



Introduction to the Play

Background to *The Merchant of Venice*

The Merchant of Venice is most often considered a comedy because it ends, as most of Shakespeare's comedies do, with the promise of a triple marriage. Like *Twelfth Night*, however, the comedy is edged with darkness because of the treatment of one of the characters. In *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio is easy to dislike, but the reader feels sympathy toward him because of the way others treat him. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the Jewish businessman Shylock is dislikable, but the cruel treatment he suffers from others is very troublesome. Because Shylock is such a memorable character, many people assume that the title "The Merchant of Venice" is him. However, the merchant of the title is actually Antonio, a true and devoted friend to Bassanio.

One of the critical practices in the play is the charging of interest and the posting of a guarantee, or bond, for anyone who wishes to borrow money. This form of money-lending, called usury, was frowned upon as an unethical and unchristian way to earn money. However, in Shakespeare's era, people sometimes did need to borrow money. Therefore, many states allowed people who were not citizens to charge interest when they lent money and to extract a penalty if the money was not repaid in a timely manner. As most states would not grant citizenship to Jews, this practice became a way for many Jews in Europe to make a living.

When Shakespeare was alive, Jewish people had been exiled from Britain. That is why he set this play in Venice, Italy, where Jews were still allowed to live and work. Depictions of Jews in Shakespeare's era were often negative and cruel. Therefore, the depiction of Shylock was considered fair and balanced when the play was originally produced. However, the anti-Semitism of the play is so intense for modern audiences that Shylock's victimization and humanity is often stressed more than his selfishness and harshness.

A story very similar to *The Merchant of Venice* was an Italian story called *Il Pecorone*. It was composed by Ser Giovanni in 1378 and was still in print in Italian in 1558. However, no English version has been found. The earlier Italian story has many of the same elements as Shakespeare's version. A kind uncle borrows money from a Jew to enable his nephew to woo a rich and beautiful woman who lives in Belmonte. The agreement is that if the money is not repaid, then the uncle will allow a pound of flesh to be taken from any part of his body. And so it happens that when it comes time to repay the Jew, the uncle cannot do so. The young woman comes dressed as a lawyer and asks the Jew to take a handsome sum of money instead of the pound of flesh, but the Jew refuses. Just before the pound of flesh is taken, the woman declares that if any blood is shed the Jew will be killed. The Jew then asks for the original settlement, only to be told that he must take the pound of flesh and face the penalty. In

Act two, Scene 9

The Prince of Aragon comes to Portia's house to try his luck at winning her hand by choosing the correct casket. He rejects the lead casket. He rejects the gold casket because he feels that choosing what many other men desire is too common. He chooses the silver casket because he feels that he rightly deserves to marry Portia. He opens the silver casket to discover a poem about how foolish he is. The Prince of Aragon leaves quickly so as not to make any more of a fool of himself. A messenger arrives to announce that Bassanio is at the gate and wishes to try for Portia's hand in marriage.

Act three, Scene 1

Solanio reports to Salerio that Antonio's ship has been wrecked on a narrow place of the English Channel. Shylock enters and cannot believe that Jessica would run away. Salerio tells him that Antonio's ship is lost at sea, but that he is sure that Shylock will not claim the pound of Antonio's flesh. But Shylock replies that he desires revenge just as any Christian might desire revenge, and that he is as human as any Christian.

Tubal enters and reports that he has not been able to find Jessica and Lorenzo. Shylock is very upset at her stealing his money and jewels. He grows even more upset when Tubal tells him that Jessica spent eighty ducats in one night in Genoa. However, Antonio is having even worse luck because another one of his merchant ships is shipwrecked in Tripoli. Shylock plans his revenge on Antonio if he cannot repay the debt. Tubal then tells of a

report that Jessica traded a turquoise ring for a monkey. Shylock loved that ring because it came from his wife, and he would not have traded it for "a wilderness of monkeys."

