

# The Merchant of Venice

Author  
**William Shakespeare**

Years Written  
**c. 1596–97**

Original Language  
**English**

## THEMES

### All That Glitters Is Not Gold

When charming Bassanio needs money to pursue beautiful Portia, his friend Antonio strikes a deadly deal with the moneylender Shylock. After his ships sink, Antonio is unable to repay Shylock with money—so he must pay with a pound of flesh cut from his chest. Bassanio and Portia must find a way to reason with the demanding Shylock.

#### Prejudice

Beset on all sides by anti-Semitism, Shylock may not be solely to blame for his vindictive nature.

#### Appearance vs. Reality

Whether locked in a box or hidden behind a disguise, the truth is more complex than it seems.

#### Mercy

The letter of the law is not always the best form of justice.

#### Worth

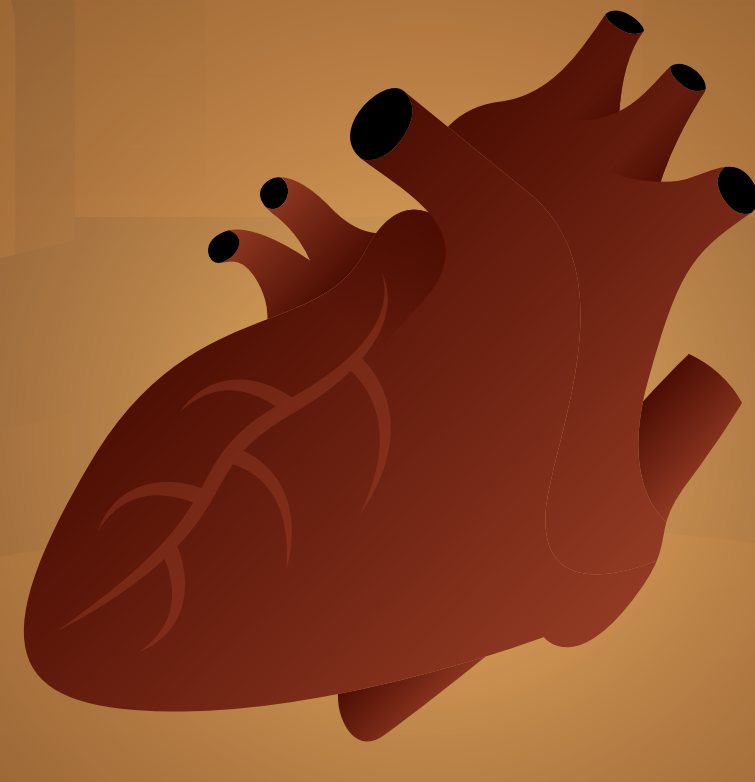
Our emotions can dramatically change the value we see in people and things.

