The Merchant of Venice

Plot Summary

Antonio, a Venetian merchant, complains to his friends of a melancholy that he cannot explain. His friend Bassanio is desperately in need of money to court Portia, a wealthy heiress who lives in the city of Belmont. Bassanio asks Antonio for a loan in order to travel in style to Portia’s estate. Antonio agrees, but is unable to make the loan himself because his own money is all invested in a number of trade ships that are still at sea. Antonio suggests that Bassanio secure the loan from one of the city’s moneylenders and name Antonio as the loan’s guarantor. In Belmont, Portia expresses sadness over the terms of her father’s will, which stipulates that she must marry the man who correctly chooses one of three caskets. None of Portia’s current suitors are to her liking, and she and her lady-in-waiting, Nerissa, fondly remember a visit paid some time before by Bassanio. In Venice, Antonio and Bassanio approach Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, for a loan. Shylock nurses a long-standing grudge against Antonio, who has made a habit of berating Shylock and other Jews for their usury, the practice of loaning money at exorbitant rates of interest, and who undermines their business by offering interest-free loans. Although Antonio refuses to apologize for his behavior, Shylock acts agreeably and offers to lend Bassanio three thousand ducats with no interest. Shylock adds, however, that should the loan go unpaid, Shylock will be entitled to a pound of Antonio’s own flesh. Despite Bassanio’s warnings, Antonio agrees. In Shylock’s own household, his servant Launcelot decides to leave Shylock’s service to work for Bassanio, and Shylock’s daughter Jessica schemes to elope with Antonio’s friend Lorenzo. That night, the streets of Venice fill up with revelers, and Jessica escapes with Lorenzo by dressing as his page. After a night of celebration, Bassanio and his friend Gratiano leave for Belmont, where Bassanio intends to win Portia’s hand.

In Belmont, Portia welcomes the prince of Morocco, who has come in an attempt to choose the right casket to marry her. The prince studies the inscriptions on the three caskets and chooses the gold one, which proves to be an incorrect choice. In Venice, Shylock is furious to find that his daughter has run away, but rejoices in the fact that Antonio’s ships are rumored to have been wrecked and that he will soon be able to claim his debt. In Belmont, the prince of Arragon also visits Portia. He, too, studies the caskets carefully, but he picks the silver one, which is also incorrect. Bassanio arrives at Portia’s estate, and they declare their love for one another. Despite Portia’s request that he wait before choosing, Bassanio immediately picks the correct casket, which is made of lead. He and Portia rejoice, and Gratiano confesses that he has fallen in love with Nerissa. The couples decide on a double wedding. Portia gives Bassanio a ring as a token of love, and makes him swear that under no circumstances will he part with it. They are joined, unexpectedly, by Lorenzo and Jessica. The celebration, however, is cut short by the news that Antonio has indeed lost his ships, and that he has forfeited his bond to Shylock. Bassanio and Gratiano immediately travel to Venice to try and save Antonio’s life. After they leave, Portia tells Nerissa that they will go to Venice disguised as men.

Shylock ignores the many pleas to spare Antonio’s life, and a trial is called to decide the matter. The duke of Venice, who presides over the trial, announces that he has sent for a legal expert, who turns out to be Portia disguised as a young man of law. Portia asks Shylock to show mercy, but he remains inflexible and insists the pound of flesh is rightfully his. Bassanio offers Shylock twice the money due him, but Shylock insists on collecting the bond as it is written. Portia examines the contract and, finding it legally binding, declares that Shylock is entitled to the merchant’s flesh. Shylock ecstatically praises her wisdom, but as he is on the verge of collecting his due, Portia reminds him that he must do so without causing Antonio to bleed, as the contract does not entitle him to any blood. Trapped by this logic, Shylock hastily agrees to take Bassanio’s money instead, but Portia insists that Shylock take his bond as written, or nothing at all. Portia informs Shylock that he is guilty of conspiring against the life of a Venetian citizen, which means he must turn over half of his property to the state and the other half to Antonio. The duke spares Shylock’s life and takes a fine instead of Shylock’s property. Antonio also forgoes his half of Shylock’s wealth on two conditions: first, Shylock must convert to Christianity, and second, he must will the entirety of his estate to Lorenzo and Jessica upon his death. Shylock agrees and takes his leave.

