

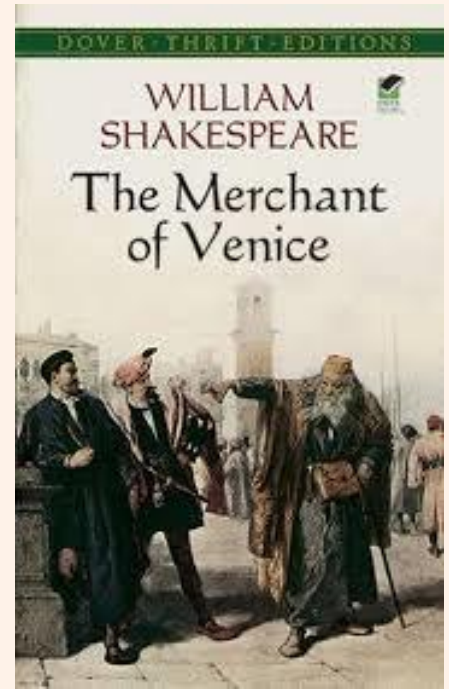
The Merchant of Venice

The Merchant of Venice is a 16th-century play written by William Shakespeare in which a merchant in Venice named Antonio defaults (προκαθορίζει) on a large loan provided by a Jewish moneylender, Shylock. Although classified as a comedy the play is most remembered for its dramatic scenes, and it is best known for Shylock and his famous "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech on humanity. Also notable is Portia's speech about "the quality of mercy".

Plot Analysis

The Merchant of Venice is essentially a play about property: in telling the story of a merchant who treats his own flesh as property to secure a loan, and the moneylender who calls in the debt, the play asks questions about the value of life itself. Throughout the play, tangible objects such as rings and caskets stand in for intangible ideas about love and fidelity. A test where three suitors (μνηστήρες) must choose between silver, lead, and gold caskets functions to remind audiences that "all that glisters isn't gold," and the true value of life has no financial equivalent. However, money plays a significant role for most of the characters, for whom financial security equals independence. Language about penalties adds to the sense of life reduced to commercial transactions. The fact that the most avaricious (φιλάργυρος), greedy character in the play ends up having lost both his physical wealth as well as his daughter and his religion warn against the dangers of excessive greed. While the play culminates in a trial scene, Portia's soliloquy (monologue) suggests that mercy, or forgiveness, is ultimately more important than legal justice.

The major conflict driving the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* takes place between Bassanio, who wants to marry Portia to gain the financial means to pay back his debt to Antonio, and Shylock, who wants revenge on Antonio for lending money without interest and for his anti-Semitic insults. Shylock's desire for revenge on Antonio implies a deeper desire to defend his humanity and his way of life. During the play's inciting incident, Bassanio uses Antonio's credit to secure a loan from Shylock, binding Antonio to Shylock and



making their final confrontation inevitable. While the couples in the play end up happy, Shylock's punishment seems neither merciful nor just. Not only is he unable to collect the money he is rightfully owed by Bassanio, he loses the rest of his wealth, his daughter, and his Jewish faith. While Shakespeare's contemporaries would have seen Shylock's conversion to Christianity as a victory for his immortal soul, Shylock's forced conversion is shockingly anti-Semitic and unjust to modern readers.

Themes

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!". 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. Human beings should be merciful because God is merciful: mercy is an attribute of God himself and therefore greater than power, majesty, or law.

Renaissance drama demanded that Shylock be a villain, and, as such, 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.

Hatred as a Cyclical Phenomenon

Throughout the play, Shylock claims that he is simply applying the lessons taught to him by his Christian neighbors; this claim becomes an integral part of both his character and his argument in court. In Shylock's very first appearance, as he conspires to harm Antonio, his entire plan seems to be born of the insults and injuries Antonio has inflicted upon him in the past. As the play continues, and Shylock unveils more of his reasoning, the same idea rears its head over and over—he is simply applying what years of abuse have taught him. Responding to Salarino's query of what good the pound of flesh will do him, Shylock responds, "The villainy you teach me I will execute".

Friendship

The theme of friendship drives most of the action in *The Merchant of Venice*. Bassanio needs money and turns to Antonio, who has already offered him substantial financial support in the past. Antonio immediately and unquestioningly agrees to do whatever he can to help his friend, including offering a pound of his own flesh to Shylock if he defaults on the loan. Antonio never rebukes Bassanio for leading him into the situation that later threatens his life. Instead, Antonio repeatedly says that he is happy to die for the sake of his friend. Thus, the play depicts friendship as one of the most intense and important emotional bonds humans can experience and suggests that the bond of friendship between Antonio and Bassanio may even run deeper than romantic love.

