

The Merchant of Venice

William Shakespeare



About the author

William Shakespeare is the most famous writer of the English language. He was born in 1564 and died in 1616 in Stratford-Upon-Avon, England. In his late twenties, he went to London where he began to write comedies, tragedies and historical plays and achieved great fame. His plays appealed to all social classes thanks to his vivid characterizations and his masterly use of the English language. Apart from being a playwright, he was also an actor and a brilliant poet.

The original text

The plots of Shakespeare's plays were not invented by the playwright; in the case of *The Merchant of Venice*, the plot was adapted by him from some contemporary Italian stories which were well known at that time. The Italian setting and marriage plot are typical of Shakespeare's comedies, but what makes the play unique is the characterization of Portia and Shylock.

The Merchant of Venice was written between 1596–97 to be performed in London theatres and at the English court. It was published for the first time in 1600 and has remained popular ever since. Film adaptations of the play such as Michael Radford's (2004) have made it even more popular.

Summary

In order to help a friend, a Venetian merchant asks for a loan from a Jewish moneylender who demands that he pays with a pound of his own flesh if he can't pay him back with money.

Act 1: In 14th century Venice, Antonio, a Christian merchant, is informed by his friend, Bassanio, that he

will clear his debts with him by seeking a lady's hand in marriage. The lady, called Portia, lives in Belmont. She is beautiful and rich, but she cannot marry a man of her own choosing because of her father's last wish that she should marry the suitor who chooses the right box from among three boxes of gold, silver and lead. Portia dislikes all her suitors except Bassanio. Although many suitors have failed in the contest, Bassanio is confident he can succeed if Antonio lends him money to travel and compete with them. However, as all the money that Antonio possesses has been invested in his ships, he can only offer his friend his good name to get a loan from Shylock, a Jewish money lender. Bassanio persuades Shylock to lend him three thousand ducats. Shylock hates Antonio because, being a Christian, the latter lends money to people without charging interest and publicly complains about Shylock. So Shylock agrees to lend him the money as long as Antonio agrees to repay the loan within three months. Otherwise, Shylock will cut a pound of flesh from his body. Antonio signs the agreement, confident that his ships will return to port in time.

Act 2: Launcelot, Shylock's servant, decides to leave Shylock's service and work for Bassanio while Jessica, Shylock's daughter, plans to elope with Lorenzo, Bassanio's friend, and become a Christian. Before going out for supper, Shylock orders Jessica to lock the door and windows so that she does not take part in that evening's celebrations. But that night Jessica, dressed as a boy, escapes with Lorenzo taking with her some of Shylock's jewels. After a night of celebration, Bassanio leaves for Belmont and Shylock is reported to be lamenting the loss of his daughter and his jewels in the streets of Venice. At Portia's house, the Princes of Morocco and Arragon choose the wrong boxes and leave defeated.

Act 3: Once in Belmont, Bassanio chooses the lead box, which is the correct choice. Portia gives Bassanio a ring to seal their union, and makes him swear that under no circumstances will he part with it. Gratiano, Bassanio's friend, and Portia's servant, Nerissa, asks to be married on the same day. But the celebration is cut short by the news that Antonio has lost his ships and that Shylock demands that they should keep to their agreement. Immediately after the marriage ceremony in the church, Bassanio and Gratiano travel to Venice, with money from Portia, to save Antonio's life. After they leave, Portia tells Nerissa that they will go to Venice disguised as men.

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Act 4: Antonio is brought before the Duke to stand trial. Bassanio offers Shylock six thousand ducats, but Shylock is inflexible. The Duke announces that he has sent for a legal expert. Portia and Nerissa enter dressed as a Doctor of Law and his clerk. Portia claims to have studied the case and delivers a short speech on mercy which Shylock ignores. Portia says that since Shylock has refused to be paid the money back there is nothing she can do. But as Shylock is about to cut the pound of Antonio's flesh, Portia reminds him that the agreement stipulates flesh but not blood. So Shylock decides to withdraw his case, but Portia tells him that he is guilty of conspiring against a Venetian, which means he will have to give half of his property to Antonio, the other half to the state, and his life will be in the hands of the Duke. The Duke spares Shylock's life and Antonio asks him to let Shylock retain half of his property. He offers to give his half to Lorenzo on condition that Shylock becomes a Christian and leaves everything he owns to Lorenzo upon his death. After the trial, Bassanio and Gratiano thank Portia and offer the 'young doctor' anything he wants. Portia asks her husband for the ring she gave him, which he unwillingly parts with. Nerissa also gets the ring she gave Gratiano, who had promised to keep it for ever.

Act 5: Lorenzo and Jessica, still in Belmont, talk about their love. Portia and Nerissa return and tell everyone to pretend they have never left. Soon after, Bassanio, Gratiano and Antonio arrive. Portia and Nerissa pretend to discover that their husbands have parted with the rings. Antonio intercedes and Portia and Nerissa give them other rings, which they recognize as the ones they have given away. Portia and Nerissa claim that they have slept with the doctor and the clerk to get the rings back. Portia finally clears up the confusion by revealing the truth, informs Antonio that three of his ships are safe and Lorenzo is told that he will inherit everything after Shylock dies.

