

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## The Merchant of Venices 1596

Shakespeare

### OVERVIEW

Still short of his greatest tragedies, Shakespeare tries out his skills here on a dark figure, Shylock, who will join the gallery of such as Iago and Richard III, though without quite their commitment to the dark side of evil. The broad plot, and the range of character types, in this play—the villainous Jew, the poor suitor, the affluent business man, the attractive woman sought by many—are familiar from numerous Italian story collections of the period, and Shakespeare appears once more to have employed his skill at fast reading and even faster synthesis, to have put the pieces of *The Merchant of Venice* together.

### CHARACTERS

**Shylock.** A Jewish moneylender in sixteenth century Venice. Victim of general contempt, for his profession and his race, Shylock has long built up a desire for revenge on his predominately Christian community, and he finds the opportunity when a wealthy Venetian businessman, Antonio, comes to him for a loan. He gives him the loan, on the condition that Antonio will owe him a pound of flesh, in the event of a default.

**Portia.** A wealthy, beautiful, and intelligent Venetian heiress, who is awaiting a lucky marriage; by her father's will she has been obligated to accept the suitor who makes the correct choice among three caskets. Disguised as a young law clerk, she will later make legal interventions which save the life of the businessman, Antonio.

**Antonio.** The wealthy businessman whose love for his friend Bassanio prompts him to back a hefty loan, which will enable Bassanio to pay proper court to his beloved, Portia. (Antonio, who suffers from an undiagnosable love melancholy, seems to be in love with Bassanio.) In the end Antonio nearly loses his life to this badly calculated loan.

**Bassanio.** Antonio's close friend, and suitor to Portia. It is he, appropriately, who makes the correct choice about Portia's three caskets.

**Graziano.** Bassanio's friend. He eventually marries Portia's ladies-maid.

**Jessica.** Shylock's daughter. Elopes with a Christian gentleman.

**Lorenzo.** Suitor who marries Jessica.

**Prince of Morocco.** One of many suitors who comes to Portia, to consider making a choice among the caskets. (The penalty for a wrong choice is never to marry at all.)

### STORY

**Loan.** We are in sixteenth century Venice, and the Venetian businessman, Bassanio, turns to his friend Antonio—an even richer man of business—for a loan, so that he can travel in proper state, to pay court to his fiancée, Portia. Antonio agrees to back a loan which Bassanio will request from Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, who comes up with a plan to provide an interest free loan, but on one condition, that if Antonio defaults on the loan, Shylock will get a pound of Antonio's flesh. Antonio's capital is vast,

although a great deal of it is in trading vessels, and there is always the possibility of a shipwreck—which would be a financial disaster for Antonio.

**Suitors.** Meanwhile, Portia is busy entertaining suitors, who continue to opt out of or fail the casket test, until Bassanio arrives, uses his instinct and immediate fondness for the lady, and chooses the proper casket. Bassanio and Portia decide on an immediate wedding, as do Graziano and Portia's maid, and the double event is in progress, in the midst of a local festivity, when the startling news comes in, that Antonio's fleet of trading vessels has suffered a fatal shipwreck. The horrible eventuality of the 'pound of flesh' appears to have become a reality.

**Legalities.** Shylock rejects many pleas to spare Antonio from the full penalty required by his contract; but Shakespeare has a trick up his sleeve, and it involves his (and his time's) favorite dramaturgical ploy of disguise. Portia (and her maid), disguised as male lawyers, go to the court and unfold a persuasive argument, that the contract signed by Antonio (with Shylock) accords the latter a pound of flesh, but no blood. The blood provision cancels out the pound of flesh, and Antonio is released from his bond.

**Resolution.** Shylock now wishes to take Bassanio's initial payment of money, but Portia, in disguise, argues persuasively that Shylock must take exactly what he contracted for—the pound of flesh-- or nothing at all. Portia continues to claim that Shylock is guilty of plotting against the life of a Venetian citizen, and must therefore pay the equivalent of half of Bassanio's money to the state, and half to Antonio. At this the Duke of Venice intervenes, reduces the fine owed by Shylock. In addition, says the Duke, Shylock must convert to Christianity, and he must will the entirety of his estate to Lorenzo and Jessica upon his death.

**End.** In the end there is the usual Shakespearean wrap up and resolution of resolutions. The characters deceived by Portia's disguise, and legal brilliance, are put back in place (as in any Shakespearean comedy): Bassanio sees through Portia's disguise; Graziano presents his ring to Nerissa, Portia's disguised law clerk; the two women return to their husbands and to Portia's home, where they find Lorenzo and Jessica kissing; news comes through that Antonio's ships have in fact made it through the storm. Everybody—or does that include Shylock? --is exhilarated.

## THEMES

**Anti Semitism** Shylock has all his life been a victim of anti-Semitic prejudice, which has at worst amounted to taunts and boycotts—of his money lending service. In return he has built up a spirit of revenge, which comes out in the present play, and a full commitment to what at this time was taken to be the Old Testamental perspective of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Portia targets this perspective in her 'the quality of mercy is not strained' speech, during the trial of Shylock, and the play is permeated by allusions to the reputedly Christian virtues of humility, forgiveness, and generosity.