Wealth

The Merchant of Venice highlights the complexities of wealth. Several wealthy characters are depicted as unhappy despite their vast fortunes. At the beginning of the play, Antonio is a prosperous merchant, but he still suffers from a sense of melancholy. He cannot figure out why he is so miserable. The uneven distribution of wealth causes problems for several characters. While money is depicted as a source of greed and dissatisfaction, the play also asserts that wealth gives individuals freedom and power. At the end of the play, the redistribution of wealth functions as both a punishment and reward.

Prejudice

Prejudice is a force that creates barriers and divisions between the people of Venice. As a Jewish man, Shylock deeply disdains Christians. When he first appears in the play, Shylock describes his feelings about Antonio, saying, "I hate him for he is a Christian". Shylock continuously refers to his animosity toward Christians, such as when he warns Jessica to shut up the house because he does not trust "the Christian fools with varnished faces". Shylock's strong prejudice against Christians is one reason Jessica runs away to be

with Lorenzo, which permanently destroys the relationship between father and daughter. For his part, Shylock sees his daughter's choice to marry a Christian as the ultimate betrayal.

The Christian characters show deep prejudice toward Shylock because of his Jewish identity. After Antonio's failure to repay his loan, many characters prejudicially link Shylock's Jewish identity to his refusal to compromise or show mercy, and Antonio's insistence that Shylock convert to Christianity indicates a desire to undermine Shylock's identity. While anti-Semitism is the most apparent type of prejudice in the play, many characters are also prejudiced against outsiders and anyone who is different than them. After the dark-skinned Moroccan prince fails to solve the casket riddle, Portia responds with relief by saying, "Let all of his complexion choose me so". She does not want anyone who looks like him to correctly solve the riddle and win her hand in marriage, indicating her deep-seated prejudice against people who look different from herself.

Revenge

Revenge is a powerful, corrupting, and destructive force in the play. Shylock wants to hurt Antonio because of Shylock's desire for revenge against the entire Christian community, which he blames for persecuting and degrading him and also for stealing his daughter and the money she took when she ran away. Shylock explains why he feels justified in seeking revenge: "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?". The lines indicate that Shylock feels he has been wronged by Christians and is entitled to seek revenge in response to their dehumanization. He views this revenge as a natural human response to mistreatment. Because of his desire for revenge, Shylock will not consider altering the conditions of Antonio's bond in any way. Ironically, his insistence on the exact nature of the law being enacted is what leads to his downfall when Portia finds a legal loophole and then uses the same law to condemn him. Shylock's desire for revenge makes him behave in an emotional rather than a logical way, and he ends up losing everything as a result.

Quiz

1. What reason does Antonio give for being sad in the opening scene of the play?
 - a) He stands to lose a fortune in his present business ventures.
 - b) He owes a fantastic sum of money to Shylock.
 - c) He gives no reason.
 - d) The woman he loves does not return his feelings.
2. From what character flaw does Bassanio believe Gratiano suffers?
 - a) Mean-spiritedness
 - b) A lack of depth
 - c) Stinginess
 - d) Vanity
3. The caskets that Portia's suitors must pick from are made of what materials?
 - a) Gold, silver, lead
 - b) Teak, mahogany, pine
 - c) Bone, porcelain, clay
 - d) Marble, stone, brick
4. Which of the following is not a reason Shylock gives for hating Antonio?
 - a) Antonio is in love with Shylock's daughter, Jessica.
 - b) Antonio has insulted Shylock in the past.
 - c) Antonio lends money without interest, which damages Shylock's business.
 - d) Antonio hates Jews.
5. How does Shylock initially describe his demand for a pound of flesh to Bassanio and Antonio?
 - a) As an opportunity for revenge
 - b) As his way of being charitable
 - c) As a harmless prank
6. Why does the prince of Morocco fear that Portia will dislike him?
 - a) He is a braggart [καυχήσιάρης/ a person who boasts about their achievements or possessions.].
 - b) He has a dark complexion.
 - c) He recently proved a coward in battle.
 - d) His clothes are flamboyant [επιδεικτικός].

7. Whom does Bassanio agree to bring with him to Belmont?

- a) Old Gobbo
- b) Gratiano
- c) Antonio
- d) Jessica

8. What act does Jessica believe will solve the misery of life with Shylock?

- a) Becoming a more devout [ευσεβής] Jew
- b) Ensuring that Shylock loses his bond to Antonio
- c) Locking herself in her room
- d) Marrying Lorenzo

9. According to Lorenzo's plan, how will Jessica escape from her father's house?

- a) She will disguise herself as Lorenzo's torchbearer and slip out undetected.
- b) She will leave during the night, while Shylock is asleep.
- c) She will take her father to a large public auction and get lost in the crowd.
- d) She will fake her own death.

