship. Husbands and wives had to prove themselves worthy of governing their little commonwealths by conducting themselves with propriety and sobriety. They were expected to keep a public profile by attending church regularly, where they sat in positions of privilege, and gave back to the community by paying new taxes. Wives also entered a new community of married women by attending births and the churchings of new mothers. Maintaining a proper household that mirrored the kingdom at large, and participating in all of the duties that went along with that kingdom, allowed all English citizens to participate in the Protestant national project.

This emphasis on establishing a domestic identity after marriage affected when and whom one married. The typical age for marriage was the mid to late twenties. Eric Josef Carlson confirms that “couples married late because they were expected to have the economic resources to maintain a family before marrying, and needed time to accumulate those resources.” Members of the upper classes (who were already financially secure) tended to marry at younger ages, but their marriages included extensive negotiations concerning the interchange of property before a ceremony could take place. Marriage bargaining could take months or even years. Naturally, some couples felt impatient with such proceedings. In a 1589 letter to Richard Bagot, the Baron John Lumley writes perplexedly that even though marriage negotiations were under way, his nephew eloped with the bride-to-be before the business had been finalized. Lumley laments that the young couple “haue with more speede then was meete coupled themselves togeather in marriage without the consent and pryvitie of their parents, to [their] vtter subuersion and undoing.” To save the couple from domestic and social suicide, he urges his friend “to conferre with their fathers to the end that those speaches and promysses that have bene deluded and made by them both may be performed accordingly, both in the assurance of their lands and otherwayes for Joycuntre, for their maintenantes.” Before the business was happily resolved, the couple caused their families and friends much distress and anxiety and endangered their own ability to establish an independent household.
Indeed, parents could, and did, withhold dowries and inheritances from children who eloped without their consent. After his elopement with Anne More, John Donne unsuccessfully attempted to persuade his infuriated father-in-law to give the couple her dowry. Expecting to move Sir George More with feelings of paternal sympathy, Donne writes in his first letter to the patriarch after the elopement: “I humbly beg of yow, that she may not, to her danger, feele the terror of your sodaine anger. I know this letter shall find yow full of passion: but I know no passion can alter your reason and wisdome; to which I adventure to commend these perticulers; That yt ys irremediably donne; That if yow incense my lord, yow Destroy her and me; That yt is easye to give us happines; And that my Endevors and industrie, if it please yow to prosper them, may soone make me somewhat worthyer of her.”

Donne here conflates Anne’s marital happiness with their economic well-being, which can only stem from More’s generosity. The cheekiness of the statement (in which Donne puns on his own name) reveals that he did not yet understand the enormity of his fault or the depth of his father-in-law’s wrath. Sir George remained unmoved, refusing to pay the dowry until years after the couple had been married. Since the couple had not fulfilled their obligations to him—obtaining his consent of the match—he felt no sense of obligation to them.

Even though parental consent was not necessary for a legal marriage (unless the couple was underage), domestic handbooks portray parental approval as important, even a requirement. In *The Christen State of Matrymonye*, Bullinger condemns “prevye contracts” since “in asmuch as the children are not yet come to perfite discretion, they can not contract mariage which requireth understanding; yea, they can nether counsell nor helpe themselves. So that in this behalf the consent of their parents is not only necessary, but also good and profytable for them.” This need for consent extended to other members of the household as well, such as servants or apprentices, who were considered extended members of the householder’s family. By violating their own household responsibilities, which included respecting the wishes of the household’s master (whether a parent or otherwise), an eloping couple seriously jeopardized their ability to establish their own domestic identity after marriage.

Communities did not want destitute or otherwise irresponsible couples setting up households in their midst, and thus they discouraged or prevented clandestine marriages as much as possible. Carlson informs us that hasty marriages followed by the cursory establishment of households “were often identified as principal causes of poverty in England and legal steps were taken to restrict . . . marriage . . . for this reason.” Outhwaite further emphasizes the community investment in marriage matches by observing that “although the
parish authorities had no legal right to meddle, they could oppose the marriages of the poor” by various “informal means such as withholding rights of settlement, housing or employment.” These kinds of steps were not restricted to the impoverished. Sir George More influenced his friends to have Donne thrown in jail and removed from his employment, thus sabotaging the young man’s aspirations to a career at court. More’s ability to influence his friends reveals the investment of the wider community in the sanctity of patriarchal norms within the household. While some of More’s friends may have believed his treatment of the couple to be harsh, they probably did not want their own daughters eloping with brazen young poets either.

The fear of seduction was rampant among the upper classes in the early modern period, and the ease of clandestine marriage made a seducer’s success potentially irrevocable. The seduction of wealthy young people was one of the main reasons for the institution of Lord Hardwicke’s Marriage Act, which made clandestine marriages illegal, in 1753. In a debate in the Commons concerning the subject, the attorney general, Dudley Ryder, argued that the act would put “an end to an evil which has been long and grievously complained of, an evil by which many of our best families have often suffered.” He asks, “How often have we known the heir of a good family seduced, and engaged in a clandestine marriage, perhaps with a common strumpet?” While Ryder makes these comments over a hundred years after Shakespeare wrote his plays, his reasons for the enactment are timeless, reflecting a centuries-long buildup of wealthy parents’ fears and frustrations concerning clandestine marriage and seduction. Indeed, wealthy families have always wanted their children to make socially advantageous matches. Furthermore, the idea that people should marry within their class rank was a prevailing notion throughout the early modern period. Clandestine marriages by means of seduction not only threatened the wealth and status of elite families but also undermined the very fabric of the hierarchical English society.