## Symbols



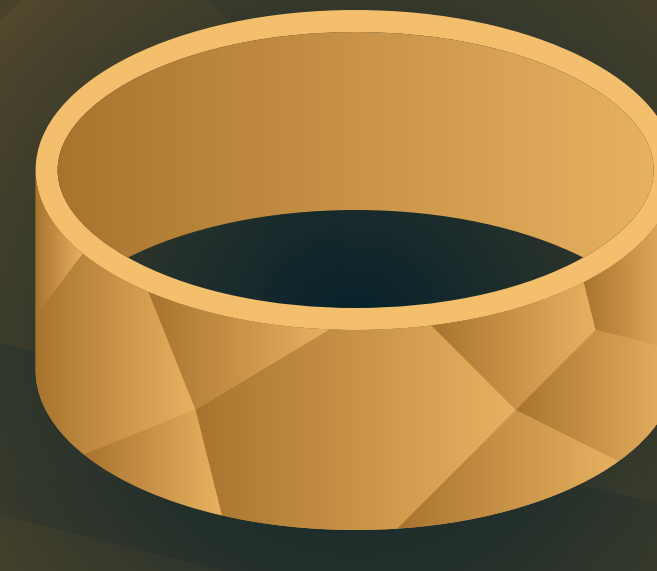
#### Gold

Symbolizes status and power—but not the most important things in life



#### Flesh

Represents life, which suddenly seems valuable when threatened



#### Rings

Stand for the strongest of human bonds, making even a simple one priceless

## The Merchant of Venice

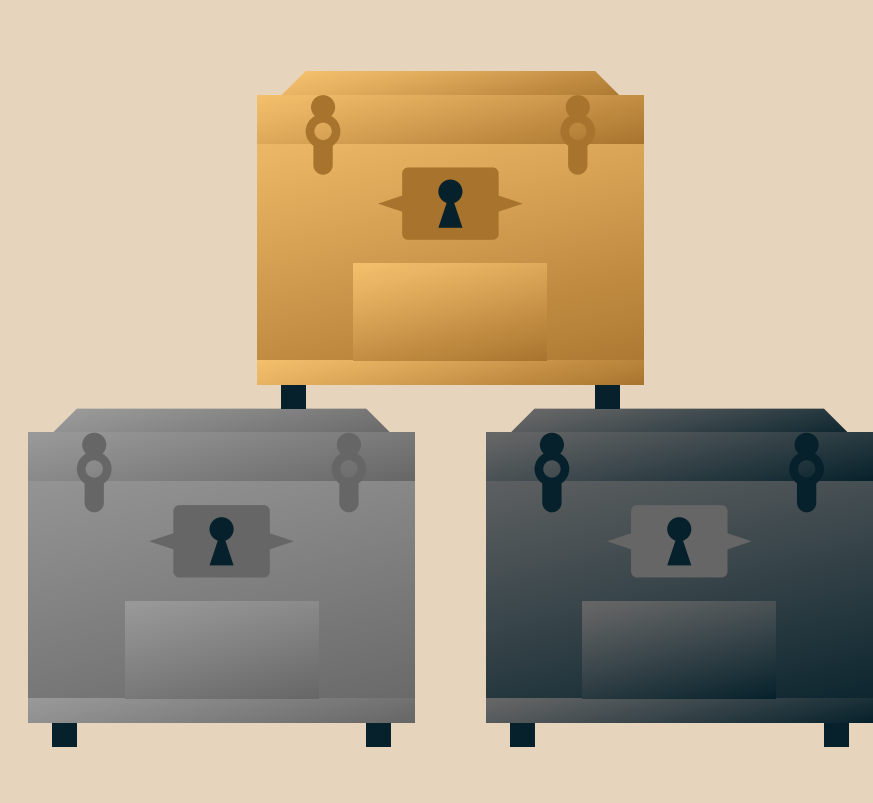
by the Numbers

2



Major sources on which Shakespeare based *The Merchant of Venice: Il Pecorone* (1378) and the *Gesta Romanorum* (1577)

3



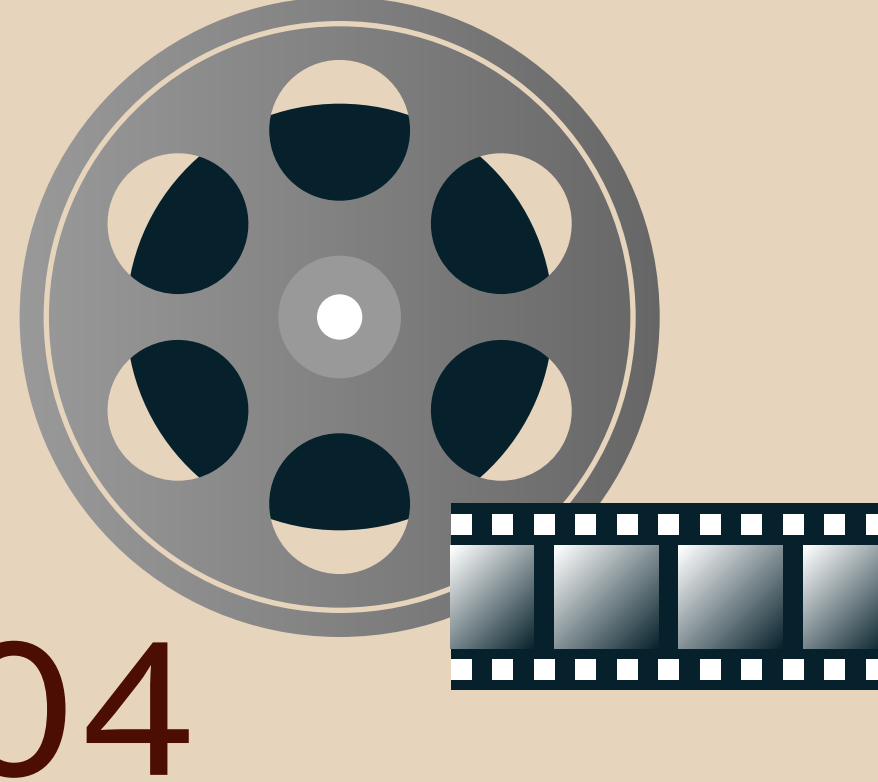
Caskets Portia's father prepared before his death to determine the choice of her husband

