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## SPATIAL RHYTHM IN THE MERCHANT OF VENICE: A STYLISTIC APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT

*This article studies the spatial rhythm Shakespeare orchestrates in *The Merchant of Venice* (MV). Among the plays of Shakespeare, this play stands unique in its engineered rhythmic alternation of two antithetical locations of action, namely, Venice > Belmont, in this order. This structural rhythm emanating from the regular oscillation of events in the succession of scenes in the play results in an aesthetic dimension of Shakespeare's work. Furthermore, the binary antithetical alternations of the two spheres convey moral and thematic significance loaded in the play. The study shows that Shakespeare plays the realistic, rigid, legal, financial, and prejudiced traits of Venice against the romantic, merciful, harmonious, generous, and friendly traits of Belmont. Thus, the alternation of space in the macrocosmic structure of the play creates a harmony that reflects a diagonal antithetical polarity of values attributed to the two cities. The alternations are supposedly repetitive and regular. However, the study shows that the departure from this regularity dictates an explanation. The playwright uses the violation of the regular spatial rhythm for a structural purpose. All spatially rhythmical scenes of Venice > Belmont are pertinent to the major plot woven around the Bassanio-Portia marriage, whereas irregular spatial rhythms are devoted to the minor plot of the Lorenzo-Jessica elopement and marriage. The article hopes to demonstrate that mapping spatial rhythm in MV contributes to the orchestration of the musical structure of the play and enhances the thematic significance embedded in the comedy. The attached figures and charts in the study are meant to demonstrate the micro- and macrocosmic structures of the individual acts and the play as a whole.*

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**KEYWORDS:** spatial rhythm, polarity, values, attributes, realism, romanticism.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Merchant of Venice (ca. 1596-1598) is one of the most popular comedies of Shakespeare. The action of the play takes place in the two settings of Venice and Belmont. Venice is a real city in Italy, while Belmont is an imaginary site. Venice represents the realistic world, whereas Belmont represents the romantic and dream world. In Venice, dwell the major characters Antonio, Bassanio, Shylock, Jessica, and Lorenzo, among others. It represents a patriarchal rigid world of business, monetary transactions, friendship, justice, religious prejudice, and the rule of law. In contrast, Belmont is realm of Portia, a wealthy heiress, that is bound to follow her father's will to get married to the suitor who wins in the lottery of the caskets designed by her father. She is the mistress of her matriarchal world of love, harmony, marriage, unison, and happiness.

The play has continued to attract scholarly attention because it covers a wide range of subjects that lend themselves to numerous critical approaches. An important issue that has been the subject of the most persistent and contentious body of criticism is the portrayal of Shylock and the image of the Jew in early modern English culture. Literary scholarship of the play has perceived Shylock with a framework of preconceptions, stereotypes, and religious prejudices, especially in light of the expulsion of Jews from England for centuries (Shapiro, 1996). While the play maintains the anti-Jewish sentiments in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, contemporary readings have brought to the fore Shylock's shared human values and feelings (Adelman, 2008).

Portia, too, has received a lot discussion in the critical studies on the play. Her disguise, rhetorical abilities, and bright intellect in the court of Venice undermines the patriarchal dynamics (Newman, 1991; Belsey, 1985). Feminist critics note that Portia's returning to Belmont and getting married examines traditional gender norms and limits the extent of her seeming liberty (Newman, 1991).

Another point that has attracted critics in the play is the moral tension between the need to have mercy and the implementation of the law in the court. Portia's advocating for the heavenly and moral ideal of mercy and forgiveness in a court of law does not strictly conform with the legal procedures. Some scholars claim that Shakespeare deliberately emphasizes this contradiction to challenge the moral authority of legal justice when it is administered without genuine compassion (Cohen, 1982; Greenblatt, 1980).