Before the passing of the Marriage Act, rape and ravishment laws discouraged seduction. While modern laws view rape as a crime against a woman’s person, early modern laws on rape and ravishment, deriving from the Middle Ages, conflated a daughter with her father’s property, viewing the crime as one against her family. Carolyn Sale explains that “ravishment, which may or may not have included forcible sexual intercourse, differed from rape only inasmuch as the seized property included, in addition to the property of the woman, any real property that she stood to inherit.” In addition to functioning more as a piece of property under these laws than as a person, a woman could even be held guilty of her own rape. This possibility derives from the 1382 legislation, 6 Richard II, which stated that women could be found guilty of their own
ravishment if they consented to the rape later. Emma Hawkes observes that “the fact that some crimes were reconciled by marriages between the rapists and their victims . . . made it possible for women to elope in the guise of ravishment with partners their parents did not approve of and for men to abduct women and arrange advantageous marriages.” In this way, the law was put into place not only to discourage fortune hunters but also to limit women’s agency within the matchmaking process. Under 6 Richard II, a woman who consented to her ravishment was cut off from all inheritance, dower, or jointure. For all essential purposes, the complicit abduction for marriage rendered the guilty couple dead (at least in terms of matters of inheritance) in the eyes of the law. During the debate concerning Lord Hardwicke’s Marriage Act, Rudley observed that even the severity of these laws did not do enough to discourage clandestine marriages of this kind.

Instead, the best course for an early modern household was to prevent elopements from happening in the first place. One of the most important duties of parents was to provide their children with acceptable marriage matches. As Lord Burghley advises his son, Robert Cecil: “Marry thy daughters in time, lest they marry themselves.” Of course, this kind of patriarchal surveillance does not have to result in loveless arranged marriages, as Lawrence Stone’s scholarship suggested. Many parents genuinely took their children’s desires to heart, simply wanting to ensure that suitors had their children’s own best interests in mind as well. Indeed, during the public arguments surrounding the Marriage Act, one supporter argued that adultery was more likely in marriages that came out of “fortune-hunting, mercenary unions that clandestinity encouraged” than out of marriages forced on young people by their parents. As Burghley’s advice suggests, parents who neglected to perform their duties for their children were at least partially to blame if their children eloped without their consent.

Elopements seriously undermined both the domestic space and, by extension, the Elizabethan commonwealth for which it served as the foundation. By violating their duties to their households, eloping couples thus called their commitment to the entire commonwealth into question. Furthermore, the act of elopement suggested that the heads of household to which the couple belonged did not have control over their subjects. Cut off from the support of their family and friends, elopers compromised their ability to enter into a new community and establish a household of their own. By keeping these issues in mind, we can better understand how Jessica and Lorenzo’s elopement threatens the domestic peace of the Belmont community.
The Belmont Estate as the Archetypal Household

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare illustrates the ideal that the household should represent a mini-commonwealth through Portia’s Belmont estate. By making Belmont the place to which characters retreat from the corrupt life of the city, he establishes the estate as a domestic archetype. Just as the domestic handbooks urge, power within this commonwealth is distributed through a system of checks and balances—Portia presides as the mistress over her household while also closely attending to responsibilities that may or may not align with her personal desires. Shakespeare thus reveals the complexity of patriarchal authority within the early modern household, which could bolster or limit male and female agency alike in order to keep the domestic space running smoothly.

The Belmont estate mirrors Elizabethan England by serving as a place of order over which Portia rules as a virgin queen. Within her court/household, she entertains foreign guests, oversees the management of her property and servants, and takes advice from her courtiers. As a single woman, Portia does not have a husband to mitigate her authority, putting her in an unusual position of power. She calls attention to her own place as an acting female head of household when she gives herself over to Bassanio: “I was the lord / Of this fair mansion, master of my servants, / Queen o’er myself” (3.2.167–169). By giving herself the title of a queen, she places herself in the position of Queen Elizabeth, suggesting that a court is a kind of domestic space and vice versa (of course, quite unlike Queen Elizabeth, Portia has no subjects outside of her household, being queen only “o’er myself”). Adelman compares Portia’s statement that she is “Queen o’er myself” to the Ditchley portrait “in which Queen Elizabeth’s body takes up virtually the entire space of her kingdom; and the name of her realm slyly figures her female anatomy, as though her kingdom and her body were one.”

On the one hand, the position of nobility is not incongruous to Portia’s aristocratic estate, but, on the other, she emphasizes the singularity of her position: a woman with so much domestic power must surely be a queen.

Shakespeare, however, supplies Portia with another source of patriarchal authority: her father’s will. Her father leaves her the Belmont estate with the stipulation that she abide by the courtship ritual outlined by the casket test. In this way, she initially seems to have less agency than other heroines in Shakespeare’s comedies. While Rosalind’s and Viola’s agency within their courtships drive the courtship plots of *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, respectively, Portia laments: “I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curb’d by the will of a dead father” (1.2.23–25).
Portia may not exert her own will when choosing her marriage match—an agency that most comic heroines take for granted. Neither Rosalind nor Viola, though, has a household over which to rule. Since Portia has become the master-mistress of her own household through unusual means (inheritance rather than marriage), her adherence to the casket test allows her to demonstrate the patriarchal source of her authority, and the virtues of a responsible householder, outside of the marital bond.

