

# Merchant of Venice

William Shakespeare

## ←Character List→

**Shylock** - A Jewish moneylender in Venice. Angered by his mistreatment at the hands of Venice's Christians, particularly Antonio, Shylock schemes to eke out his revenge by ruthlessly demanding as payment a pound of Antonio's flesh. Although seen by the rest of the play's characters as an inhuman monster, Shylock at times diverges from stereotype and reveals himself to be quite human. These contradictions, and his eloquent expressions of hatred, have earned Shylock a place as one of Shakespeare's most memorable characters.

**Portia** - A wealthy heiress from Belmont. Portia's beauty is matched only by her intelligence. Bound by a clause in her father's will that forces her to marry whichever suitor chooses correctly among three caskets, Portia is nonetheless able to marry her true love, Bassanio. Far and away the most clever of the play's characters, it is Portia, in the disguise of a young law clerk, who saves Antonio from Shylock's knife.

**Antonio** - The merchant whose love for his friend Bassanio prompts him to sign Shylock's contract and almost lose his life. Antonio is something of a mercurial figure, often inexplicably melancholy and, as Shylock points out, possessed of an incorrigible dislike of Jews. Nonetheless, Antonio is beloved of his friends and proves merciful to Shylock, albeit with conditions.

**Bassanio** - A gentleman of Venice, and a kinsman and dear friend to Antonio. Bassanio's love for the wealthy Portia leads him to borrow money from Shylock with Antonio as his guarantor. An ineffectual businessman, Bassanio proves himself a worthy suitor, correctly identifying the casket that contains Portia's portrait.

**Gratiano** - A friend of Bassanio's who accompanies him to Belmont. A coarse and garrulous young man, Gratiano is Shylock's most vocal and insulting critic during the trial. While Bassanio courts Portia, Gratiano falls in love with and eventually weds Portia's lady-in-waiting, Nerissa.

**Jessica** - Although she is Shylock's daughter, Jessica hates life in her father's house, and elopes with the young Christian gentleman, Lorenzo. The fate of her soul is often in doubt: the play's characters wonder if her marriage can overcome the fact that she was born a Jew, and we wonder if her sale of a ring given to her father by her mother is excessively callous.

**Lorenzo** - A friend of Bassanio and Antonio, Lorenzo is in love with Shylock's daughter, Jessica. He schemes to help Jessica escape from her father's house, and he eventually elopes with her to Belmont.

**Nerissa** - Portia's lady-in-waiting and confidante. She marries Gratiano and escorts Portia on Portia's trip to Venice by disguising herself as her law clerk.

**Launcelot Gobbo** - Bassanio's servant. A comical, clownish figure who is especially adept at making puns, Launcelot leaves Shylock's service in order to work for Bassanio.

**The prince of Morocco** - A Moorish prince who seeks Portia's hand in marriage. The prince of Morocco asks Portia to ignore his dark countenance and seeks to win her by picking one of the three

caskets. Certain that the caskets reflect Portia's beauty and stature, the prince of Morocco picks the gold chest, which proves to be incorrect.

**The prince of Arragon** - An arrogant Spanish nobleman who also attempts to win Portia's hand by picking a casket. Like the prince of Morocco, however, the prince of Arragon chooses unwisely. He picks the silver casket, which gives him a message calling him an idiot instead of Portia's hand.

**Salarino** - A Venetian gentleman, and friend to Antonio, Bassanio, and Lorenzo. Salarino escorts the newlyweds Jessica and Lorenzo to Belmont, and returns with Bassanio and Gratiano for Antonio's trial. He is often almost indistinguishable from his companion Solanio.

**Solanio** - A Venetian gentleman, and frequent counterpart to Salarino.

The duke of Venice - The ruler of Venice, who presides over Antonio's trial. Although a powerful man, the duke's state is built on respect for the law, and he is unable to help Antonio.

**Old Gobbo** - Launcelot's father, also a servant in Venice.

Tubal - A Jew in Venice, and one of Shylock's friends.