This study, however, opts to take a stylistic route by explicating the musical structure of the play

resulting from the spatially rhythmical alternations of the location of events. Rhythm, in general, is the recurrence of an event or a pattern at equidistant intervals (Cooper & Meyer, 1960, p. 3). Cooper's definition involves two major elements: repetition and symmetrical duration. Repetition indicates the recurrence of a certain activity and the expectation of that activity to reoccur in the future. Symmetrical duration indicates that rhythm is a temporal concept and that rhythmic activities reoccur at regular intervals. This understanding of the concept is in line with studies of language and literature, especially poetry. In fact, rhythm has been considered a domain of poetry and music since the Greeks. The concept of rhythm has developed further in the writings of Henri Lefebvre, particularly in *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (2004). Lefebvre isolates three types of rhythm: linear, cyclical, and Cycle of life rhythms.

Spatial rhythm in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice is a linear type about the alternation of the location where events take place. The rhythmical oscillation of events between Venice and Belmont structures the values and attributes of each location. The action of the play alternates from one place to the other almost regularly, like regular beats of an iambic or trochaic line of poetry, or what Schluter (2005) calls right-headed or left-headed feet of poetry. Thus the spatial logic that resembles poetic or temporal rhythm is produced by narrative settings and recurrent locales.

This structural organization of space proves to be thematically and artistically significant in the play. Indeed, an analysis of this alternation of spatial zones infers very significant and informative data about Shakespeare's intended vision about the values and issues he celebrates or deplores in the play. The resulting rhythmic spatial tension creates a confrontation between the values or vices associated with each of the two sites of action and reflects thematic issues established specifically in this Shakespearean drama. In this polarity, Shakespeare compares Venice and Belmont as two allegorical realms that represent diametrically opposed ideologies and two separate value systems.

Venice is a representation of a public, male, and commercial civilization governed by financial calculations, contracts, and law. Its guiding concepts are social hierarchy, profit, risk, and fairness. Relationships in Venice are often transactional: Antonio's friendship with Bassanio is mediated by money, and Shylock's bond is a legal contract rather than a moral or emotional one. The city's reliance on strict rule and logical order is best shown in the trial scene, where justice is first perceived as the actual

enforcement of the bond. Venice thus symbolizes a culture in which worldly items are frequently used to evaluate one's value and kindness has little institutional space.

In contrast, Belmont symbolizes a romanticized, private, feminine world associated with love, harmony, generosity, and inventiveness. Instead of business and speed, it operates through romance, music, and the lottery of the caskets. Even if wealth is present, moral awareness, inner value, and the capacity for love are the primary factors utilized to assess characters. The idea of kindness is introduced to Venice from Belmont, and Portia's home promotes balance and moral judgment rather than force by the law. It is noteworthy to notice that Shylock's quest for revenge stems from his experiences recruited from memory or objective time. He explains that his insistence to exact a pound of flesh from Antonio's chest is the result of the arid reality composed of events and confrontations with Antonio over a long period of time in the rialto of Venice (Al-Abdullah, 2021).

The contrast between the two settings emphasizes the play's central struggle between mercy and justice, materialism and idealism, and calculation and compassion. Shakespeare does not, however, keep them entirely apart: In order to interfere in Venice, Portia must leave Belmont, suggesting that Belmont's values are necessary for a compassionate society to counteract Venice's inflexibility. In this way, rather than opposing the law, the drama promotes its moral humanization.

As a result, the text's geography uses spatial rhythm to communicate moral dynamics, social hierarchy, power dynamics, and psychological feelings.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Amitai F. Aviram's seminal work on literary theory and poetic rhythm, *Telling Rhythm: Body and Meaning in Poetry* (1994), the word "rhythm" originated from the Greek word "rhuthmos," which denoted a moving item like a dancer's body or a stream of water. Virnam claims that Plato mandated that the movement be metrical, or follow a measure. Since then, the phrase has come to mean more and more what it does now. Thus, the traditional belief that rhythm is metrical is Platonic. According to Aviram, rhythm is a core force that determines poetic experience and meaning rather than merely a secondary attribute or decorative element of poetry. Poetry impacts the reader and gives them meaning. He contends that poetry "tells rhythm"—that is, rhythm is fundamental to how poetry creates meaning and impacts the reader—

rather than rhythm only supporting semantic meaning.

