On one level, *The Merchant of Venice* is as detached from reality as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the comedy that Shakespeare wrote immediately before it. A dead father's will requires his daughter to marry the suitor who chooses the correct casket, regardless of her feelings and his suitability. Yet the daughter is won by the very man she loves. A moneylender makes a merry bond with a merchant, calling for the forfeit of a pound of the latter's flesh if he does not repay a loan within three months, and the merchant, despite the reservations of his closest friend and the deep hostility between lender and borrower, signs it. All the merchant's ships miscarry, causing him to forfeit his bond, but a young woman disguises herself as a doctor of law to save him. In the last act, half his ships arrive in port safely.

*The Merchant of Venice* nonetheless feels a world away from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and fairyland. Many of Shakespeare's comedies steer uncomfortably close to tragedy: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* rewrites *Romeo and Juliet* in a major key but could easily repeat that tragedy; *Much Ado About Nothing* is *Othello* narrowly averted. *Merchant* sails even closer to tragedy, perhaps even crosses over into it. The anti-Semitism of the play's Christians, if not of the play itself, deprives Shylock of daughter, wealth, and identity. Nonetheless, there is something almost heroic about him. In Philip Larkin's novel *Jill* (1946), John Kemp, on his first night at Oxford, opens one of his roommate's notebooks and reads, "Thus we see that in creating the character of Shylock, Shakespeare's original intention was deflected, and instead of a comic moneylender, he produced a figure of tragic significance." Nor is Shylock the only sufferer. The title character, too, loses what is most dear to him, as Bassanio, for whom Antonio offers his life, leaves him for Portia. Jessica's happiness in her marriage remains questionable at the play's end.

Despite the play's ambiguities, it has enjoyed immense popularity in the classroom and on the stage. It was the first Shakespeare drama to be staged in America (Williamsburg, 1752), Japan, and China. Scholars say that it has generated more commentary than any other Shakespeare work except for *Hamlet*. However one understands the intended genre—the first printing of *Merchant* in 1600 calls it a history, not a comedy—the play transcends a love story with a happy ending to explore questions of prejudice and hatred, friendship and love, mercy and revenge, appearance and reality, and the corrupting power of money. Like all other great works of art, it challenges its audiences to rethink their assumptions, to reexamine their lives, and to hear the still, sad music of humanity playing even within a comedy.

**Background**

Many students reading about *The Merchant of Venice* are interested in the place of Jews in the English society of Shakespeare's time. The truth is that there were very few Jews in England then, but the idea of Jews and Jewishness seemed to have a hold on the Elizabethan imagination. In 1594, Dr. Rodrigo Lopez, a converted Portuguese Jew and physician to Queen Elizabeth, was executed on a trumped-up charge of plotting to poison her and Don Antonio Pérez, pretender to the Portuguese throne. This event was widely publicized and may well have helped prompt Shakespeare to write a Jewish play. Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton also wrote plays capitalizing on Lopez's notoriety. After Lopez was convicted, his estate was seized by the government. Elizabeth returned his property to his widow and five children, just as the Venetian duke waives the state's claim to Shylock's wealth in Shakespeare's play. Elizabeth kept only a ring that Lopez had received from the Spanish minister, another possible suggestion for the ring plot in *Merchant*. (For more information on Jews in English society, see the section on Difficulties of the Play. Also, James Shapiro's *Shakespeare and the Jews* [1996] provides a very interesting analysis of this subject).

