

The Merchant of Venice

When the play opens, Antonio, the merchant in the title, is complaining to friends that he feels miserable but doesn't know why. Trade is good, he isn't crossed in love, yet their attempts to cheer him up fail. His greatest friend, Bassanio, asks to borrow money so he can court the beautiful (and rich) Portia who lives in Belmont. Antonio has no ready cash as all his ships are at sea but as they are due home soon, he agrees to borrow 3,000 ducats to help his friend.

Portia's father has left a peculiar will to ensure his daughter marries a suitable man. Suitors are asked to choose one of three caskets, gold, silver or lead, each of which has an inscription. The man who chooses the right casket will find Portia's portrait inside and can then claim her as his wife. Many men have been to woo her but so far have turned back when told of the task. She and her maid/friend Nerissa discuss those who have so far been, all of whom were loathsome. Nerissa reminds Portia of the young Venetian, Bassanio, whom she has met in the past and Portia wishes she could find a man like him.

Bassanio and Antonio approach Shylock, a wealthy Jewish money-lender (a usurer) to borrow the money. Antonio hates him and has abused him in the past and Shylock, in return, hates Antonio and indeed all Christians who have made his life a misery. He agrees to lend the money for three months, on the understanding that if it is not paid back then Antonio must forfeit a pound of flesh nearest the heart. Antonio agrees, confident that his ships will be home well before then.

The Prince of Morocco visits Portia and chooses the gold casket - the wrong one

Lancelot Gobbo, a clown and a servant of Shylock, announces to his father, Old Gobbo, that he will no longer serve the Jew but will transfer his allegiance to Bassanio. Another of the group of Venetian Christian friends, Gratiano, tells Bassanio he wants to accompany him to Belmont and Bassanio agrees as long as Gratiano promises to behave himself and be a bit less rowdy than normal. (Gratiano is a loudmouthed, racist bully and it seems odd that the play should end happily for him.)

Jessica, Shylock's daughter, hates her father and is conducting an illicit affair with another of Antonio's friends, Lorenzo. She intends to escape from her father's house and marry him, converting to Christianity. Lancelot Gobbo is used as a go-between.

Shylock is invited to a masqued supper with Bassanio and friends to seal the bond for the money. He gives Jessica instructions that she is to mind the house. She sneaks out, dressed as a boy and elopes with Lorenzo taking with her money and jewels belonging to her father, some of which are of sentimental value. Shylock's response, according to yet two more of the Venetian clique, Salerio and Solanio, is to complain more about the loss of his money and jewels than his daughter.

Meanwhile, the Prince of Arragon comes to try his luck with Portia but he too chooses the wrong casket - the silver one.

Salerio and Solanio discuss Antonio's bad luck - one of his ships has been wrecked. Shylock enters and is delighted at the news - he wants his pound of flesh in revenge for all the insults he has suffered. He gives a moving speech in which he catalogues all that Antonio has done to him in the past.

Bassanio and Gratiano arrive in Belmont and Bassanio (but of course) chooses the right casket - the lead one. Portia is delighted and so is Gratiano who has fallen in love with Nerissa. They arrange to be married. Lorenzo and Jessica turn up with Salerio, who brings a letter to Bassanio from Antonio saying that all his ships have been wrecked and hoping to see him before he dies under Shylock's knife.

After the wedding, Bassanio and Gratiano sail for Venice to plead for their friend's life in court. Now he is married, Bassanio is wealthy and hopes to repay Shylock and save Antonio. When they leave, Portia and Nerissa tell Lorenzo they are going to a monastery until their husbands return but secretly they plan to dress as men and pretend to be a lawyer and his clerk at the court.

Act 4, Scene 1 takes place in the courtroom. The Duke of Venice exhorts Shylock to be merciful but he refuses. Bassanio offers 6,000 ducats but Shylock says he will have his pound of flesh no matter how much is offered. Gratiano abuses him verbally yet again. The Duke wants to put off judgement until he has heard from a learned friend of his to whom he has written for advice but he knows in his heart that the law of Venice must be seen to represent Jews as well as Christians if it is to be respected.

At this point Nerissa enters dressed as a lawyer's clerk with a letter from this learned friend praising the skills of a young lawyer Balthazar. (Portia) The Duke allows her to pass judgement. Portia implores Shylock to be merciful in a famous speech claiming that mercy is the greatest quality a man can possess. He remains unmoved. Portia has no option but to uphold the law and Shylock is delighted and praises the young lawyer fulsomely. At this point both Bassanio and Gratiano claim they would sacrifice their wives to save

Antonio, not realising that the aforesaid wives are listening!

Just as Shylock is about to claim his forfeit, having refused to let a doctor stand by, Portia stops him. She reminds him that the bond only claims a pound of flesh - that if he sheds so much as a drop of blood then his lands and money will have to be given up to the state. Shylock realises he is beaten and says he will take the money instead but Portia announces the punishment for threatening someone's life. Half his fortune must go to Antonio, the other half to the state and his life will be forfeit unless the Duke chooses to be merciful. The Duke does but only on condition that Shylock becomes a Christian. Antonio suggests that half the money should go to Jessica and Lorenzo. Shylock has no option but to agree and leaves the court a penniless and broken man.

As a reward for their services Portia and Nerissa will accept nothing but the rings given to Bassanio and Gratiano by their new wives. They reluctantly agree.

The final act takes place back in Belmont where Portia and Nerissa arrive just before their husbands and friends. There is a lot of humour over the 'missing' rings - both women insisting that they intend to sleep with the new owners. Eventually all is told. Jessica and Lorenzo are rich and Antonio finds out that some of his ships have not after all been wrecked so he too is still a wealthy man - but seems no happier than he was in the opening scene!