In a broader sense, Lefebvre (2004) classifies rhythms of daily life. He makes references to several groupings of rhythm that can be found in urban life in addition to the study of rhythm. He divides everyday life rhythms into three main categories: 1) repetitions of gestures, motions, action circumstances, and differences; 2) interferences between linear and cyclical processes; and 3) lifetimes, which include birth, growth, peak, decline, and end (5-18). He focuses on two types of rhythms that are connected to every other rhythm in daily life: cyclical and linear rhythms.

Similarly, Tim Edensor's (2011) article, "Mobility, Rhythm and Commuting," examines the daily experience of commuting via the prism of movement and rhythm. Edensor studies how commuter habits organize space and time, forming predictable patterns that influence commuters' interactions with one another and their surroundings. The study emphasizes the physical and sensory aspects of commuting, highlighting how people's social and emotional experiences are impacted by movement rhythms including walking, waiting, and driving. It advances our knowledge of mobility as a geographical, social, and rhythmic behavior in modern life.

Russel West's (2014) book, *Spatial Representations and the Jacobean Stage: From Shakespeare to Webster*, provides a thorough analysis of how space is used and portrayed in Jacobean theater, especially in the works of Webster and Shakespeare. The importance of mental and physical space on stage is examined in the book, along with how spatial dynamics affect thematic expression, character relationships, and story progression. West's analysis provides a comprehensive look at the relationship between theatrical space and dramatic storytelling during that time, highlighting the significance of spatial design and movement in influencing audience perception and understanding of Jacobean plays.

Tim Edensor's study, *Geographies of Rhythm* (2016), offers a detailed examination of the idea of rhythm in connection to time, location, and daily existence. The book explores how human experiences and spatial behaviors are shaped by a variety of rhythms, including those found in urban settings, work routines, social interactions, and natural cycles. Edensor highlights the temporal, sensory, and bodily aspects of rhythms, demonstrating how they shape social and cultural patterns and organize daily life. This book provides a sophisticated knowledge of how rhythms play a role in

the creation and perception of place and environment in modern geography.

### 3. DISCUSSION

Examining the individual acts of the play separately, we find little or no regular rhythm. In Act

1, the setting of action in the three scenes alternates regularly between Venice and Belmont. However, that alternation of the two different settings does not make a pattern that requires the repetition of three beats, as is clear in Figure 1.

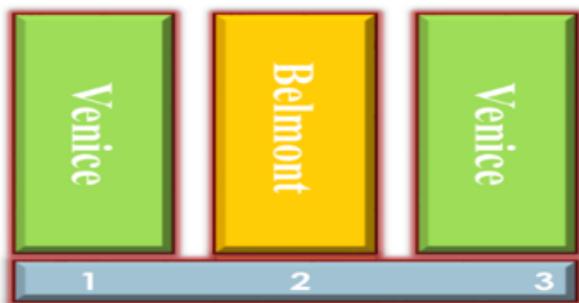


Figure 1: Act I.

Shakespeare establishes the main plot related to Bassanio and Portia's marriage in this act. When the rhythm is regular, Venice turns into the habitat of Bassanio's arrangement to take the journey to Belmont to woo the affluent Portia, and Belmont is the location of Portia and the attempts of her various suitors coming from the four corners of the world. The play introduces the characters involved in this

marital arrangement. Antonio, Bassanio, and Shylock are the three prominent characters among them. To court the wealthy Portia in Belmont, the ostentatious Bassanio persuades his close friend Antonio to guarantee a loan from his adversary, Shylock. The atmosphere of Venice is characterized, among other things, by contracts, business transactions, rigidity, hostility, and religious inequality.



Figure 2: Act II.