Scholars have extensively explored the question of literary sources for the play, and some believe that an earlier play must have inspired it. In the case of *The Merchant of Venice*, three candidates for this role present themselves. In *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579) Stephen Gosson mentions the play *The Jew*, performed at the Bull, "representing the greediness of worldly chusers, and bloody mindes of usurers." Without excessive straining, one could apply the first phrase to the unsuccessful suitors who select the gold and silver caskets, the latter to Shylock's attempt on Antonio's life. Philip Henslowe's diary mentions, under the date of August 15, 1594, *The Venesyon Comedy*, and Thomas Dekker wrote a play entitled *The Jew of Venice* (date uncertain). All three of these works are lost, so it is impossible to determine how much Shakespeare drew from them.
Shakespeare also could have found the stories that make up *The Merchant of Venice* in a variety of sources other than those plays. Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone* (1378; printed in Italian in 1558, though not yet in English by the 1590s) consists of 50 stories divided into days, in the manner of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (ca. 1354). The first tale of the fourth day contains many of the key elements of Shakespeare's drama. In that narrative, Giannetto, left penniless by his father's will, goes to live with his godfather, Ansaldo, the richest merchant in Venice. Ansaldo furnishes Giannetto with a ship and cargo to trade at Alexandria. The young man sails into the harbor of Belmonte, where a beautiful widow offers to marry the man who can satisfy her in bed. If the man fails, his wealth is forfeit to her. Giannetto, though warned of the ill success of many others, resolves to win her. She feasts him and at night takes him into her bedroom, but her servant gives him drugged wine to drink. He sleeps through the night; the next morning, the widow claims his ship and its contents.

Back in Venice, Giannetto claims that he suffered shipwreck. Ansaldo furnishes him with a second vessel and goods. Again Giannetto sails to Belmonte, where he is once more feasted and then drugged, so that he loses his wealth again. Still undeterred, Giannetto goes back to Venice and desires a third ship. To equip this one, Ansaldo must borrow 10,000 ducats from a Jew, who stipulates that if the debt is not repaid by St. John's Day, the Jew can claim a pound of flesh from the merchant's body. As Giannetto departs, Ansaldo asks him to return even if his enterprise fails: "If I can see you once before I die, I can die willingly." Antonio echoes this sentiment when he declares, "Pray God Bassanio come / To see me pay his debt, and then I care not!" (3.3.35–36).

On this visit, Giannetto is warned by one of the maids not to drink the drugged wine. He satisfies the lady, and they wed. Giannetto then forgets about his godfather until he sees people going to church on St. John's Day. He grows sad, and when his wife asks the cause of his unhappiness, he tells her about the loan. She gives him 100,000 ducats to take to Venice and tells him to bring Ansaldo back to Belmonte with him if he can save the merchant. After Giannetto departs, his wife disguises herself as a lawyer and follows him, as Portia does in Shakespeare's play. As a lawyer, she also serves as judge.

The Jew refuses repayment, insisting on his pound of flesh. He and Giannetto appeal to the disguised judge for a verdict. She offers the Jew the 100,000 ducats, just as Portia at the trial repeatedly tries to get Shylock to accept repayment of his loan. Like Shylock, the Jew refuses. The judge then declares that the Jew is entitled to enforce his bond. As he prepares to carve out Ansaldo's flesh, she adds that if he spills a drop of blood or takes more or less than a pound of flesh, he dies. Portia relies on this same literalism, though she also introduces the law that condemns aliens for plotting against Venetians. The Jew now wants the 100,000 ducats, as Shylock tries to claim repayment once he learns he cannot shed blood. The judge and Portia both state that having refused the money earlier, he cannot claim it now. In *Il Pecorone*, the Jew tears his bond and leaves. He does not suffer the additional punishment inflicted on Shylock.

Giannetto offers the judge the 100,000 ducats he was going to pay the Jew, but she asks only for his wedding ring. Giannetto initially refuses to part with it because his wife will think he gave it to a lover. When the judge persists, he yields, just as Bassanio behaves in the play. The lady then returns to Belmonte ahead of her husband and Ansaldo. As Giannetto feared, his wife, seeing that he is not wearing his wedding ring, accuses him of giving it to some woman. They argue, and Giannetto begins to weep. She then produces the ring and explains her ruse. Portia does the same. Ansaldo marries the maid who warned Giannetto about the drugged wine, and everyone lives happily.