10. How does Shylock react to losing Launcelot as a servant?

- a) He weeps in private
- b) He tells Launcelot that Bassanio will be a harder master
- c) He beats Launcelot with a stick
- d) He refuses to pay Launcelot the wages he owes him

11. How does Portia react to the prince of Morocco's failure as a suitor?

- a) She prays that no one with such dark skin ever wins her hand.
- b) She is relieved because the quick-tempered prince would not have made a stable husband.
- c) She is sad to lose such a wealthy suitor.
- d) She laughs at his foolishness and sends him away.

12. Who loses the opportunity to marry Portia by choosing the silver casket?

- a) The Jew of Malta
- b) The prince of Arragon
- c) The duke of Earl
- d) The viscount[υποκόμης] of Normandy

13. According to Tubal's report, for what did Jessica trade Shylock's most precious ring?

- a) A gondola
- b) A horse for Bassanio
- c) A christening gown for her first child
- d) A monkey

14. What course of action does Portia suggest when she learns that Shylock wishes to collect his pound of flesh?

- a) That Bassanio and his men disguise themselves and usher Antonio a safe distance away from Venice
- b) That the matter be dealt with in a court of law
- c) That Jessica plead with her father for mercy
- d) That the bond be paid many times over

15. Where does Portia instruct her servant Balthasar to hurry?

- a) To an apothecary
- b) To Padua to visit Doctor Bellario
- c) To Morocco
- d) To Shylock's house

16. What complaint does Launcelot make regarding the conversion of the Jews?

- a) He says there would be no one left to loan money.
- b) He says the garment industry would suffer.
- c) He says that the price of bacon would soar.
- d) He says the Catholic Church would be unable to handle so many conversions.

17. In court, how does Antonio react to Shylock's insistence on collecting his pound of flesh?

- a) He weeps openly.
- b) He vows that he will meet Shylock's hatred with patience.
- c) He curses Shylock's vengefulness.
- d) He makes an impassioned plea to the court to intervene on his behalf.

18. Who enters the court disguised as a young doctor of Law named Balthasar?

- a) Portia
- b) Nerissa
- c) Jessica
- d) Lorenzo

19. What loophole in Shylock's bond allows Portia to stop him from taking a pound of Antonio's flesh?

- a) Jewish law prohibits Shylock from practicing his trade on the Sabbath.
- b) Shylock is entitled only to flesh, but not blood.
- c) Shylock forgot to sign the bond.
- d) There is no hard evidence that Antonio's ships have sunk, and that he cannot pay the bond.

20. How is Shylock punished for seeking to take Antonio's life?

- a) He is banished.
- b) He is ordered to surrender all his property to the Church of Rome.
- c) He must convert to Christianity and will his possessions to Jessica and Lorenzo upon his death.
- d) He must work as Antonio's servant for the remainder of his life.

21. What words does Shylock utter after accepting the court's sentence?

- a) A pox (ευλογία) upon Venice
- b) These are most unlawful laws
- c) Forgive me my sins
- d) I am not well

22. What does Bassanio offer the young law clerk who saves Antonio?

- a) His gloves
- b) His wife
- c) The ring that Portia gave him
- d) The three thousand ducats originally due to Shylock

23. What does Lorenzo order when he learns that Portia is on her way to Belmont?

- a) A banquet to welcome the lady of the house
- b) Music
- c) A ring to match the one she once gave to Bassanio
- d) Flowers

24. What does Portia vow to do when she learns that Bassanio no longer has the ring she gave him?

- a) Never again speak to her husband
- b) Deny her husband children
- c) Leave her husband
- d) Make her husband a cuckold

25. What news does Antonio receive at the play's end?

- a) Shylock has killed himself.
- b) Some of the ships he supposed were lost have arrived in port.
- c) The duke of Venice has changed his mind and finds Antonio guilty of forfeiture of Shylock's bond.
- d) His long lost brother has been found.