Background and themes

- Love and loyalty vs hatred: To what lengths can we go for somebody we love? Is Antonio's agreement to pay with his own flesh generous or simply stupid?
- Forgiveness vs revenge: How does it feel when we take revenge on somebody who has hurt us? Can we sympathise with Shylock?

- Appearance vs reality: Do we feel more powerful when we are wearing a disguise? Is this the case with Portia and Nerissa when they pretend to be a lawyer and his assistant?
- Prejudice vs tolerance: Is it easy to overcome our prejudices and accept other people's religious beliefs, values and habits?
- Money: borrowing and lending money are central to the conflict in the play. Can love and friendship be stronger than money?

For further suggestions, refer to the Introduction, pages v–viii.

Discussion activities

Before reading

Act 1

- 1 **Guess:** In pairs, have students look at the cover and:
 - a **describe the picture**
 - b **discuss the title.** *Where is Venice? What does a merchant do?*
- 2 **Research:** Using books or the Internet, have some students look up information about Venice and then make a brochure advertising the city. They can include photographs or any other artwork. Ask other students to design a similar brochure about Venice in the 14th century. Make sure they become aware of Venice's central position in Europe at that time.

While reading

- 3 **Discussion:** Antonio says that all he has to offer is his good name. Is a good name important nowadays?
- 4 **Discussion:** On page 4, Nerissa says that rich people live shorter lives because they have too many worries. Do you agree with her? Why/why not? Do rich characters in the play worry a lot?
- 5 **Read carefully:** Re-read the part where Shylock speaks to himself (page 8). Underline four reasons why Shylock hates Antonio.
- 6 **Research:** Using books or the Internet, ask students to do some research about how Jews were treated in Shakespeare's time both in Venice and in England. Is religion a reason for conflict in the places where they live?
- 7 **Predict:** Have students re-read the terms of the agreement on pages 8 to 11 and ask these questions. *Will everything end happily? If you don't believe so, will Shylock feel pity for Antonio and agree to be repaid in any other way? Why /why not?*

After reading

- 8 **Writing:** Have students make a list of Portia's suitors and Portia's description of them and then have students express their own opinion of them.

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- 9 Role-play:** Have students imagine there is a talk show called 'Why Portia can't find a husband'. Taking into account the previous activity, have them act the talk show host and Portia's suitors. Remember that if you are part of the audience you can ask questions and make comments as does the studio audience of any talk show.

Act 2

Before reading

- 10 Predict:** Have students look at the title: 'The Three Boxes'. What will happen in act 2?

While reading

- 11 Discussion:** Ask students these questions.
When Shylock wants Jessica to lock the door and close the windows, is he trying to protect her or to control her? Compare Shylock to Portia's father.

After reading

- 12 Role-play:** In groups, have students imagine that Shylock goes to the police station to report his daughter is missing. Get them to dramatize the scene.
- 13 Writing:** Have students write a short article for a newspaper based on one of these headlines:
- Father Cries over Missing Daughter and Jewels!
 - Masked Men Take Lady Dressed as a Man
 - Lady Portia says 'NO' to Another Suitor
 - Merchant Agrees to Pay Pound of Flesh for Loan

Act 3

Before reading

- 14 Predict and pairwork:** Taking into account the previous act and the title *Bad News*, have students write Portia, Bassanio, Antonio, Jessica and Shylock's horoscopes for the following day.

While reading

- 15 Read carefully and discuss:** Re-read Shylock's speech in Scene 1 (page 29).
What do you learn about Shylock? Is what Shylock says true? Do you feel pity for him?
- 16 Pairwork:** Have students decide what the messages on the three boxes mean. Then discuss them as a whole class.
- 17 Pairwork:** Bassanio and Portia go against the rules in different ways.
What step does Bassanio miss out when choosing the boxes? What tradition does Portia change before Bassanio goes back to Venice?

After reading

- 18 Discuss:** Ask students these questions.

- a *Why do you think Shylock wants Antonio's life? Do you agree with Antonio that it is because he helped people with their debts?*
- b *Why do you think Antonio wants Bassanio to come and see him die to pay his debt?*

Act 4

Before reading

- 19 Predict:** Have students look at the picture on page 45 and guess what will happen next.

While reading

- 20 Guess:** Portia says that forgiveness is 'precious' (page 46) while Shylock believes revenge is sweet. *Do you think that Shylock will feel better once he takes revenge?*
- 21 Discussion:** Portia promises to give Shylock more justice than he expects (page 49): *Is Portia's 'justice' fair on Shylock? Is justice always fair?*
- 22 Discussion:** *Why do Portia and Nerissa dress as men in Venice and as women in Belmont?*

After reading

- 23 Predict:** *Do you think Gratiano will give the doctor's assistant his ring too?*

Act 5

Before reading

- 24 Predict and Role-play:** Get students to dramatise the scene.

What will Portia and Nerissa tell their husbands if they go back to Belmont without the rings? What will the men say?

While reading

- 25 Pairwork:** In pairs, have students underline all the places in this act where they know more than the characters do. Then ask them to share the information with the whole class. Discuss how this contributes to a comic effect.
- 26 Discussion:** *How do you think Portia got the letter saying Antonio's ships have returned safely?*

After reading

- 27 Discussion:** *How do you imagine Shylock's life in Venice after this? Do you think Antonio will stay in Belmont? Will Jessica ever return to Venice?*
- 28 Writing:** Ask students to write a few sentences describing the life of the characters one year later.