The lady's bed test for choosing a husband was not well-suited for the Elizabethan stage. Instead, Shakespeare required the suitors to choose the casket that contains Portia's picture. Such a procedure appears in story 32 of the *Gesta Romanorum* (ca. 1300; first printed in English by Wynkyn de Worde, 1510–15). To demonstrate her worthiness to marry the son of the Roman emperor, the daughter of the king of Naples must select from among three vessels. One, of gold, bears the inscription "They that choose me shall find in me that they deserve." Inside are bones. On the second, silver, vessel is carved "They that choose me shall find in me that nature and kind desire." The third vessel, made of lead, carries the motto "They that choose me shall find in me that God hath disposed." Inside this unpromising container are precious stones. The princess chooses the lead vessel and so wins the emperor's son.

Shakespeare used the same metals, though he reversed the inscriptions on the gold and silver caskets and changed the leaden one to read, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath" (2.7.16), emphasizing the play's theme of hazarding and giving. Shakespeare also altered the contents to pictures and poems. The 1595 edition of the *Gesta Romanorum*, in the English translation by Richard Robinson, states the motto on the leaden vessel was "insculped"; Shakespeare uses that word at 2.7.57, the only appearance of that word in his works.

Another possible source for the debate between Shylock and Portia in the trial scene (4.1) is Alexandre Sylvain's *Epitome de cent histories* (1581, translated into English as *The Orator* in 1596 by "L. P.," i.e., Lazarus Pyott, a pseudonym for Anthony Munday). As in *Il Pecorone*, a Christian merchant borrows money (900 ducats) from a Jew. If the loan is not
repaids in three months, the same period stipulated in *The Merchant of Venice*, the Jew can claim a pound of the merchant's flesh. The merchant defaults, the Jew claims the forfeit, and the judge rules that the Jew must take precisely a pound of flesh or he will die. The Jew protests this ruling as violating the principle of contracts. He grants that taking a pound of flesh is cruel, but worse are imprisonment or enslavement for debt, yet these are common practices. Shylock raises the issue of slavery at 4.1.90–98. Also, Sylvain's Jew maintains that the debtor is obliged to give him the pound of flesh; as creditor, he should not be responsible for taking it. The Christian's reply attacks Jews and asks for mercy but does not counter any of the Jew's arguments. Sylvain does not indicate which side prevails.

The late 13th-century *Cursor Mundi* also addresses such a bond between a Jew and a Christian. Denied his forfeit because he cannot shed any blood, the Jew curses the judges and then is condemned to death, as Shylock is. In *Cursor Mundi*, the Jew saves himself by showing Queen Helena the site of the true cross. The ballad of "Gernutus" again involves a bond between a Christian and Jew calling for the loss of a pound of flesh if the former fails to repay the latter. This poem may predate Shakespeare's play, but it might also be based on that work.

The subplot of Jessica's elopement probably derives from the 14th tale in Masuccio Salernitano's *Il Novellino* (1476; no English translation in the 16th century). Salernitano's name may have suggested Shakespeare's Salerio and Solanio as well. In Masuccio's tale, Giuffredi Saccano falls in love with Carmosina, daughter of a miserly merchant who keeps her imprisoned and treats her worse than a servant. At 2.3.2, Jessica complains, "Our house is hell," and Shylock in 2.5 instructs her not to look out the window at a masque. Saccano pretends to befriend the miser and insinuates a maid, Anna, into the man's house to abet Carmosina's flight, just as Launcelot Gobbo, Shylock's erstwhile servant, assists Lorenzo to secure Jessica. Carmosina escapes her father's house at night, taking 1,500 ducats with her, as Jessica steals money and jewels from Shylock when she flees with Lorenzo. In this story, the lovers eventually marry and Carmosina's father accepts the match. In Shakespeare's play, Shylock is compelled to make Jessica and Lorenzo his heirs.

Anthony Munday's *Zeleuto or the Fountaine of Fame* (1580) offers another version of the Jessica-Lorenzo story; his includes a trial as well. In this tale, Truculento, a Christian usurer of Verona, loves Rodolfo's sister, Cornelia. Rodolfo's friend Strabino also loves her. Rodolfo borrows money from Truculento and buys a jewel for his friend; Strabino gives the gem to Cornelia's father, who then allows Strabino and Cornelia to marry. Rodolfo marries Brisana, daughter of Truculento, who does not know of Rodolfo's plot. The young lovers have pledged their right eyes as well as their lands to obtain the loan from Truculento, who initially claims that he will never enforce the bond, just as Shylock says he has no desire for Antonio's flesh (1.3.160–168).