As a single young woman, Portia is dangerously vulnerable to the fortune-hunting schemes that Elizabethan parents of wealthy children feared. The overbearing nature of the casket test, which derives from the *Gesta Romanorum*, thus serves to protect Portia. The will gives her the authority to send away unwelcome suitors once they have hazarded the test. She appears dissatisfied with her lack of agency in the courtship, but also confirms:

> If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana, unless I be obtain’d by the manner of my father’s will. I am glad this parcel of wooers are so reasonable, for there is not one among them but I dote on his very absence, and I pray God grant them a fair departure.

(1.2.106–111)

Without her obligation to uphold her dead father’s wishes to reject suitors who fail the test, she may not be able to rid herself of unwelcome, or unreasonable, wooers, who may not respect the wishes of a young woman in the same way they respect those of a dead patriarch. By performing his paternal duty to Portia from beyond the grave, her father makes certain that no one can question her marriage’s legitimacy or marry her without his approval. She cannot turn into an early modern Penelope with hoards of suitors lusting after her wealth and chastity, and with no good reason to turn them away.

Portia’s father polices the domestic identities of the suitors outside of the Belmont estate as well. As the Prince of Arragon reveals, failed suitors must promise “never in my life / To woo a maid in way of marriage” (2.9.12–13; emphasis mine). This harsh stipulation does not appear in the *Gesta Romanorum* where the Roman emperor simply dictates that the King of Ampluy’s daughter will not marry his son if she chooses incorrectly. By raising the stakes of the casket test, Portia’s father ensures that the suitors must truly want to marry Portia. Otherwise, they would not be willing to take the risk. The raised stakes also underscore how the proper establishment of households lies at the foundation of the test: Portia’s father denies the unsuccessful suitors the ability to have families of their own. In a play that places such a strong emphasis on domestic responsibilities, the inability to become the head of a
family household (not simply the inability to marry Portia) is the ultimate punishment.

The casket test also allows Portia to demonstrate the self-control necessary for responsible householdership. In addition to needing time to gain the necessary resources, couples delayed getting married because young people were considered “incapable of stability.” When responding to Nerissa’s observation that she has no good reason for her melancholy, Portia acknowledges:

If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men’s cottages princes’ palaces. It is a good divine that follows his own instructions; I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done than to be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching. The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o’er a cold decree.

Even though she cannot pinpoint the source of her sadness, she cannot help feeling so. Douglas Trevor points out that Hamlet, when ruminating on his own famous melancholy, “roots these forces inside of himself, where fluctuations he cannot control make and remake him as a tortured Galenic subject.”

Portia’s speech confirms that similar feelings, although fueled by blood and a “hot temper,” could control her actions. The casket test provides a tempering influence to her courtship so that she does not fall prey to the irrational passions of youth that could jeopardize her decision making.

Nerissa helps maintain household order by insisting that her mistress participate in a marriage that will garner public consent. She assures her mistress that her father has devised the casket test so that Portia will love the person who chooses correctly: “The lott’ry that he hath devis’d in these three chests of gold, silver, and lead, whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you, will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly but one who you shall rightly love” (1.2.29–33). Whether this is actually the case is up for debate—and beside the point. Nerissa’s main duty is to ensure that Portia’s marriage occurs at least within the trappings of patriarchy so that her mistress does not lose her position of authority. Indeed, many theatrical productions emphasize Portia’s ability to manipulate the casket test (such as through musical cues or even overt eye rolling) so that her preferred suitor makes the correct choice. Portia’s need to prompt Bassanio in these performances suggests a fear that the casket test’s purpose to provide a love match is not foolproof (i.e., Portia believes Bassanio could fail to puzzle through the clues and choose incorrectly) while also allowing Portia to retain agency over the matchmaking. Even if Portia does
manipulate the casket test, however, the fact that she follows through with it rather than discarding it is what is most important. As the Redcrosse Knight learns when Archimago shows up to forbid the banns at the end of *The Faerie Queen*, book I, appearances matter. Considering Portia’s initial dissatisfaction with the casket test, one can only wonder if she would have adhered to its rules without Nerissa’s encouragement (as well as knowing that the rest of the members of her household were watching). However, since Portia ends up marrying the suitor of her choice (whether through her father’s foresight or her own manipulation of the dictated test), Shakespeare indicates that domestic duties need not result in loveless matches. In the realm of comedy, domestic duties contribute to the fostering of the household.

Portia’s father fulfills another paternal duty by making sure that she does not lack for suitors in number or variety. Indeed, the casket test does not screen for race—despite Portia’s relief at his failure, the Prince of Morocco has a one-in-three chance of success. Perhaps just as alarming to an early modern audience as the possibility of miscegenation, though, is fortune hunting, which the casket test also does not screen for. Bassanio is just the kind of fortune hunter that Lord Hardwicke’s Marriage Act hoped to ward against. After explaining to Antonio the destitution of his estate due to his own profligacy, he launches into his plans to seduce “a lady richly left” in order to fill his beleaguered coffers (1.1.161). Scholars who wish to idealize the Portia-Bassanio match as a happy, successful one usually gloss over the reasons for Bassanio’s pilgrimage to Belmont while emphasizing his ability to choose (unprompted) the correct casket. For these scholars, the end justifies the means since Portia and Bassanio do seem to love each other. However, we cannot overlook the significance of Bassanio’s seemingly ungentlemanly behavior concerning his desire to woo Portia, and the fact that their marriage also easily could have devolved into a case of seduction and elopement.