**Doctor Bellario** - A wealthy Paduan lawyer and Portia's cousin. Doctor Bellario never appears in the play, but he gives Portia's servant the letters of introduction needed for her to make her appearance in court.

**Balthasar** - Portia's servant, whom she dispatches to get the appropriate materials from Doctor Bellario.

## Merchant of Venice Study Guide

The Merchant of Venice was first printed in 1600 in quarto, of which nineteen copies survive. This was followed by a 1619 printing, and later an inclusion in the First Folio in 1623.

The play was written shortly after Christopher Marlowe's immensely popular Jew of Malta (1589), a play wherein a Jew named Barabas plays a greatly exaggerated villain. The portrayal of Shakespeare's Jew was and remained comic until the late 1700s at which time he was first played as a true villain. In 1814 Shylock's role was depicted as a character to be pitied, and in 1879 he was first portrayed as a tragic character. Subsequent interpretations have varied greatly over the years, but since World War II he has most often been conceived of as tragic.

The Merchant of Venice has been described as a great commentary on the nature of racial and religious interactions. The title itself is misleading, and is often misconstrued as a reference to Shylock, the Jew. However, in reality it describes the merchant Antonio. This ambiguity and misinterpretation has not surprisingly led scholars to continue hotly debating whether Shakespeare meant to be anti-Semitic or critical of anti-Semitism. His depiction of Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, causes the audience to both hate and pity the man, and has left critics wondering what Shakespeare was really trying to achieve.

The choice of Venice can hardly have been arbitrary. The Venice of Shakespeare's day was renowned for its wealth and diversity of cultures, for it was a cosmopolitan market where Eastern goods made their way into the West. Since Shakespeare's interactions with Jews in England would have been limited, if at all, Venice provided him with the example of tolerance and heterogeneity that he needed.

It is interesting to note that the Christians are portrayed as being an incredibly tight, commonly bound group. Antonio rushes to grant Bassanio a loan, even though it will bankrupt him. A similar example occurs later when Graziano asks Bassanio for a favor, which is granted before Bassanio even knows exactly what Graziano is asking for. However, this central community of Christians, with all of its virtue and decency, is immediately subverted by the prodigal loss of the money by Bassanio. While it may be virtuous for Antonio to give all he has to his friend, it is clear to the audience that it is foolish for him to give to a friend who will gamble it away. In addition, the Christian's generosity and friendship is further undermined by the racism so apparent in their actions. Antonio is proud of the fact that he kicks and spits upon Shylock, while Portia is overjoyed when the black Prince of Morocco fails to choose the correct casket, saying, "Let all of his complexion choose me so" (2.7.79). The Christian ideals are not only undermined by this racism, this inherent distaste for anyone different from themselves, but also by their hypocrisy with respect to slavery. When the Christians exhort Shylock to release Antonio, he asks them why Antonio should be treated differently from their slaves, considering that he was bought by Shylock via the contract. Shakespeare thus plants doubt as to whether the Christians' kindness to each other is in fact as great a virtue as it would at first appear. The nature of the religious differences has a profound impact on the way the Christians and the Jews live their lives. For Shylock, absolute adherence to the law is necessary, as evidenced by his reliance on contracts. In addition, money and possessions are things which he feels he must defend. Rather than try to increase his wealth, he struggles merely to maintain it. This economic conservatism contrasts starkly with the aristocratic, gambling nature of Bassanio and the others. The characteristic generosity of the Christians is a very aristocratic trait, based on an ideology which forces gentlemen to ignore practical monetary concerns. Thus Bassanio can truly say, "all the wealth I had ran in my veins" (3.2.253-254).

Perhaps the moment of strongest contrast between Shylock and the Christians' ideals concerns the contract of a pound of flesh. Shylock directly links money and flesh as being equal, something which any Christian would consider taboo. Antonio is unable to see this link, thinking instead that the contract is some form of game for Shylock. He makes the crucial mistake of believing that the contract cannot be for real, and that Shylock must somehow have grown "kind."