1656



Year Jews were readmitted to England after being expelled in 1290

2004



Year a film adaptation starring Al Pacino as Shylock was released



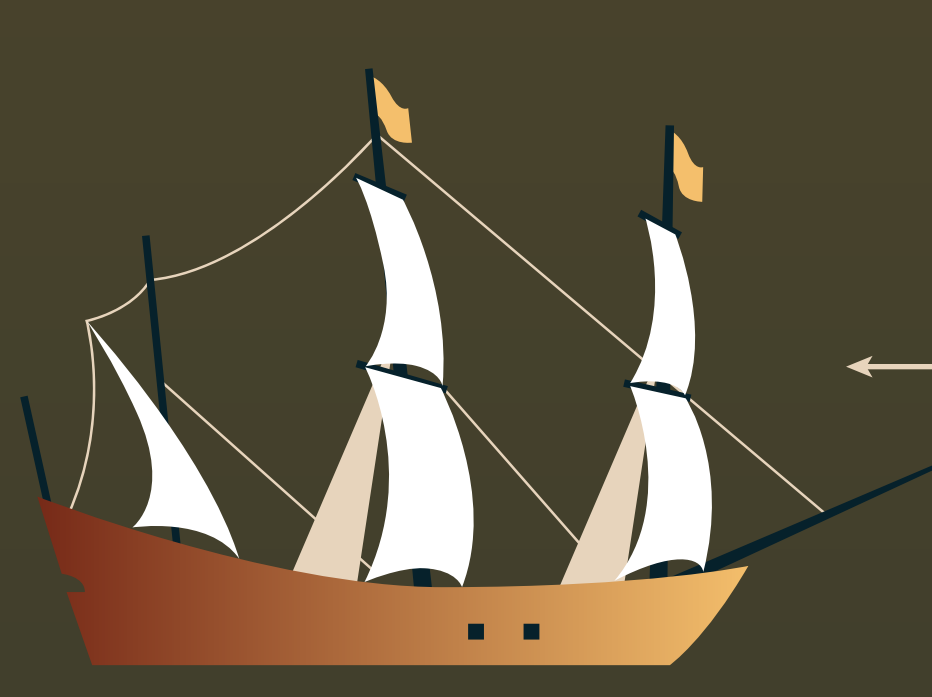
**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**  
1564–1616

Shakespeare was at the height of his career when he wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, borrowing from existing Italian and medieval stories for the characters and basic plot. Its characterization of the Jewish Shylock and “Christian” Venetians highlights social, religious, and moral tensions of the time.