Act 2, which consists of nine scenes, begins arhythmically as action switches the rhythm's sequence from Venice to Belmont. Subsequently, it dwells in Venice for four scenes in a row until scene 6, when the episodes that follow restore the rhythmic alternation between Venice and Belmont, as seen in Figure 2. The pattern's repetition is lacking in this instance. However, the two beats do not form a rhythmic pattern, which requires at least three beats to realize. The arhythmic scenes (2-5) clustered in Venice are mainly about the arrangements for the elopement of Jessica with Lorenzo to get married in Belmont. This marriage and its arrangements can be

considered the minor plot in the play. Shakespeare uses rhythm to distinguish the events of the major plot from the minor plot. The events of the major plot of the Bassanio-Portia marriage are marked by the regular alternations of the action between Venice and Belmont. This regular symphony is violated when the action diverts to the Lorenzo-Jessica marriage and arrangements, as in Act 2, scenes 2-5. The subsequent 4 scenes of Act 3 are regularly rhythmical as they alternate between Venice and Belmont. As in the design of Shakespeare, the two scenes in Venice are engaged with the threads of the major plot of the Bassanio-Portia marriage and the consequences of

the bond with Shylock. The two scenes revolve around Antonio's losses, the conflict between Shylock and Jessica over the stolen jewels and precious stones during Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo, and Shylock's determination to enforce the bond and extract a pound of flesh from Antonio's chest. The two counter scenes in Belmont are devoted to Bassanio's success in the casket lottery, resulting in

his marriage to Portia and Gratiano's marriage to Narissa in addition to the marriage of Lorenzo and Jessica. Scene 5 violates the rhythm as it diverts from the regular beats of Venice-Belmont. The reason lies in the fact that this scene is about the minor plot of Jessica and Lorenzo. In this act, characters from Venice travel or resort to Belmont for marriage, happiness, or refuge.

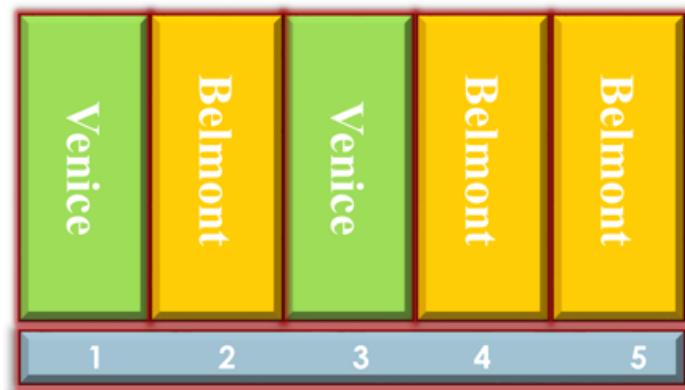


Figure 3: Act III.

The last two acts of the play are flatly arhythmic. In Act 4, events stay in Venice. Less rhythmical is Act

5, which is composed of only one extended scene in Belmont, as in figures 4 & 5.

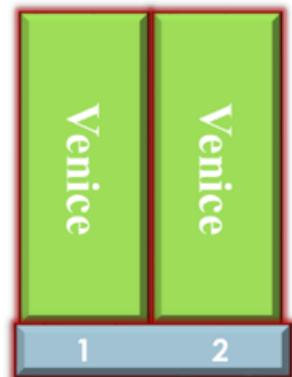


Figure 4: Act IV.

Scene 1 of Act 4 is the climax of the play, in which the main characters of Venice and those of Belmont converge again in the court of Venice to defend Antonio from Shylock's vengeance through the bond, which is secured by the laws of Venice. The journey here is from Belmont to Venice. The Belmontian characters arrive in Venice empowered with their values of mercy, peace, forgiveness, and harmony. Portia and Nerissa arrive in Venice disguised as men to conform with the patriarchal Venetian community.