There is a division between the Christian portrayal of Shylock and the words and actions of Shylock himself which cannot be overlooked. The Christians are convinced that he can only think of money, whereas Shylock actually presents a very different, even sentimental outlook. Solanio claims that Shylock ran through the street crying out for his daughter and ducats in the same breath, yet there is no evidence of this when Shylock himself appears. Later, when his daughter, Jessica, exchanges a turquoise ring for a monkey, Shylock is not upset about the monetary loss of the ring, but rather the sentimental value it held for him. Most of Shakespeare's comedies return to the first city in which they are set. However, this type of ending is uniquely absent in *The Merchant of Venice*. The final scene moves away from the abandonment of Shylock in Venice, shifting instead to Belmont. Belmont, however, is not nearly as idyllic as it appears throughout the play. Indeed, it represents wealth derived from inheritance, built on the merchandising of Venice, and is therefore a paradise founded on the despised trade it

claims to hate. Ending the play in Belmont serves to remind the audience that the play can be viewed as anything but a comedy, and that in fact it is in many ways a tragedy.

## Merchant of Venice Summary

The Merchant of Venice opens with Antonio, a Christian merchant, in a depressed state. His friends try to cheer him up, but nothing works to make him feel better. Finally his friend Bassanio, an aristocrat who has lost all of his money, comes and asks Antonio to loan him some money.

Antonio, who has tied up all of his money in seafaring ventures, is unable to give Bassanio a direct loan. Instead he offers to use his good credit to get a loan for Bassanio. Bassanio finds Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, and convinces him to give a loan of three thousand ducats as long as Antonio will sign the contract. In a rather unusual twist, instead of charging the Christian men interest, Shylock agrees to waive it as long as Antonio promises him a pound of his flesh as collateral. Antonio, thinking this is a "merry sport," accepts the condition of the bond (contract) and signs it.

Bassanio takes the money and prepares to go visit Portia, a wealthy heiress living in Belmont. She is unmarried because her father has decreed that all suitors must first select one of three caskets in order to marry her. The caskets, one made of gold, one of silver, and one of base lead, all contain different messages. Only one of these caskets contains a picture of Portia. The suitor who picks that casket will be granted permission to marry her.

Prior to Bassanio's arrival the Prince of Morocco tries his luck in choosing among the caskets. He picks the gold casket because it contains an inscription reading "what every man desires." Instead of Portia's picture, he finds a skull which symbolizes the fact that gold hides corruption. As part of losing the suit, he is further sworn to never propose marriage to any other woman, and must return to Morocco immediately. The next suitor, the Prince of Aragon, selects the silver casket which bears an inscription stating that it will give a man what he deserves. Inside is a picture of an idiot, indicating that his self-centered approach was foolish. He too leaves in shame.

Back in Venice, Jessica, the daughter of Shylock, has fallen in love with Lorenzo. They plan to escape one night when Shylock is invited to eat at Bassanio's house. After Shylock leaves Lorenzo goes to his house with two friends. Jessica appears at a window dressed as a boy and tosses a chest of money and jewels down to them. She then emerges from the house and runs away with Lorenzo.

Shylock, upon discovering that his daughter has run away with a lot of his money, blames Antonio for helping her escape. At the same time there are rumors developing in Venice that many of Antonio's ships, with which he expected to repay Shylock for the loan, have sunk or been lost at sea. Shylock begins to revel in the news that Antonio is losing everything because he wants to exact his pound of flesh in revenge for the many insults Antonio has dealt him throughout the years.

Bassanio arrives in Belmont and meets Portia. She remembers him as the dashing soldier with whom she fell in love several years earlier. Portia begs Bassanio to wait before choosing among the caskets, but he demands the right to start immediately. Without even properly reading the inscriptions, Bassanio selects the lead one because he considers it a threatening casket. Portia is overjoyed when he finds her portrait inside. She gives him a ring to seal their engagement and they prepare to get married the next day. Graziano, who has accompanied Bassanio to Belmont, tells him that he and Nerissa (Portia's friend) wish to be married as well.