Act three, Scene 2

Portia asks Bassanio to delay choosing a casket so that they can spend more time together. Bassanio cannot postpone his choice, and asks to be able to take the test. Bassanio rejects gold as too gaudy and silver as too common. He chooses the paleness of the lead casket. When Bassanio opens the lead casket, he finds a beautiful picture of Portia. He praises the beauty and likeness of the portrait. He then reads a poem that tells him that because he did not choose for outward appearance, he can win the hand of Portia and claim her with a kiss. Bassanio wishes to marry Portia, but is unsure whether or not she really wants him.

Portia expresses her love for Bassanio, and gives him her house, her servants, and herself by giving him a ring. She tells Bassanio that if the ring is lost or given away that his love will also be ruined. Bassanio promises that the only way he will be parted from the ring is at his death. Gratiano asks to be able to marry Portia's maid Nerissa. Nerissa indicates that she would be pleased to marry Gratiano.

Lorenzo, Jessica, Salerio, and a messenger from Venice arrive. Salerio gives a letter to Bassanio, and delivers the sad news that Antonio has lost all his ships and is now unable to repay Shylock. Shylock has vowed to take nothing but Antonio's pound of flesh in payment for his loan, and will listen to no other entreaties.

Introduced by a letter from Dr. Bellario, Portia enters disguised as a young lawyer named Balthazar. In questioning Shylock, Portia invites Shylock to choose mercy over justice because under justice we are all condemned, but only with mercy can anyone be saved. Shylock, however, demands justice as stated in the law.

Portia then asks if there is money to repay the debt, and Bassanio offers much more than the original three thousand ducats. However, Portia replies that it is too late; the law demands the payment of the bond. To take the money would negate the law. Shylock is very pleased that Portia understands his position and calls her “A Daniel come to judgment.”

Once more Portia pleads with Shylock to tear up the bond and take nine thousand ducats instead and show mercy, but Shylock once again refuses. Portia tells Antonio to prepare to give his pound of flesh. Antonio proclaims that he is willing to die as a show of his love and loyalty to Bassanio. He only asks that Bassanio tell his wife of Antonio’s love and that Bassanio should only regret that he has lost a friend. Bassanio and Gratiano both say that they would sacrifice their marriages if it would save Antonio’s life.

Right before Shylock is going to take Antonio’s life, Portia points out that the bond only allows for the taking of flesh, not the spilling of any blood. Therefore, if Shylock sheds any of Antonio’s blood, he will have to give up all his land and goods to the state of Venice. Immediately, Shylock says he will take the nine thousand ducats. Bassanio offers the money, but Portia

insists that justice demands that Shylock take the penalty. If he sheds any blood, or takes any little bit more than an exact pound, Shylock will be sentenced to death and all his goods taken by the state.

Shylock offers to take only his three thousand ducats, but Portia insists that he follow through with the forfeiture. Shylock then renounces all claims on his money, but Portia accuses Shylock of planning to kill Antonio. The laws of Venice declare that anyone who seeks to kill a Venetian will be sentenced to death unless given mercy by the Duke of Venice. In further consequence, Shylock must give up half his goods to his intended victim and the other half to the state. Portia tells Shylock to beg mercy from the Duke. The Duke pardons Shylock’s life but still takes all his money for Antonio and for the state. Antonio requests instead that the court forgive the fine of one half of Shylock’s goods in exchange for his use of the money in trust until Shylock dies, at which time the money will go to Jessica and Lorenzo. However, for this to take place, Shylock must make his daughter and Lorenzo his full heirs, and Shylock must become a Christian. Shylock agrees.

Bassanio tries to give Portia the three thousand ducats as payment for her services, but she refuses. When he insists, she says instead that she will take his gloves and ring. Bassanio refuses to give up the ring, telling her that his wife made him vow never to sell, give, or lose it. Portia accuses him of reneging on his offer, and she leaves. Antonio pleads with Bassanio to give Portia the ring as thanks for saving his life and

much money in his younger days, he must borrow money to support his wooing of Portia.

Solanio: He is a good friend to Antonio and Bassanio.

Salerio: He is also a good friend to Antonio and Bassanio.

Gratiano: He is friends with Antonio and Bassanio. He is attracted to Portia's lady-in-waiting, Nerissa. He loves to talk loudly and joke often.