Obviously, the casket test cannot prevent fortune hunters from taking their chances, but it does mean that the courtship and marriage take place publicly and within patriarchal trappings. Bassanio cannot seduce Portia and then take her money and run. Of course, when Bassanio learns that Antonio’s ships have miscarried, he does hurry off to save his friend. He is able to do so, however, only after Portia, as the head of her household and knowledgeable in its financial matters, dismisses the bond of three thousand ducats as a paltry sum. She gives the money to Bassanio willingly, proclaiming “You shall have gold / To pay the petty debt twenty times over” (3.2.305–306). Bassanio thus departs to save his friend only after obtaining Portia’s permission, acknowledging that he has “her good leave” (3.2.324), and only after agreeing to solemnize their
marriage in a church. After such a public display of marital commitment in terms of vows and the transference of money, Bassanio could not expect to simply slip away into the night even if he wanted to. In this way, the casket test does not necessarily guarantee that someone does not court Portia for the sake of her money. Instead, it seeks to ensure that the successful suitor must fulfill his marital obligations to Portia and settle down at her Belmont estate. The suitor cannot undermine patriarchal authority any more than Portia. The stable creation of households, and the clear and legitimate transfer of property and inheritance, is what is truly at stake in the casket test.

Nerissa’s choice of a marriage partner is also conditioned by her sense of domestic propriety. As Gratiano reveals, Nerissa agrees to marry him “provided that [Bassanio’s] fortune / Achiev’d her mistress” (3.2.207–208). Nerissa is not going to leave her employment just to get married. In a similar fashion, domestic handbooks stressed that servants should ask their master’s permission when pursuing marriage partners. Servants “ought not to marry while the time of their covenent for service lasteth,” Gouge explains, “vnlesse their master giue consent thereto.” While Nerissa does not ask Portia’s permission to marry outright, she agrees to go forward with the marriage only if it will not trouble the Belmont estate by displeasing her mistress. She places her household duty to her mistress above her own personal happiness.

Even though The Merchant of Venice may seem a comedy that appears to stifle female agency within matters of love, Shakespeare takes the opportunity to show that comic heroines need not become silent after marriage (as often seems the case when the marriage occurs at the end of the play). By adhering to their proper responsibilities within the household, women can wield a considerable amount of agency within the home. Many scholars take issue with Portia’s lack of agency in her courtship (just as Portia initially does) and hail Portia’s cross-dressing during the courtroom scene, and her orchestration of the ring trick, as an indication of her ability to undermine the patriarchal framework that confines her otherwise. Jean E. Howard, for instance, lauds Portia for her agency in the courtroom scene and points out that Portia’s cross-dressing allows her “to gain control over her sexuality” within marriage by delaying the consummation to a time of her choosing. However, Howard does not consider Portia’s marriage as necessary to granting that agency. Portia follows Bassanio to the courtroom to keep an eye on the well-earned husband that her father has chosen for her. Indeed, her marriage differentiates her from Shakespeare’s other cross-dressed heroines, Rosalind and Viola, who don men’s clothing to court their future husbands. Portia cross-dresses as a means to make sure that her match, arranged with the sanction
of her father, household, and community, is a successful one, and she does not trouble patriarchy as much as she benefits from it during the courtroom scene and ring trick.

Through the ring trick, Portia reveals that a husband’s domestic identity should take precedence over his community of male friends. Bassanio infamously hesitates to give Portia’s ring away until Antonio claims that his friend’s love should “be valued ‘gainst your wive’s commandment” (4.1.451). Bassanio’s and Gratiano’s commitments to male friendship result in a few tense moments when they believe that they have been cuckolded. Portia capitalizes on this by teaching the men that privileging male friendship over their ties in Christian matrimony could be disastrous, particularly considering that Bassanio now has the Belmont estate to offer as an inheritance. Portia thus overturns the popular discourse on male friendship, which championed the primacy of homosocial networks, by emphasizing Bassanio’s inclusion into patriarchal hierarchy through marriage. Bassanio even subconsciously anticipates his possible cuckoldry when he claims that he will die if he ever takes off the ring, further implying that his lineage will die out with him. Portia reminds the men of the importance of marriage when she chides Gratiano for parting with “A thing stuck on with oaths upon your finger / And so riveted with faith unto your flesh” (5.1.168–169). While many of Shakespeare’s heroines seem to have agency only during their courtship, and then become silent after marriage, the staging of Portia and Bassanio’s marriage in the middle of The Merchant of Venice reveals that a married woman could wield considerable agency within her marriage. Counterintuitively, this agency derives from her wifely authority within patriarchal structures. Shakespeare illustrates that Portia’s marital agency can derive only from an ideal household where parents, children, and servants all follow their domestic responsibilities.