A messenger arrives and hands Bassanio a letter from Antonio in which he informs Bassanio that he has lost all his money and must forfeit a pound of flesh to Shylock. Bassanio immediately tells Portia what has happened. She orders him to take six thousand ducats and return to Venice where he can pay Shylock and cancel the contract. After Bassanio and Graziano have left, Nerissa and Portia depart for Venice disguised as men.

Shylock has Antonio arrested and brought before the Duke of Venice, who presides over a court of justice. The Duke pleads with Shylock to forgive the contract and let Antonio go free. When he refuses, the Duke asks him how he expects any mercy if he is unable to offer it. The Duke then tells the gathered men that he is waiting for a doctor of the law to arrive.

Nerissa enters the court and hands a letter to the Duke which notifies him that a Doctor Bellario has sent an educated young doctor in his place. Portia arrives disguised as the

Doctor Balthasar. She informs the Duke that she has studied the case and will preside over it. She first asks Shylock for the contract and looks it over. Bassanio offers to pay Shylock the six thousand ducats, but he refuses to accept the money, preferring instead the revenge of killing Antonio. Unable to find any loopholes, Portia grants Shylock his pound of flesh. Shylock, overjoyed at winning his case, holds a knife ready to cut into Antonio's breast.

Portia stops him by asking if he has a surgeon present to suppress the flow of blood. Shylock tells her that the bond said nothing about providing a doctor. She informs him that he may have his pound of flesh, but that if he sheds a single drop of blood then Venice can take away his lands and wealth according to the law. Shylock, clearly unable to comply with this law, asks instead that he be given the six thousand ducats. Portia refuses his request, explaining that she has already ruled according to the contract, and that it must be carried out.

Portia then starts to read the contract literally, reaffirming that Shylock must take exactly one pound of flesh, no more and no less, or he will violate the contract and die. Shylock tells the court that he wishes to completely drop his case and forgive Antonio the entire three thousand ducats. Portia again refuses his request, explaining that the law in Venice states that if any foreigner conspires against the life of a Venetian, half his wealth is to be given to the man against whom he conspired, and half is taken as a fine by the state. In addition, the Duke is granted the power of life and death over him.

When Shylock is pardoned by the Duke, he informs the court that he would prefer death rather than lose everything he owns. Antonio asks the court to return the fine of half of Shylock's wealth provided Shylock converts to Christianity. In addition, Antonio declares he will keep his share in a trust for Jessica and Lorenzo. Portia agrees to this, and also makes Shylock promise to give all his money to Lorenzo upon his death.

After the trial Bassanio thanks "Dr. Balthasar" (Portia) for "his" good work and offers "him" anything "he" desires. Portia asks him for the ring she had given him earlier as a token of their love. He is upset about giving it to her since he thinks she is "Balthasar." However, after Antonio points out that he nearly lost his life for Bassanio, Bassanio pulls off the ring and hands it to her.

Portia and Nerissa return to Belmont dressed normally. Lorenzo and Jessica have been living there, enjoying the comfortable life Belmont offers. Soon after the two women arrive, Bassanio and Graziano also return from Venice. The happy reunion is destroyed when Portia asks Bassanio about the ring (which he gave away). She forgives him only after Antonio vouches for Bassanio's fidelity.

Portia then gives Antonio the ring and has him hand it to Bassanio. He is shocked to see it is the same ring he gave "Balthasar". Portia finally tells him the truth about Balthasar. The play ends with three happy couples: namely Lorenzo and Jessica, Nerissa and Graziano, as well as Portia and Bassanio. However, Antonio and Shylock remain outcasts, separated from the happy ending.