**Disguise.** As in many Shakespearean 'comedies' disguise plays an important role in the present play. The prime example is Portia's assuming a male disguise—ironic, because the female parts, in the plays of Shakespeare's time, were in fact played by teen age boys—in order to plead Antonio's case. Portia suggests, in an aside, that cross dressing gives women an opportunity to see inside the male world—and to anticipate male strategies for getting the better of women.

**Mercy** In the trial of Shylock (Act IV) Portia builds her plea (for Antonio) around the eventual point that the Shylock-Antonio contract forbade the spilling of blood. Therefore, she argues, the pound of flesh demanded by Shylock could not be taken. Portia's overall argument, then, is that Shylock cannot take his due revenge, but in constructing this point Portia maintains (expounding a widely affirmed Christian maxim of the time) that respect for mercy overrides even the claims of justice.

**Revenge.** Shylock is eager for revenge against Antonio, but his vengefulness is not without basis. He has suffered a life time of insults and scorn, from his fellow Venetians, and he naturally holds this destiny against the Christianity he sees in practice. At the same time, Antonio and his fellow Christians see

Shylock, who is in the usury business, as nothing but a money maker, with no sense of what Portia calls 'mercy.' A mutual revenge setting is perfectly constructed between Christians and Jews in Venice. No one need run out of targets for his resentment.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### Shylock

**Character** Shylock is a professional money lender—as are many of the leading figures of capitalist society today—and makes his profit from interest on loans. (Significantly enough, in the present play, Shylock has given Antonio an interest free loan.) While not known especially for the harshness of the interest he takes, Shylock is addressed throughout the play as a revenge minded fringe figure in Venetian society. His own daughter cannot wait to escape his household, and none of the other players learn from or relate to the man. Shakespeare's own view, of this haunting and central figure, vacillates: he gives Shylock lines (Act III, 49-61) which open Shylock into his humanity:

*I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes. Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?*

At the same time, as the passage makes clear, being a Jew means that Shylock has learned the lessons of revenge, and will pay back harshly, for the treatment he has learned to receive from Christians.

**Parallels.** Scrooge, in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, comes to mind first, a perfect modern example of a selfish money centered businessman. Unlike Shylock, Scrooge is not taking revenge on Christian citizens, by taking their interest from them, but purely trying to enrich himself at others' expense. In this he resembles Balzac's *Pere Goriot*, a lover of his own money—essentially his own feces, piles of them hardening inside of him—or Moliere's *L'avare*, the greed consumed man who, unlike Scrooge, never gains any final relief from his rapacious condition. Ben Jonson's *Volpone* introduces us to the will-hunter, an honorable member of the club that to this day crowd the death bed, while B. Traven, in that subtle masterpiece, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, introduces us to three treasure hunters, whose jealousy of one another's dug up treasures has murder written all over it.

### Illustrative moments

**Humanity.** In Act III Shylock reaches into his emotions, to declare his—and Jews' in general—identity with the rest of the human race. Shakespeare himself is a subtle presence in this defense of the 'universal Jew,' as he both defends the man, and excoriates him, for his deep embeddedness in the revenge game which provides the working structure of Venetian society.

**Loss.** In the second Act, we see Shylock beginning to realize that his daughter is about to leave him—to elope with Lancelot; although this plot is still in its formative stage, Shylock has no trouble sensing it; nor does he have any illusions about being an attractive friend. He lives tightly and defensively to himself. He is the ultimate tight-ass.

**Puritanical.** We do not get many intimate insights into Shylock's world, but know that he scorns revelry and pretentious youngsters, and that he is puritanical in his private life. Well to do too, of course!

**Insistent.** In the third scene of Act III, Shylock escorts to prison the Antonio whose fleet has suffered shipwreck, and who is unable to cover the debt he and Bassanio took out at the beginning of the play. Shylock twists the vengeance theme when he asks the jailer to be careful not to let his new prisoner escape, and when, shortly after, he reiterates insistence on his pound of flesh.

**Merciful?** When the prosecutor of Antonio's trial, Portia, asks Shylock whether he may not someday want and need mercy for himself, he replies that he will not, that the time will never come that Shylock needs mercy, for he does nothing wrong.

**Discussion questions**

Is the present play a comedy, since it ends happily for all except Shylock? Is it a tragedy, commenting bleakly on the human condition, and the widespread of greed and parochialism among people? Is it a problem play, raising questions about what mercy and greed are, and their functions in society? Is the play weakened, by some indecision about exactly what kind of play it is?

Does the play support the general position that mercy is a priceless component of society, or does it undermine the concept of mercy, by declaring its absence from the behaviors of either Shylock or his Christian tormentors? If mercy is a questionable factor throughout the play, what can we say about love? Is Antonio 'in love with' Bassanio? Are the young lovers, throughout the play, simply trendy youngsters, or is there evidence of love among them?

What makes Shylock the outstandingly central figure of the play? Is it his isolation, in a culture different from his? Does he stand out for that reason? Is he a complex character, who draws attention from an audience curious to understand him? Is it that Shylock seems almost like a mirror reversal of the 'Christians' who surround him—Antonio and Bassanio? Each group, that is, has its own staunch values, and accuses the other of revenge for following its own precepts?