Shylock: A rich Jew who makes his living by lending money and collecting interest or the collateral if the loan is not repaid in a timely manner. He is controlling and harsh, but has suffered indignities at the hands of Christians, especially Antonio.

Tubal: A Jewish friend of Shylock

Jessica: Daughter of Shylock. She is in love with Lorenzo, who is not Jewish.

Lancelot Gobbo: A clown who serves Shylock. He desires to change masters.

Old Gobbo: Father to Lancelot

Lorenzo: A friend of Antonio and Bassanio, he is in love with Jessica.

Leonardo: A servant to Bassanio

Balthazar: A servant to Portia

Stephano: A servant to Portia

Portia: A beautiful rich woman who has inherited her father's estate. She cannot marry whomever she wants, but must marry the suitor who chooses the casket that has her picture inside of it. She travels to Venice disguised as a lawyer to win the case of Shylock against Antonio.

Nerissa: The lady-in-waiting to Portia. She is her helper and advisor, and accompanies her to Venice disguised as a law clerk.

Magnificoes of Venice: Senior magistrates of the court

Officers of the Court of Justice: Men who oversee the proceedings of cases brought before the court

Jailer: He is responsible for Antonio when he is under arrest.

Servants to Portia: Provide help managing Portia's home in Belmont

Other Attendants: People who provide support to their superiors

Shakespeare and Stage Directions

The plays of Shakespeare are so well written that they seem to leap off the page and come to life. However, the plays themselves have very few stage directions. Perhaps this is because Shakespeare's plays were performed in large amphitheaters that were very simple.

This was a time before electric lights, so the plays needed to take place during the day to utilize the natural light. The average time for a performance was between noon and two in the afternoon. Theater historians report that there were typically no intermissions; plays ran from beginning to end without a break and took about two hours.

The set might be painted canvas to illustrate whether the play was occurring in a forest or a town, for example. Sometimes the background was accompanied by a sign that indicated the



Introduction to Shakespeare

A Brief Biography of William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 to John and Mary Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. His birthday is celebrated on April 23. This is memorable because April 23 is also the day Shakespeare died in 1616.

Shakespeare was the eldest of nine children in his family, six of whom survived to adulthood.

William Shakespeare's father worked with leather and became a successful merchant early in his career. He held some relatively important government offices. However, when William was in his early teens, his father's financial position began to slide due to growing debt. After many years, John Shakespeare's fortunes and respect were restored, but records indicate that the years of debt and lawsuits were very stressful.

Historians assume that young Will went to school and took a rigorous course of study including Latin, history, and biblical study. In 1582, at the age of eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, who was three months pregnant. Studies of Elizabethan family life indicate that Anne's situation was not unusual since it was accepted that the engagement period was as legally binding as the marriage. The couple had a daughter, Susanna, followed by twins, Hamnet and Judith. Not much is known about Shakespeare during the next seven years, but his name is listed as an actor in London by 1592. This was a difficult time for the theater

because measures to prevent the spread of the plague regularly closed the theaters.

Between 1594 and 1595, Shakespeare joined the Chamberlain's Men as a playwright and actor. The acting company featured actor Richard Burbage, and they were a favorite of Queen Elizabeth I. During this time, Shakespeare was writing such plays as *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Even though Shakespeare was enjoying great success by the time he was 32, it was dampened by the death of his son, Hamnet, in 1596. Soon after, Shakespeare refocused on his home in Stratford where he bought an estate called New Place, with gardens, orchards, and barns in addition to the main home. He still maintained a home in London near the theater.

In 1599, Shakespeare wrote *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, and *As You Like It*. The Globe Playhouse was up and running, with Shakespeare a 10 percent owner. This means that he was able to earn 10 percent of any show's profits. This business position helped him solidify his wealth.

In 1603, Shakespeare's reputation earned his acting troop the sponsorship of James I, who requested one play performance per month. Their name changed to the King's Men. By this time, Shakespeare had written and performed in almost all of his comedies and histories. He was proclaimed the finest playwright in London.