Ο Μπασάνιο, ένας νεαρός από τη Βενετία, θέλει να ταξιδέψει στο Μπελμόντε για να πολιορκήσει την όμορφη και πλούσια κληρονόμο Πόρσια. Γι' αυτό ζητά βοήθεια από το φίλο του, τον έμπορο Αντόνιο, προκειμένου να του δώσει 3000 δουκάτα για τα έξοδα του ταξιδιού του για 3 μήνες. Καθώς όλα τα πλοία του Αντόνιο δεν έχουν ακόμα ολοκληρώσει τα ταξίδια τους στη θάλασσα, ζητά δάνειο από τον Εβραίο τοκογλύφο Σάιλοκ. Καθώς ο Αντόνιο είχε καταφερθεί εναντίον του, κακόβουλα ο Σάιλοκ προτείνει τον εξής όρο στο συμβόλαιο: αν ο έμπορος Αντόνιο αδυνατεί να ξοφλήσει το δάνειό του μέσα στον ορισμένο χρόνο, ο Σάιλοκ θα πάρει μια λίβρα σάρκας από οποιοδήποτε μέρος του σώματός του. Ο Αντόνιο, έκπληκτος από τη "γενναιοδωρία" του Σάιλοκ που δε ζητεί χρήματα ως αντάλλαγμα, αποδέχεται τον όρο κι έτσι ο Μπασάνιο, μαζί με το φίλο του, Γκρατσιάνο, φεύγουν για το Μπελμόντε.

Στο Μπελμόντε, η Πόρσια πολιορκείται από μνηστήρες. Στη διαθήκη, όμως, που άφησε ο πατέρας της, έχει ως όρο ότι όλοι οι μνηστήρες θα πρέπει να διαλέξουν ένα από τρία κουτιά: ένα χρυσό, ένα ασημένιο κι ένα από μολύβι. Ένα από τα τρία περιέχει ένα μικρό πορτρέτο της Πόρσια κι αυτός που θα το βρει θα την κερδίσει. Μετά από δυο αποτυχημένες προσπάθειες από τους Πρίγκιπες του Μαρόκου και της Αραγωνίας, ο Μπασάνιο διαλέγει το μολυβένιο κουτί και κερδίζει την Πόρσια. Τα άλλα δυο κουτιά περιέχουν περιπαικτικούς στίχους: από εδώ προέρχεται κι η γνωστή φράση "Ό,τι λάμπει δεν είναι χρυσός".

Στη Βενετία, μαθαίνεται πως όλα τα καράβια του έμπορου Αντόνιο έχουν χαθεί στη θάλασσα κι έτσι αδυνατεί να ξεπληρώσει το δάνειο. Ο Σάιλοκ βάζει να συλλάβουν τον Αντόνιο, αποφασισμένος να πάρει εκδίκηση από τους Χριστιανούς, καθώς η κόρη του, Τζέσικα, κλέφτηκε με το νεαρό Λορέντζο κι έγινε Χριστιανή. Τα νέα φτάνουν στο Μπελμόντε, όπου οι δυο νιόπαντροι φίλοι, Μπασάνιο και Γκρατσιάνο, επιστρέφουν εσπευσμένα στη Βενετία, ενώ οι σύζυγοί τους, Πόρσια και Νερίσσα, αποφασίζουν να συμβουλευτούν το δικηγόρο Μπελάρियो, ξάδερφο της Πόρσια στην Πάδοβα.

Η δραματική κορύφωση του έργου πραγματοποιείται στο δικαστήριο του Δόγη της Βενετίας. Ο Αντόνιο προσφέρεται να αποζημιώσει το Σάιλοκ με τα διπλά χρήματα (6000 δουκάτα), αλλά ο τοκογλύφος επιμένει κι απαιτεί μια λίβρα σάρκας από τον έμπορο. Ο Δούκας συμβουλεύεται τον Μπαλτάσαρ, έναν νεαρό μελετητή του νόμου, που έχει καταφτάσει με το βοηθό του, που δεν είναι παρά η Πόρσια κι η Νερίσσα μεταμφιεσμένες. Η Πόρσια ζητά από το Σάιλοκ να δείξει έλεος, αλλά εκείνος αρνείται, οπότε το δικαστήριο του επιτρέπει να πάρει αυτό που ζητά από τον Αντόνιο.

Την τελευταία στιγμή, η Πόρσια αναδεικνύει μια λεπτομέρεια: ο όρος έλεγε να αφαιρεθεί μια λίβρα σάρκας, άρα όχι αίμα. Αν ο Σάιλοκ έχανε αίμα του Αντόνιο, όλη η περιουσία του θα κατασχόταν. Ηττημένος, ο Σάιλοκ αποδέχεται την πληρωμή του με χρήματα, αλλά η Πόρσια αναφέρει ότι η περιουσία του πρέπει να κατασχεθεί, μισή από την κυβέρνηση και μισή από τον έμπορο Αντόνιο, επειδή αποπειράθηκε να αφαιρέσει τη ζωή ενός πολίτη. Ο Δούκας χαρίζει τη ζωή στο Σάιλοκ κι ο Αντόνιο παραχωρεί το μερίδιό του στο Λορέντζο και τη Τζέσικα, ενώ με παρέμβασή του, ο Δούκας υπόσχεται να παραχωρήσει το μισό της περιουσίας του στο Σάιλοκ, αν γίνει Χριστιανός.