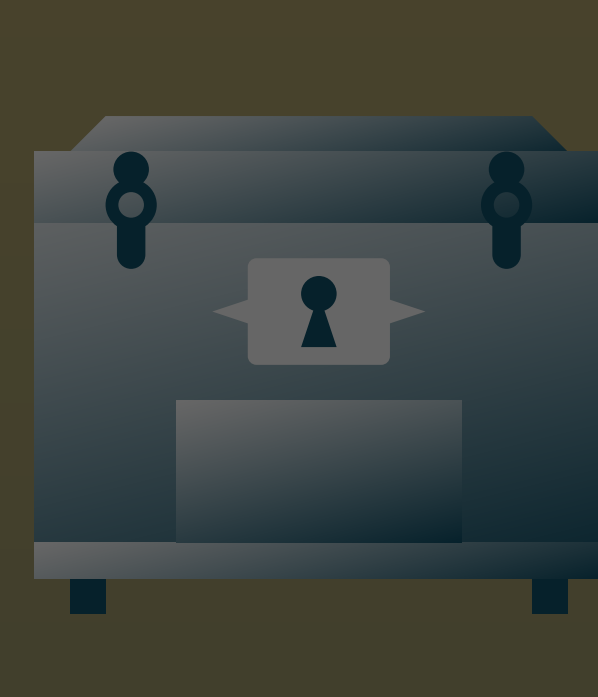
## Main Characters

- Friendship
- Married
- Family



#### Antonio

Struggling merchant; borrows money from Shylock for Bassanio



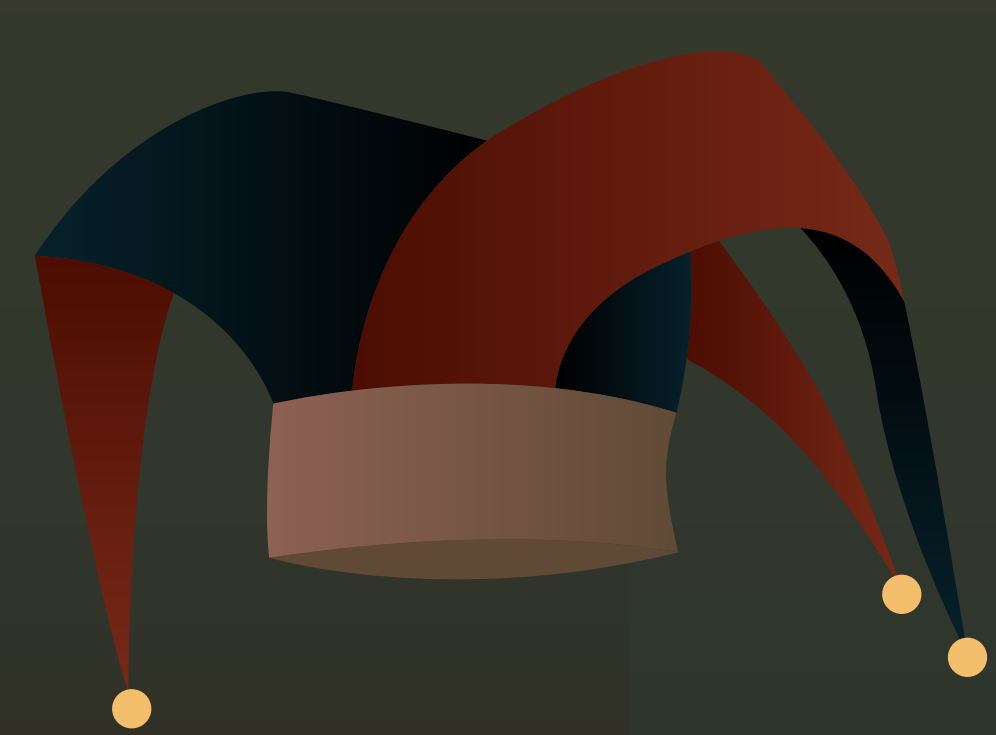
#### Bassanio

Bankrupt nobleman; borrows money to win Portia



#### Portia

Beautiful, cunning heiress; rescues Antonio from Shylock



#### Launcelot Gobbo

Shylock's jester; helps Jessica run away



#### Shylock

Miserly moneylender; tragic villain



#### Jessica

Steals from her father; hurts her father's feelings



#### Nerissa

Portia's lady-in-waiting; marries Gratiano



*If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?*

Shylock, Act III, Scene I