Bassanio, who does not see through Portia’s disguise, showers the young law clerk with thanks, and is eventually pressured into giving Portia the ring with which he promised never to part. Gratiano gives Nerissa, who is disguised as Portia’s clerk, his ring. The two women return to Belmont, where they find Lorenzo and Jessica declaring their love to each other under the moonlight. When Bassanio and Gratiano arrive the next day, their wives accuse them of faithlessly giving their rings to other women. Before the deception goes too far, however, Portia reveals that she was, in fact, the law clerk, and both she and Nerissa reconcile with their husbands. Lorenzo and Jessica are pleased to learn of their inheritance from Shylock, and the joyful news arrives that Antonio’s ships have in fact made it back safely. The group celebrates its good fortune.

**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.

Although critics tend to agree that Shylock is *The Merchant of Venice’*s most noteworthy figure, no consensus has been reached on whether to read him as a bloodthirsty bogeyman, a clownish Jewish stereotype, or a tragic figure whose sense of decency has been fractured by the persecution he endures. Certainly, Shylock is the play’s antagonist, and he is menacing enough to seriously imperil the happiness of Venice’s businessmen and young lovers alike. Shylock is also, however, a creation of circumstance; even in his single-minded pursuit of a pound of flesh, his frequent mentions of the cruelty he has endured at Christian hands make it hard for us to label him a natural born monster. In one of Shakespeare’s most famous monologues, for example, Shylock argues that Jews are humans and calls his quest for vengeance the product of lessons taught to him by the cruelty of Venetian citizens. On the other hand, Shylock’s coldly calculated attempt to revenge the wrongs done to him by murdering his persecutor, Antonio, prevents us from viewing him in a primarily positive light. Shakespeare gives us unmistakably human moments, but he often steers us against Shylock as well, painting him as a miserly, cruel, and prosaic figure.

**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. Quick-witted, wealthy, and beautiful, Portia embodies the virtues that are typical of Shakespeare’s heroines—it is no surprise that she emerges as the antidote to Shylock’s malice. At the beginning of the play, however, we do not see Portia’s potential for initiative and resourcefulness, as she is a near prisoner, feeling herself absolutely bound to follow her father’s dying wishes. This opening appearance, however, proves to be a revealing introduction to Portia, who emerges as that rarest of combinations—a free spirit who abides rigidly by rules. Rather than ignoring the stipulations of her father’s will, she watches a stream of suitors pass her by, happy to see these particular suitors go, but sad that she has no choice in the matter. When Bassanio arrives, however, Portia proves herself to be highly resourceful, begging the man she loves to stay a while before picking a chest, and finding loopholes in the will’s provision that we never thought possible. Also, in her defeat of Shylock Portia prevails by applying a more rigid standard than Shylock himself, agreeing that his contract very much entitles him to his pound of flesh, but adding that it does not allow for any loss of blood. Anybody can break the rules, but Portia’s effectiveness comes from her ability to make the law work for her.

Portia rejects the stuffiness that rigid adherence to the law might otherwise suggest. In her courtroom appearance, she vigorously applies the law, but still flouts convention by appearing disguised as a man. After depriving Bassanio of his ring, she stops the prank before it goes to far, but still takes it far enough to berate Bassanio and Gratiano for their callousness, and she even insinuates that she has been unfaithful.

**Antonio**

Although the play’s title refers to him, Antonio is a rather lackluster character. He emerges in Act I, scene i as a hopeless depressive, someone who cannot name the source of his melancholy and who, throughout the course of the play, devolves into a self-pitying lump, unable to muster the energy required to defend himself against execution. Antonio never names the cause of his melancholy, but the evidence seems to point to his being in love, despite his denial of this idea in Act I, scene i. The most likely object of his affection is Bassanio, who takes full advantage of the merchant. Antonio has risked the entirety of his fortune on overseas trading ventures, yet he agrees to guarantee the potentially lethal loan Bassanio secures from Shylock.