Jessica and Lorenzo’s Elopement

While Jessica and Lorenzo’s elopement may seem to follow a comedic paradigm (the cross-dressing heroine marries the suitor of her choice), their marriage violates the domestic ideal associated with Belmont. As a result, their participation in the play’s comic ending appears ambiguous. Portia welcomes Lorenzo as Bassanio’s friend, but Jessica apparently hangs back since Gratiano must urge Nerissa, “cheer yond stranger, bid her welcome” (3.2.237). Referring to Jessica as a “stranger” confirms her outsider status (even as the wife of Bassanio’s friend), and Jessica’s discomfort must be obvious indeed if Gratiano notices that she needs cheering up. The new wives may not be eager to
welcome Jessica into their community of married women because they do not know her, and because she enters the Belmont estate with no one to commend her as Lorenzo does. No public announcement preceded her wedding to give them a chance to approve of her marriage as they would expect, especially considering that even Nerissa was willing to forgo marriage if it did not suit her mistress. In this way, clandestinity poses a threat to Jessica’s marriage just as male friendship threatens Portia’s normative one. Jessica, however, has no source of domestic authority from which to defuse the threat.

Jessica’s Jewish blood could undermine Belmont’s Christian commonwealth. When considering whether Jessica could successfully convert to Christianity, Janet Adelman suggests that marrying across races was understood to taint the bloodlines, and thus national identities, of the fledgling European nation-states. Shylock appeals to the importance of blood to nationhood when describing the Jewish race as a landless religious nation held together by blood ties, referring to his fellow Jews as belonging to a “tribe” (1.3.51, 57, 110), “nation” (3.1.56, 85), or, more specifically, “sacred nation” (1.3.48). Although he claims that Jews have the same “hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions” (3.1.59–60) as Christians, Shylock insists that they have a different national identity even while living among the other Venetians. Salerio attempts to distance Jessica from Shylock by claiming that her blood differs from his as red wine differs from white (3.1.41–42). This claim, however, made more in mockery of Shylock than in defense of Jessica, does not hold up. Just four scenes later, Launcelot privately informs Jessica that she cannot escape her blood relationship with her father. According to Launcelot, Jessica’s physical attributes of fairness, observed by the other characters, do not necessarily guarantee her a Christian identity. He laments: “The sins of the father [Shylock’s Jewishness] are to be laid upon the children” (3.5.1–2).

Even Jessica does not try to soften or undermine her blood relationship with her father when admitting, “I am a daughter to his blood” (2.3.18). Both Jessica and Shylock express that she is of his “own flesh and blood” even if she exhibits bodily Christian characteristics. Jessica does not—and cannot—deny consanguinity with Shylock. She must find another means, therefore, to distance herself from her Jewish identity if she wishes to integrate into the Christian community.

Thankfully for Jessica, blood ties were not the only way to form religious or national identity in the early modern world. As Richard Helgerson observes, early modern cartographers reveal a transition from “universal Christendom, to dynastic state, to land-centered nation.” The boundaries of commonwealths, according to Helgerson, were drawn on maps—not by blood. James Shapiro further observes that countries that emphasized bloodlines as part of
their national identities were unsuccessful. Spain’s efforts to institute “limpieza de sangre,” blood laws that distinguished between those of Jewish lineage and Old Christians . . . signaled . . . failure, since adopting them meant abandoning the fundamental tenet of Christianity as a religion based on brotherhood.”

As we saw in the first chapter, participating in a nation’s religious rituals could also constitute an important means of expressing one’s commitment to a national identity. Jessica, therefore, does not make her claim to Christianity in bodily or racial terms.

Sidestepping the idea of race altogether, Jessica insists that her wedding vows—not her bodily attributes—will constitute her conversion. When anticipating her marriage, she proclaims that even though she is Shylock’s daughter:

I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo,
If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian and thy loving wife.

(2.3.19–21)

In conflating becoming a Christian with becoming a wife, Jessica indicates that her marriage vows will have a sacramental effect. She later explains to the doubting Launcelot that “I shall be sav’d by my husband, he hath made me a Christian” (3.5.19–20). The term “sav’d” again underscores the sacramental nature of her marriage vows. John Foxe, in A Sermon Preached at the Christening of a Certaine Jew, states that Jews could become Christians by “embracing the faith, and Sacramentes of Christ Iesu.” Even though marriage no longer constituted a sacrament under the Protestant faith, the marriage ritual, and all other rituals in the Book of Common Prayer, constituted the means by which a person could openly express her devotion to both the state and its religion. Jessica (or anyone else in the play) never indicates that she has participated in any other sacramental actions, such as baptism. She puts her entire faith in the marriage ritual as the means through which she will prove her Christianity. When arriving in Belmont, she refers to Shylock and his “countrymen” (3.2.285), as though she now considers herself to be an outsider to the Jews’ landless nation. Jessica’s focus on her “manners” as being different from Shylock’s, therefore, implies that her actions—her participation in the Christian marriage ritual—will differentiate her most emphatically from her father and his Jewishness.

Manners play an important role in distinguishing the Christians from the Jews throughout the play. When she enters the courtroom, Portia fails to see a difference between her husband’s cherished friend Antonio and his enemy Shylock, famously remarking, “Which is the merchant here? and which the
Jew?” (4.1.174). Bodily differences between the races, at least in this particular case, are not immediately obvious. Shylock distinguishes himself in the courtroom scene through his adherence to the law, expressing a value system that aligns itself more with Old Testament justice than with the Christian spirit of mercy. In other words, he performs his Jewishness by means of adherence to this value system. The fact that people could participate in “Judaizing,” or turn into a Jew, similarly confirms that behavior was crucial to establishing an ethnic identity. Of course, whether Portia and her fellow Christian characters act mercifully in the courtroom scene is up for debate. Instead, as we saw in the previous section, attention to one’s domestic responsibilities, even at the potential expense of one’s own personal happiness, serves as the foundation for the Christian community at Belmont.

