The Merchant of Venice: William Shakespeare

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Title of the play: The Merchant of Venice

Name of the playwright/ dramatist: William Shakespeare

Type of drama: Romantic Comedy/ Poetic drama

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THE MERCHANT OF VENICE: BRIEF INTRODUCTION

- *The Merchant of Venice* probably written in either 1596 or 1597, after *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard III*, but before the great tragedies

- Its basic plot outline is found in a number of contemporary Italian story collections -
  - the characters of the merchant
  - the poor suitor,
  - the fair lady, and
  - the villainous Jew -

- Shakespeare borrowed several details such as the choice of caskets

- Italian setting and marriage plot - typical of Shakespeare’s earlier comedies

- Play elevated to a new level because of -
  - the character of Portia, Shakespeare’s first great heroine, and
  - the unforgettable villain Shylock
Antonio, a Venetian merchant, complains to his friends of a melancholy that he cannot explain.

His friend Bassanio is needs money to go to Belmont to marry Portia, a wealthy heiress.

Bassanio asks Antonio for a loan.

Antonio unable to make the loan himself -
- His money invested in a number of trade ships that are still at sea.

suggests Bassanio to secure the loan from one of the city’s moneylenders and name Antonio as the loan’s guarantor.
At Belmont, Portia expresses sadness over the terms of her father’s will. According to the will:
- she must marry the man who correctly chooses one of three caskets.
None of Portia’s current suitors are to her liking.
- she and her lady-in-waiting, Nerissa, fondly remember a visit paid some time before by Bassanio.
Antonio and Bassanio approach Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, for a loan

Shylock has been nursing a grudge against Antonio for a long time, because:

- Antonio always criticised Shylock and other Jews
- Was against the practice of loaning money at very high rates of interest
- Affects their business by offering interest-free loans
- Has publicly insulted Shylock several times

Shylock offers to lend Bassanio three thousand ducats with no interest

Condition of the loan -
- Should the loan go unpaid, Shylock will be entitled to a pound of Antonio’s own flesh

Despite Bassanio’s warnings, Antonio signs the bond
Shylock’s servant Launcelot leaves Shylock to work for Bassanio
Shylock’s daughter Jessica elopes with Antonio’s friend Lorenzo
Shylock furious
But rejoices that Antonio’s ships are rumoured to have been wrecked - his chance to claim his debt
Bassanio and his friend Gratiano already left for Belmont
Meanwhile, in Belmont, Portia welcomes the prince of Morocco
The prince studies the inscriptions on the three caskets - chooses the gold one - wrong choice
**Plot: Bassanio Succeeds**

- The prince of Arragon picks the silver one - wrong choice
- Bassanio arrives at Portia’s estate
- They declare their love for each other
- Portia’s request to wait before choosing
- Bassanio immediately picks the correct casket - made of lead
- He and Portia rejoice
- Gratiano confesses to have fallen in love with Nerissa
decide on a double wedding
Portia gives Bassanio a ring as a token of love
makes him swear that under no circumstances will he part with it
Lorenzo and Jessica join them unexpectedly
The celebration is cut short -
  - the news that Antonio has indeed lost his ships
  - he has forfeited his bond to Shylock
Bassanio and Gratiano immediately rush to Venice
After their departure, Portia tells Nerissa that they will go to Venice disguised as men
Shylock ignores the pleas to spare Antonio’s life
a trial is called
The duke of Venice to presides over the trial -
sends for a legal expert -
Portia disguised as a young man of law comes as a substitute for that legal expert
Portia asks Shylock to show mercy
Shylock remains inflexible -
- insists the pound of flesh is rightfully his
Bassanio offers Shylock twice the money
Shylock insists on collecting the bond as it is written
Portia examines the contract
finds it legally binding
declares that Shylock is entitled to the merchant’s flesh
Shylock ecstatically praises her wisdom
proceeds to collect his due
Portia reminds him that he must do so without causing Antonio to bleed -
- the contract does not entitle him to any blood
Shylock trapped by this logic-
- hastily agrees to take Bassanio’s money instead
Portia denies: take your bond as written, or nothing at all
Portia’s verdict:
- Shylock guilty of conspiring against the life of a Venetian citizen -
- must turn over half of his property to the state and the other half to Antonio.
The duke spares Shylock’s life
accepts a fine instead of Shylock’s property
Antonio forgoes his half of Shylock’s wealth on two conditions:
  - first, Shylock must convert to Christianity
  - second, he must will the entirety of his estate to Lorenzo and Jessica upon his death
Shylock agrees and takes his leave
Bassanio does not recognise Portia
expresses his gratitude
eventually has to give Portia the ring with which he promised never to part
Gratiano has to give his ring to Nerissa, now disguised as Portia’s clerk
The two women return to Belmont -
- find Lorenzo and Jessica declaring their love to each other under the moonlight
Bassanio and Gratiano arrive the next day -
their wives accuse them of faithlessly giving their rings to other women
Portia reveals that she was the law clerk
she and Nerissa reconcile with their husbands
Lorenzo and Jessica are pleased to learn of their inheritance from Shylock
the joyful news of the safe arrival of Antonio’s ships
good fortune celebrated
true to the spirit of a romantic comedy, ends in happiness
contains all the elements of a Shakespearean comedy -
- Lovers pine and are reunited
- a foolish servant makes endless series of puns
- genteel women masquerade as men
All these - defining marks of Shakespearean comedy
Shylock and his quest for a pound of flesh provides a generous share of the tragic light language of the play’s comedic moments disappears for whole scenes at a time Antonio’s fate more suspenseful than funny The final act redeems the play’s claims to be a comedy - piling on the necessary humour and serendipity - rest of the play is overcast by the fear that Antonio may soon pay Bassanio’s debt with his life
Thank You!