Antonio ends the play as happily as he can, restored to wealth even if not delivered into love. Without a mate, he will likely return to his favorite pastime of moping about the streets of Venice (IV.i.113). After all, he has effectively disabled himself from pursuing his other hobby—abusing Shylock—by insisting that the Jew convert to Christianity. Although a sixteenth-century audience might have seen this demand as merciful, as Shylock is saving himself from eternal damnation by converting, we are less likely to be convinced.

**Themes**

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

**Self-Interest Versus Love**

On the surface, the main difference between the Christian characters and Shylock appears to be that the Christian characters value human relationships over business ones, whereas Shylock is only interested in money. The Christian characters certainly view the matter this way. Merchants like Antonio lend money free of interest and put themselves at risk for those they love, whereas Shylock agonizes over the loss of his money and is reported to run through the streets crying, “O, my ducats! O, my daughter!” (II.viii.15). With these words, he apparently values his money at least as much as his daughter, suggesting that his greed outweighs his love. However, upon closer inspection, this supposed difference between Christian and Jew breaks down. When we see Shylock in Act III, scene i, he seems more hurt by the fact that his daughter sold a ring that was given to him by his dead wife before they were married than he is by the loss of the ring’s monetary value. Some human relationships do indeed matter to Shylock more than money. Moreover, his insistence that he have a pound of flesh rather than any amount of money shows that his resentment is much stronger than his greed.

Just as Shylock’s character seems hard to pin down, the Christian characters also present an inconsistent picture. Though Portia and Bassanio come to love one another, Bassanio seeks her hand in the first place because he is monstrously in debt and needs her money. Bassanio even asks Antonio to look at the money he lends Bassanio as an investment, though Antonio insists that he lends him the money solely out of love. In other words, Bassanio is anxious to view his relationship with Antonio as a matter of business rather than of love. Finally, Shylock eloquently argues that Jews are human beings just as Christians are, but Christians such as Antonio hate Jews simply because they are Jews. Thus, while the Christian characters may talk more about mercy, love, and charity, they are not always consistent in how they display these qualities.

**The Divine Quality of Mercy**

The conflict between Shylock and the Christian characters comes to a head over the issue of mercy. The other characters acknowledge that the law is on Shylock’s side, but they all expect him to show mercy, which he refuses to do. When, during the trial, Shylock asks Portia what could possibly compel him to be merciful, Portia’s long reply, beginning with the words, “The quality of mercy is not strained,” clarifies what is at stake in the argument (IV.i.179). Human beings should be merciful because God is merciful: mercy is an attribute of God himself and therefore greater than power, majesty, or law.

The strictures of Renaissance drama demanded that Shylock be a villain, and, as such, patently unable to show even a drop of compassion for his enemy. A sixteenth-century audience would not expect Shylock to exercise mercy—therefore, it is up to the Christians to do so. Once she has turned Shylock’s greatest weapon—the law—against him, Portia has the opportunity to give freely of the mercy for which she so beautifully advocates. Instead, she backs Shylock into a corner, where she strips him of his bond, his estate, and his dignity, forcing him to kneel and beg for mercy. Given that Antonio decides not to seize Shylock’s goods as punishment for conspiring against him, we might consider Antonio to be merciful. But we may also question whether it is merciful to return to Shylock half of his goods, only to take away his religion and his profession. By forcing Shylock to convert, Antonio disables him from practicing usury, which, according to Shylock’s reports, was Antonio’s primary reason for berating and spitting on him in public. Antonio’s compassion, then, seems to stem as much from self-interest as from concern for his fellow man. Mercy, as delivered in *The Merchant of Venice,* never manages to be as sweet, selfless, or full of grace as Portia presents it.

Appearance versus reality: view class notes