### **1. What causes do Salerio and Solanio suggest for Antonio's melancholy?**

Salerio and Solanio think Antonio is distracted because his money is tied up in his ships, which are sailing on dangerous seas. When he denies this suggestion, Solanio guesses that he's in love, an answer Antonio also rejects.

### **2. What humorous advice does Gratiano offer Antonio?**

Gratiano tells Antonio not to be so grave about worldly affairs, but rather "With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come. Why should a man whose blood is warm within/ Sit like his grandsire.../...And creep into the jaundice/ By being peevish?" In other words, he suggests Antonio is acting old before his time.

### **3. who was shylock and where did he live?**

shylock, the Jew lived at Venice, he was an usurer who had amassed an immense fortune by lending money at great interest to Christian merchants.

### **4. How do the so-called wise people act and what's their purpose according to Gratiano?**

According to Gratiano, wise men are silent and stern. They're only considered wise because they don't say anything.

### **5. Who was Bassanio?**

the friend of Antonio who borrows three thousand ducats from him. He is also the suitor to Portia who chooses the correct casket and marries her.

**6.WHAT IS ANTONIOS ACTUAL CAUSE OF SADNESS IN ACT 1 SCENE 1 ?**

In Act I, Scene 1, we are told that even Antonio doesn't know why he's feeling sad. Everyone assumes he's worried about the safety of his ships, but he claims the ships are not the reason for his depression.

**7.Why was portia in a pensiv mood during the selection of her husband?Justify your answare?**

Portia did not all together want a husband. She also was weary of having her husband chosen by her father's casket game.

**8.who are tubal and chus?**

Tubal and Chus are Lorenzo's Jewish friends.and Tubal is one of Shylock's good friends and Chus is among his fellow jews (countrymen).

**9.What is Gratiano's philosophy to overcome sadness?**

Gratiano is telling Antonio to "chill out" and have some fun. He says it is better to get laugh lines all over his face than wrinkles from worrying. He would rather overload his liver with alcohol that deny himself a good time:

With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come.  
And let my liver rather heat with wine  
Than my heart cool with mortifying groans.

**10.In the story Merchant of V• enice (Act3, Scene2), what was written in the letter that made Bassanio turn pale? Who had written the letter?**

In Act III, Salerio hands Bassanio a letter from Antonio. Bassanio turns pale at the news that Antonio has lost his fortune and his ships, and he asks Salerio if it is true that all of Antonio's ventures have failed.

**11.what are the most important themes of the play 'Merchant of Venice'?**

Some of the different themes in this play are love, hatred, mercy, and prejudice.

**12.Describe Caskets trial about Prince of Morocco and Prince of Aragon ?**

The Prince of Morocco first chooses gold and gets a death skull. The Prince of Aragon receives the picture of an idiot. This is symbolic, for he is an old man and hence is an idiot for thinking himself deserving of a young woman.

**13.In which way does Shakespeare portray Portia's generous nature?**

Portia has a good idea what she is going to do before the trial of Shylock. She gives Shylock the chance to concede his bond on Antonio before disaster befalls him. She offers Shylock compensation for loan but Shylock refuses.



**14. How does Portia show that she is intelligent and has good management skill ?**

Portia and Nerissa, worried about their new husbands, tell Lorenzo that they are going to stay at a local monastery for a few days in order to pray. After Lorenzo and Jessica leave, Portia sends her servant Balthasar to her cousin Doctor Bellario with instructions that Balthasar should bring anything Bellario gives him to Venice. Portia then informs Nerissa that they are going to dress up as men and go to Venice in order to help their husbands.

**What is Antony concerned about at the beginning of the play?**

His melancholy.

**What does Salarino think Antonio's sadness is about?**

Worry over his ships.

**Why is Antonio not worried about his wealth at the beginning of the play?**

His wares are on more than one ship.

**What does Solanio think Antonio's sadness is about?**

Love.

**How is Bassanio related to Antonio?**

Bassanio is his cousin.

**What does Antonio compare life on this earth to?**

A staged play.

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