In this hemisphere, the long deliberations in the court scene end up like a combat between Portia and Shylock over the life of Antonio. Shylock and Portia, who are given the same volume of direct and indirect utterance of around 7200 words of the word count of the play (al-Abdullah, 2024), stood in a contest, the one representing the force of hatred and death, the



Figure 5: Act V.

other, the force of mercy, peace, and life. Al-Abdullah contends that both characters are given an equal chance to present their case. One appeals for mercy, the other sticks to the law. In this competition, the Belmontian force of romance, love, and life wins over the Venetian rigid force of destruction, anger, hatred, and death. Portia uses Shylock's same tool of law to outshine him and defeat his plot against her husband's friend. Furthermore, she succeeds in stripping the alien Shylock of all his wealth, belongings, and properties that are confiscated, according to Venetian law, for plotting against the life of a Venetian citizen.

As a lawyer, Portia gathers a considerable amount of respect for her mastery of Venetian law along with her joy for her invasion of the patriarchal order with reason and sharp intelligence. And despite her

trickery, she remains the heroine of the play, according to Ivan Atmanagara and Marliza Yeni (2007). Through an examination of both canonical materials and current research, Weijian Wang (2015) contends that Portia is a reflection of Queen Elizabeth I and that Shakespeare's complex feelings during a time of polarizing politics and religion are mirrored in the narrative and character development. Other critics, like Carol Rutter (2021), criticize her for bias and injustice because she does not apply her concept of mercy to Shylock. Similarly, Cecily Ran Liao (2022) argues that her actions against Shylock contradict her moving portrayal of mercy because she is closely related to Antonio. Despite being idolized, Liao comes to the conclusion that she is not as perfect as she seems.

Similar to Portia, Shylock's character in *The Merchant* has been subject to an in-depth critical examination. According to Brian Weinstein (2007), Shylock represents the stereotypical connection between Jews and usury in traditional Christian beliefs. Weinstein contends that Shakespeare's representation of Shylock displays his comprehension of human nature. Joseph Ross Parmet (2014) maintains that Shylock represents the critique of early modern capitalism by reflecting the Venetian trading system's societal exploitation. Furthermore, Shylock is portrayed by Huang Li-hau (2019) as an outsider in Venice, highlighting his alienation and loss of Jewish identity as he becomes the object of social contempt. A more recent study by Tiffany Hoffman (2022) explores the emotional dynamics

between Shylock and Antonio, highlighting a struggle for dominance that culminates in Shylock's eventual submission to judgment.

Interesting is the dominance of Portia of the action in the two scenes of Act IV. This looks like a spatial merger of the two spheres with the Belmontian values and attributes brought about by Portia pervade, and the rigid dynamics of the Venetian world recede to the background and give way to a better social order. This fusion of the two spheres of the play defuse the need for the rhythmical alternation between two antithetical binary worlds. The victory and dominance of Portia in both worlds merge the two realms and unites their newly shared values. Subsequently, the major characters, including Antonio travel to Belmont, the land of dreams, music, happiness, marriage, and love.

So far, spatial rhythm has been described and analyzed in the separate acts of the play. However, clustering the twenty scenes of the play in a sequence that cuts across the five acts of the play, as in Figure 6, gives Shakespeare's text a different perspective. It looks like an orchestrated symphony with regular spatial rhythm of Venice- Belmont as avid and clear in clusters 1, 3, and 5. The second and fourth clusters are arhythmic. An analysis of these two clusters demonstrates that they are merely concerned with elopement of Jessica and Lorenzo. Thus Shakespeare uses rhythm to separate the major plot evolving around the Bassanio-Portia marriage and the complications resulting from it from the minor plot pertinent to the marriage of Jessica and Lorenzo.