Jessica may claim that she will integrate into the Christian community through matrimony, but a community cannot know if an outsider has participated in a ritual if it has not seen the ceremony take place. When Gratiano calls Jessica an “infidel” as she appears on stage for the first time after the elopement, we should remember that the other characters have not served as witnesses to the marriage. At first glance, Jessica’s conversion to Christianity seems far more convincing than her father’s. Since Shylock does not wish to convert to Christianity, his conversion will constitute a textbook example of an infelicitous speech act. The other characters, however, do not have the opportunity to witness Jessica’s own sincere vows. For all they know, her vows are infelicitous, or even misfire entirely. How can they be sure, for instance, that Jessica and Lorenzo’s marriage was even a Christian one? As we have seen, clandestine marriages were the hallmark of Catholic recusants who did not wish to participate in the rituals of the Book of Common Prayer. A clandestine marriage suggested that the participants could be religious deviants or, at the very least, had something to hide. We might remember that Gouge condemns clandestine marriages for this reason: “As such seeking of secrecie taketh much from the honour and dignitie of mariage, so it implieth some euill cleauing thereto. . . . For where such meanes as are sanctified for obtaining a blessing on mariage are neglected, what blessing can thereupon be expected?” Unfortunately for Jessica, the impossibility of a public courtship between a Jew and a Christian means that the ritual that leads to community approval of a marriage cannot take place. While living in her father’s house, Jessica remained a “pagan” (2.3.11), perhaps waiting for the time when her father solidifies her fate by stipulating that she marry another Jew. Her only option of conversion (at least within the context of the play), however, a clandestine marriage with a Christian, means that the other characters call her marriage vows into question.
Creating a domestic space as a “seminary for the church and commonwealth” could serve as an important avenue for Jessica to demonstrate her commitment to Christian matrimony. Her inability to do so, therefore, further sabotages her conversion narrative. In Jessica and Lorenzo’s elopement, religious deviance, or the related issue of miscegenation, is not at stake as much as is the potential disruption of the general commonwealth through the couple’s inability to provide for themselves. After discovering that Launcelot has been heckling Jessica about her conversion, Lorenzo chides him for impregnating a woman of another race: “I shall answer that better to the commonwealth than you can the getting up of the Negro’s belly; the Moor is with child by you, Launcelot” (3.5.37–39). With these words, Lorenzo conflates the identity of the Jew with that of the Moor. He does not identify race as the problem, though, but rather that Launcelot has not married the woman he has impregnated. He has failed to establish a mini-commonwealth, even though he has participated in the marital privilege of sex and reproduction. Extramarital sex and its ability to destabilize the commonwealth at large through bastardy prove more problematic than miscegenation alone.\(^56\)

Despite Lorenzo’s recognition of the importance of the domestic space, Jessica and Lorenzo’s failure to gain her father’s permission for their marriage, and their consequent inability to seek community approval of the marriage, violates the rules of the Belmont household that keep it running smoothly. Making matters worse, since Lorenzo steals Jessica away with the money that supposedly would contribute to her inheritance, they commit a textbook example of the crime of ravishment under 6 Richard II, placing themselves outside of the law’s protection. Shylock’s reported conflation of his daughter with his ducats after her elopement—“My daughter! O my ducats” (2.8.15)—seems devoid of paternal sympathy, but his desire for “Justice! the law!” (2.8.17) is not unreasonable, since she has indeed “stol’n” (2.8.19) his possessions and since Lorenzo has stolen his daughter. Shylock’s view of the elopement as a kind of thievery does not simply illustrate the early modern stereotype of Jewish greediness but rather establishes his victimhood under the law. He is the victim of Jessica’s ravishment. The law is on his side: the Venetian duke helps Shylock search the ships for the eloping couple. Camille Slights observes that Jessica’s renouncement of parental protection “makes herself dangerously vulnerable. The report that the Duke accompanied Shylock to search Bassanio’s ship for the runaways (2.8) tells us how much protection Jessica could expect from the state.”\(^57\) Indeed, Portia’s father implements the casket test in order to avoid the exact situation in which Shylock finds himself. Even if the Christian characters sympathize with Jessica and Lorenzo, or delight at Shylock’s
misfortune, they cannot afford to undermine the norms that govern their households by ignoring Shylock’s grievance completely.

Of course, if Portia’s household is exemplary, then Shylock’s household serves as its perverse analogue. He finds himself bereft of both fortune and daughter through his own poor household management. Unlike Portia’s father, who takes his patriarchal duties seriously even in death, Shylock fails to find his daughter an appropriate husband in order to maintain his fortune’s legacy. Jessica complains to Launcelot, “I am sorry thou wilt leave my father so. / Our house is hell, and thou, a merry devil, / Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness” (2.3.1–3). The “hell” that Jessica describes does not derive from ill treatment at the hands of her father but from boredom. This image starkly contrasts with Portia’s own lively household, which features a steady stream of carefully supervised eligible bachelors—eliminating (or at least mitigating) the possibility of a seducer. Shylock’s household, by comparison, is noticeably vacant. As he exits the house, he leaves Jessica with paranoid instructions to “lock up my doors” (2.5.29) and “stop my house’s ears” (2.5.34) so that “the sound of shallow fopp’ry” (2.5.35) cannot “enter” (2.5.35). Kathy Lavezzo explores how closed-off households in early modern literature embody Jewish stereotypes, literally demonstrating the Jews’ willingness to shut themselves off from religious truth. The specificity of Shylock’s instructions, warning Jessica not to “clamber . . . up to the casements then, / Nor thrust your head into the public street / To gaze on Christian fools” (2.5.31–33), suggests that Jessica has done so in the past—curious about the outside world from which she has been isolated. In addition to this inability to participate in youthful pursuits, Jessica has no close household companion as does Portia, and, despite Shylock’s reference to his former wife, Shakespeare portrays no other female members of the Jewish community. Jessica appears just as cut off from the Jewish community as the Christian one. Her isolation thus serves as a catalyst for her elopement. Shylock’s neglect of Jessica’s needs and desires as a young woman brings this aspect of his own tragedy on himself. While Portia’s father carefully arranges for his own wealth to be passed down to the future generations, Shylock’s main concern is to hoard his riches with no thought of his own daughter’s welfare.