Clothing in Shakespeare's time was very expensive. Of course, servants and other lower-class people wore simple garb, often a basic blue. But if a person wanted to display his wealth, his clothing was elaborate and colorful, sewn with rich velvet, lace, and gold braid. An average worker might earn seven or eight English pounds in a year, and a very nice outfit for a nobleman might cost as much as 50 or 60 pounds. In other words, if seven or eight healthy workers pooled their money for the entire year, spending nothing else, they could buy only one respectable nobleman's outfit.

Entertainment was an important part of life in Shakespeare's England. Popular sports were bear-baiting, cockfighting, and an early form of bowling. Bear-baiting, in which dogs were set loose to fight with a chained bear in the center of an amphitheater, and cockfighting, in which roosters pecked each other to death, were popular then but would be absolutely unacceptable entertainment today. Bowling, however, has maintained its popularity in our current culture.

In London, a main source of entertainment was the theater. Some theaters were very large and could hold more than two thousand people. Even poor people could attend the theater since entrance cost only one penny (equivalent to 60 cents today), and they could stand around the stage. For a bit more money, a person could sit in an actual seat during the performance. However, some thought that going to the theater could be dangerous to your body or your soul. The theaters were closed twice during the plagues to reduce the spread of the disease. The Puritans disapproved of the theater as an unwholesome leisure time activity. And the Puritans also disliked the theater because the theaters were located in an area of London surrounded by brothels and bars. Nevertheless, the theater became respectable enough by 1603 to be supported by James I—and he was the monarch who directed the King James Version of the Bible to be translated.



ACTIVITY 6

The Prince of Morocco Takes a Chance Act two, Scene 1

Background In this scene, the Prince of Morocco speaks articulately—and proudly—of himself as a fine suitor for Portia. He admits, however, that this riddle of the caskets introduces chance into the quest for Portia—anyone could potentially win or lose. In this scene, we learn that any suitor who takes a chance must first vow that if he chooses incorrectly, he will never marry. Although the stakes are high, the Prince of Morocco decides to take the chance.

Directions Imagine that you are the Prince of Morocco alone with your thoughts and prayers at the temple. Write your thoughts down on a separate sheet of paper, and consider including the following:

- What you think the casket of gold, silver, and lead might mean/symbolize and which you are considering choosing (and why)
- Why you think Portia is worth the risk of never marrying
- Your sworn vows (to never marry should you choose the wrong casket)
- Some sort of prayer, wish, or supplication that you might choose correctly

Suggested length: $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 page



ACTIVITY 9

*Shylock*Acts one and two

Background In Act two, Scene 7, we learn that Shylock's daughter has run away to marry Lorenzo, a Christian. Seemingly equally upsetting to Shylock is the fact that she has stolen money and jewels from her father before she ran away to be secretly married. Is Shylock an evil man, devil incarnate, as his former servant has stated, or simply a materialistic but misunderstood person? You decide.

Directions First, in a sentence or two, rewrite the following quotations in your own words, and then explain what each shows us about Shylock's character. Use a separate sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following: but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you." Act one, Scene 3, lines 30–34
2. "If I can catch him once upon the hip, I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him . . . Cursed be my tribe, If I forgive him!" Act one, Scene 3, lines 41, 42, 46, and 47
3. ". . . let the forfeit be nominated for an equal pound of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken in what part of your body pleaseth me." Act one, Scene 3, lines 145–148
4. "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter! Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats! Justice! the law! my ducats, and my daughter!" Act two, Scene 8, lines 15–17 (as quoted by Solanio)



ACTIVITY 12

Bassanio's Choice and Yours

Act three, Scene 2

Background Bassanio is the third suitor we see who contemplates aloud the meaning of the riddle on each casket and then chooses. His contemplation is quite different from the other two and focuses more on how looks are often deceptive.

Directions Reread Bassanio's speech in lines 72–107 and, summarizing it and paring it down to its very essence, put it in modern-day speech as if you were on a game show speculating which door to go through (gold, silver, or lead) to win the grand prize of a million dollars. Keep the basic message/theme of the speech intact, and rework it as you contemplate which door to open.