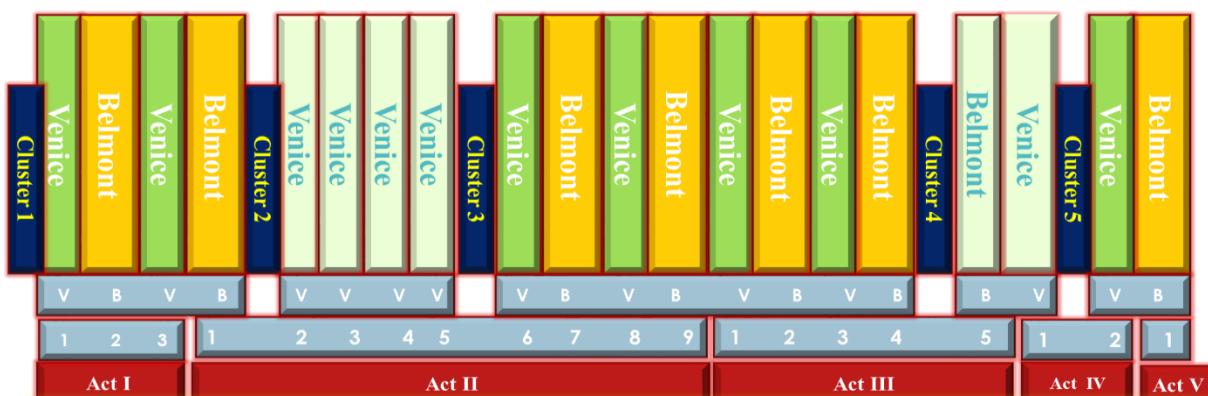


Figure 6: All the scenes of *The Merchant of Venice*.

It is interesting to note how well-designed this distribution is. And as Coleridge (1811-12) repeatedly asserts, there is nothing in Shakespeare that is haphazard or out of place, and it is our fault if we fail to understand what he is trying to say. Shakespeare's creative judgments and the notion that seeming anomalies are "mere dreams of pedantry," according to Coleridge, suggest that nothing in Shakespeare's

work is random but rather reflects "Judgment commensurate with his Genius" (341). Coleridge consistently maintains in his lectures that Shakespeare's plays demonstrate organic wholeness, contending that each character, scene, and image has a structural and thematic function. Coleridge holds that Shakespeare's work is "never arbitrary," with

seeming irregularities being intentional and expressive rather than thoughtless.

A close examination of the scenes reveals that the rhythmic scenes correspond with the main plot, which addresses matters relevant to the bond and the events that follow involving Antonio, Bassanio, Shylock, and Portia. In contrast, the arhythmic scenes, are related to the minor plot involving Jessica eloping with Lorenzo and the comic sequences of Launcelot deserting Shylock's service and replacing him with Bassanio. Besides, Act III, Scene 5, which is arhythmic because it flips the rhythmical direction, consists primarily of a loving exchange of Lorenzo and Jessica in Belmont.

The two scenes of Act 4 remain in Venice, however, are dominated by Portia, the lady of Belmont. Scene 1 is the court scene where the inhabitants of Venice and Belmont meet for the first time in a playfield of legal confrontation over the bond signed by Antonio, which entitles Shylock to cut a pound of flesh from anywhere in the body of Antonio he chooses. The attendants include the main characters from Venice: Antonio, Bassanio, Shylock, and Gratiano, along with the Duke and officials of the court. To this group, Portia and Nerissa, disguised as males, are introduced as Lawyer Balthazar and his assistant, who are here to look into the case of the forfeited bond. In other words, this scene merges the characters of the two settings or spheres in one place.

Venice in this scene serves as a merger of the two alternating locations of action throughout the play. The disguised lady of Belmont succeeds in defusing the fatal scheme of Shylock against Antonio and succeeds in saving his life. She also exacts a heavy penalty on Shylock for his evil plot against the life of Antonio. In effect, she controls the court's deliberations and decisions.

Similarly, Portia is the dominant character in the next scene in Venice. In other words, the princess of Belmont controls the court scene and the subsequent events in Venice in the second short scene of Act IV. Besides, her Belmontian values of mercy, justice, love, and life, friendship, unison, happiness, and loyalty pervade and substitute the vices of hatred, revenge, religious discrimination, and selfishness that permeate Venice up to the court scene.