According to the play’s emphasis on domestic responsibilities, Shylock’s failure to provide his daughter with a match makes clandestine marriage necessary for Jessica and Lorenzo. Their inability to operate within social norms, however, jeopardizes their marriage from the start. When compared with Portia’s highly public and ritualized courtship, Jessica and Lorenzo appear to have no courtship at all, or at least no meaningful courtship takes place.
Gratiano and Salerio reveal that they think Jessica and Lorenzo elope for the exact reasons that Portia’s father implements the casket courtship ritual, and for the reasons that early modern readers would have been suspicious of any clandestine marriage: fortune hunting and/or sexual desire. When Jessica tosses Lorenzo a heavy casket and then returns to the house to “gild [herself] / With some more ducats” (2.6.49–50), her behavior suggests that Lorenzo’s intentions may be more akin to Bassanio’s than initially realized. Jessica assumes that Lorenzo may not consider their elopement worth the risk if there is not a substantial financial reward. While waiting for the tardy Lorenzo to show up to whisk Jessica away from her father’s house, Gratiano banteres with Salerio about Lorenzo’s motives. In doing so, he reveals that he also questions Lorenzo’s intentions, claiming “Who riseth from a feast / With that keen appetite that he sits down?” (2.6.8–9). His following ten lines ensure that no one misses the point: Gratiano believes that Lorenzo will tire of Jessica after the excitement of the elopement has worn off. The clandestine nature of the marriage, which places the lovers outside of patriarchal authority, also means that Jessica may have less ability to hold Lorenzo to his marriage vows than Portia does. After Lorenzo’s entrance, Salerio’s comment desiring further conversation on the subject, “Here comes Lorenzo, more of this hereafter” (2.6.20), further implies that there is substance to the banter. That Lorenzo arrives late because he has been busy conscientiously preparing does not occur to either of his friends: the association between clandestine marriage and desire is too powerful to overcome.

Since Lorenzo and Jessica have had to hide their courtship from Shylock, they have had little opportunity to test their affections in the public sphere to prove the worthiness of their match, and their marriage encourages gossip, and doubts concerning its sincerity, before it even takes place.

If marriage was intended to provide stability to a household and community, Jessica and Lorenzo flout the responsibilities of married life when reportedly spending her father’s fortune on trifles. One lesson that the ring trick teaches Bassanio is that he will have to become more mature in his financial dealings after his prodigal lifestyle as a bachelor. After all, hazarding is for courtship, not marriage. Jessica and Lorenzo’s marriage, which takes place outside of the public eye and with no father figure to watch over the spending of his inheritance, means that they feel no obligation to restrict the spending that appears to have bankrupted Venetian citizens already. Instead, they reportedly spend in “one night fourscore ducats” (3.1.109), paralleling Bassanio’s sad state at the beginning of the play where he admits that he has squandered his fortune. Joan Ozark Holmer claims that Jessica’s “freewheeling caper is not mean-spirited” and that Jessica also may dispose of her father’s beloved turquoise
ring due to its association with talismanic powers, and thereby “rids herself of such superstition by selling it for a monkey.” Portia’s ring exchange with Bassanio, though, proves that the symbolic nature of betrothal rings was not limited to Christian or Jewish cultures, and Jessica in fact sells the one object that most connects her with marital values. After expressing his disappointment that Jessica has sold the ring that his wife, Leah, gave him by claiming, “I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys” (3.1.122–123), Shylock reveals that the Jewish traditions do include respect and concern for the sanctity of marriage. When Bassanio and Gratiano exclaim that they would rather see their wives dead than Antonio, Shylock exclaims: “I have a daughter—/ Would any of the stock of Barrabas / Had been her husband rather than a Christian!” (4.1.295–297). Despite his previous remarks about disowning his daughter, Shylock feels he has reason for concern for her welfare, although the realization that he should have suggested a Jewish husband comes too late. As a result, Jessica’s sale of the ring, perhaps sold in an attempt to disassociate herself from her father, only reflects a disregard for the marital values that have currency in both the Christian and Jewish faiths, and the couples’ extravagance confirms Gratiano’s belief that they marry for passion rather than reason. On the one hand, Jessica may act hastily by eloping with Lorenzo and spending her father’s fortune; on the other, the Christian community’s racism disallows her from learning the proper purpose of marriage.