More remarkable is exodus of the major characters from Venice to Belmont in Act V, excluding Shylock, who disappears from the play in that last act, an absence that indicates the termination of the negative traits he stands for. Hence, Portia's rush to rescue Antonio in Venice ends up in a form of exorcism of evil and destructive forces. Therefore, we can safely say that the three scenes are dominated by Belmont and, thematically, they become arhythmic because Belmont can replace Venice in these scenes, as in Figure 7 below. They look like a Belmont dominion.

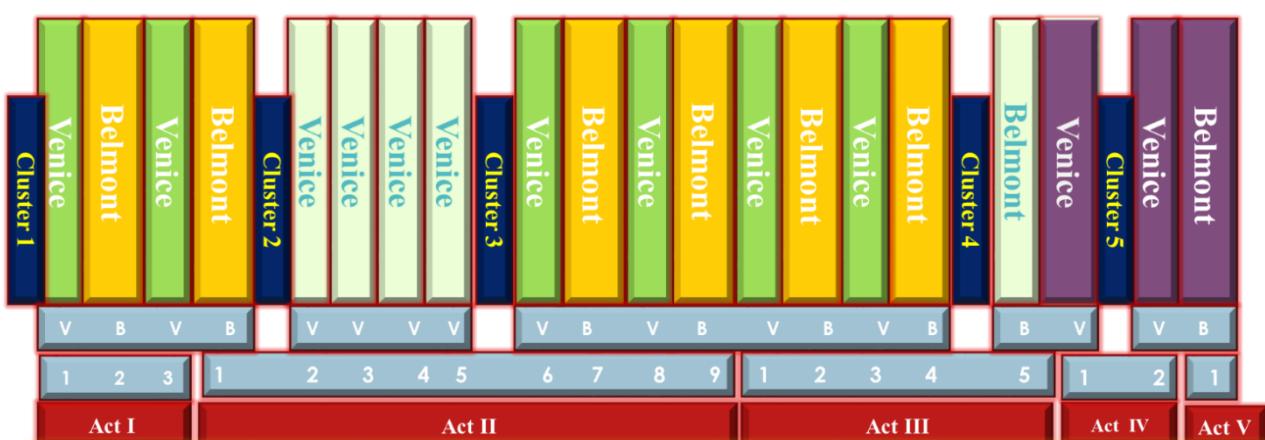


Figure 7: All the scenes of *The Merchant of Venice*.

The last 2 act of the play merge the two places together and are controlled by the lady of Belmont. This suggests that the values of Belmont are to pervade at the end, making the play a comedy with a happy conclusion. Without the intervention of Portia, the play could have been a tragedy.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In *The Merchant of Venice*, spatial rhythm functions as a musical structure where space flows like a line of left-headed trochaic poetry, with Venice

as the stressed location and Belmont as the unstressed one. But that type of arrangement changes in Act IV, when Portia comes from Belmont and dominates the sphere of Venice and turns the music into a right-headed iambic set in which Venice loses its luster and gives way to the moral and logical power of Belmont. The alternation of the binary antithetical spheres of action also represents a confrontation between the values and attributes of the two places. The patriarchal world of business,

conflicts of interest, rigid law, hatred, revenge, segregation, and religious prejudice is juxtaposed to the matriarchal world of love, music, marriage, unity, dreams, and peace.

Furthermore, the mobility of characters in the geography of the play is artistically engineered. Some major characters, namely, Bassanio, Gratiano, Lorenzo, and Jessica, journey from Venice to Belmont seeking marriage and refuge. Act IV brings back Venetian characters along with their disguised wives to save Antonio from the knife of Shylock. At the end of the play, the married couples, along with the

rescued Antonio, have an exodus to Belmont, the utopia of hope, security, and self-fulfillment. The study does not claim that Shakespeare wins a victory for matriarchy, despite a current of feminist studies that advocate such a claim. Instead, he triumphs for Belmont's idealistic ideals against the inflexible conflicts of commerce, and for humanity and mercy against the harshness and callousness of the law. Thus, behind the symphonic music of spatial rhythm lies an undercurrent of confrontation between the sets of values pertinent to the binary alternating hemispheres of geography.

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