As Jessica and Lorenzo walk the moonlit streets of Belmont, they appear to have internalized these doubts concerning their marriage as they compare their relationship with other clandestine marriages and love affairs that ended in tragedy. Any couple that participates in a clandestine marriage cannot but be reminded of their classical literary predecessors. Lorenzo first mentions Troilus and Cressida, musing that “in such a night / Troilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls, / And sigh’d his soul toward the Grecian tents, / Where Cressid lay that night” (5.1.3–6). The fact that Cressida gets traded to the Greek camp because no one knows about her union with Troilus exemplifies the complications surrounding the ease of clandestine marriages. The practice allowed a member of a couple to extricate himself from a marriage almost as easily as he entered it. Jessica alludes to this possibility: “In such a night / Did young Lorenzo swear he lov’d her well, / Stealing her soul with many vows of faith, / And ne’er a true one” (5.1.17–20). While the lovers obviously tease each other in this scene, the “vows of faith” quite literally refer to their wedding vows and her lines speak to early modern fears concerning the ease of conducting (and disavowing) clandestine marriages via spousal vows. Their teasing hints at the possible tragedy that their union could have befallen.
What, then, saves Jessica and Lorenzo from this fate? The Christian characters help secure their domestic identities within a patriarchal framework. Proving the importance of Jessica’s need for a domestic identity in order to be incorporated into the Belmont community, Portia’s first direct acknowledgment of Jessica occurs just after she gives Lorenzo and his wife command over her estate: “I commit into your hands / The husbandry and manage of my house / Until my lord’s return” (3.4.24–26). She thus gives Lorenzo the opportunity to accept a household duty and participate in the proper art of “husbandry.” Portia acknowledges that the task may be an “imposition” (3.4.33), but, as a guest that has accepted her “love” (3.4.34), Lorenzo is obliged to accept. Portia also does not neglect Jessica; she suggests her servants “will acknowledge you and Jessica / In place of Lord Bassanio and myself” (3.4.38–39; emphasis mine). Jessica’s role may not be completely comfortable, but at least she has one. Tellingly, Michael Radford’s film version of *The Merchant of Venice* (2004) leaves out this line. Portia commits the rule of her house to only Lorenzo while Jessica remains standing awkwardly in the corridor. The film’s desire to portray Jessica as an outsider necessitates that Portia neglect to include Jessica in household responsibilities. Portia’s willingness to impose on Jessica in Shakespeare’s play thus becomes an important instance of inclusion, and the fact that the imposition takes the form of a domestic duty indicates that the proper oversight of the household is the way in which Jessica and Lorenzo will integrate their cross-cultural marriage into the Belmont community.

In the courtroom scene, Shakespeare gives Shylock the opportunity to contest the legitimacy of his daughter’s marriage as though before an early modern church court. Lorna Hutson suggests that Shylock’s failure to mention his daughter’s elopement contributes to the other characters’ pitiless reaction to him, as they would have viewed the elopement as a legitimate grievance. Shylock does not capitalize on the opportunity due to his obsession with taking revenge. The Christian characters, however, reveal their anxiety concerning the elopement by bringing it up themselves. Antonio’s reference to Lorenzo as “the gentleman / That lately stole [Shylock’s] daughter” (4.1.384–385) confirms the belief that Lorenzo did “play the knave” (2.3.12) when marrying Jessica. Antonio feels it necessary to bring Jessica and Lorenzo within patriarchal norms in order to come to terms with the elopement. The use of the term “stole” within the courtroom—not just as part of the idle banter of Launcelot or Gratiano—confirms that Lorenzo has indeed committed a crime by abducting Jessica from her house, even if she was complicit in the act. By acknowledging that Shylock is a victim, Antonio must defuse the threat that the couple presents to the law since they are indeed guilty. To do so, he forces
Shylock to accept his daughter’s marriage by granting the couple an inheritance. In addition to becoming a Christian, Shylock must “record a gift, / Here in the court, of all he dies possess’d / Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter” (4.1.388–390). Antonio’s reference to Lorenzo as Shylock’s “son” may come as a surprise since one imagines the Christian characters would prefer to disassociate their friend from his father-in-law as much as possible. To the contrary, Antonio’s language makes clear that Shylock must view Lorenzo as his son and must offer his blessing by leaving the couple with an inheritance, in order for the Christian characters to become fully comfortable with the elopement. Shakespeare thus underscores that even though parental consent was not necessary to make a legal match, it was considered necessary if the match was to be viewed as socially acceptable.

The Christian characters thus can feel comfortable that patriarchal norms have been restored, and that Jessica and Lorenzo will come into an inheritance that will secure their financial future. In light of the early modern fears concerning elopement, Lorenzo’s statement that Antonio’s stipulation “drop[s] manna in the way / Of starved people” (5.1.294–295) reflects the concern that those who elope literally will have no means to provide for themselves and will contribute to the poverty of the community, destabilizing the economic well-being of the state as a whole. His words may seem like an exaggeration since Jessica and Lorenzo are clearly in no danger of starving just yet, but only because they are taking advantage of Portia and Bassanio’s generosity. The public acknowledgment and acceptance of Lorenzo and Jessica’s marriage that takes place within a courtroom ensures that the marriage takes on the trappings of legitimacy within the eyes of the law, and gives them the ability to move out of their friends’ house and into a home of their own. Shakespeare thus defuses the threat of the eloping cross-cultural couple not by proving that Jessica is not a Jew but by proving that she will be able to enter into the Christian community as a responsible householder.