Once Truculento learns that he has been deceived, he changes his mind, just as Jessica's flight may prompt Shylock to turn the "merry bond" (1.3.173) into a serious one. The men fail to repay Truculento on time, so he insists on removing their eyes. Like Portia and Nerissa, the women disguise themselves as men and save their husbands by declaring that Truculento's contract does not allow the spilling of blood. Truculento had refused repayment and declared that he did not want their lands. Thwarted in his revenge, he, like Shylock, now asks for the money he earlier rejected but is denied. Shakespeare probably knew this story, since he apparently drew on it for *The Taming of the Shrew* (ca. 1594). In Masuccio's story, Strabino's father, Vincentio, has sent his son to Verona to further his education, just as in Shakespeare's comedy, Lucentio, son of Vincentio, has come to Padua to "institute / a course of learning and ingenious studies" (1.1.8–9).

Christopher Marlowe is Shakespeare's great precursor, and his shade haunts works from *Venus and Adonis* (1593) to *The Tempest* (1611). Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1592) suggested lines, situations, characters, and themes for Shakespeare's Jewish play. Barabas, Marlowe's title character, is both merchant and moneylender. Shakespeare divided these occupations between Antonio and Shylock, but the men remain two halves of a whole. When Barabas protests the confiscation of his wealth, a fate that also befalls Shylock, a Maltese knight justifies the action with pious protestations. Barabas retorts, "What, bring you Scripture to confirm your wrongs?" (1.2.111). Shakespeare turned this line into Antonio's "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose" (1.3.98). Barabas continues,

> Why, I esteem the injury far less,  
> To take the lives of miserable men  
> Than be the causers of their misery

by impoverishing them (1.2.147–149). Both Shylock (4.1.376–377) and Antonio (5.1.286) link life and livelihood.

In *The Jew of Malta*, to retrieve some of her father's money, Barabas's daughter, Abigail, gains entrance to his seized house and tosses down to him money, pearls, and jewels he had concealed there. In *Merchant*, Act II, Scene 6, Shylock's
daughter takes money and jewels from his house and tosses them down to her lover. Barabas praises Abigail: "O, my girl, / My gold, my fortune, my felicity, / ... O girl! O gold! O beauty! O my bliss" (2.1.46–47, 53). According to Solanio, when Shylock learns of his daughter's robbery and flight he laments, "My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter! / Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!" (2.8.15–16). Abigail of the Bible is the daughter of Jesse, whose name may have suggested Jessica. Both Barabas and Shylock want their daughters to marry a Jew, but both women fall in love with Christians, and both convert to Christianity. Lodowick, Abigail's lover, calls her "gentle" (2.3.317), and Lorenzo applies the same adjective to Jessica (2.4.19), in both cases punning on gentile.

Barabas says that in Florence, he learned to "Heave up my shoulders when they call me dog, / And duck as low as any bare-foot friar" (2.3.23–25). Shylock declares (1.3.109–110) that he has borne Antonio's calling him a dog and his other insults "with a patient shrug / (For suff'rance is the badge of all our tribe)." Barabas buys a skinny rather than a fat slave because he wants one who will not eat much. Shylock complains that Launcelot Gobbo is "a huge feeder" (2.5.46).

Barabas's slave Ithamore tells the courtesan Bellamira, "I'll be thy Jason, thou my golden fleece" (4.2.94). Bassanio compares Portia to the Golden Fleece (1.1.169–170), and after he and Gratiano win their ladies' hands, the latter exclaims, "We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece" (3.2.241). Barabas and Shylock dominate their respective plays, and while both are vengeful, they are also wronged. Both plays show the corrupting influence of money, and both reveal the truth of Barabas's accusation against the Christians:

> For I can see no fruits in all their faith,  
> But malice, falsehood, and excessive pride,  
> Which methinks fits not their profession.

(Merchant 1.1.114–116)

Murray J. Levith's "Shakespeare's Merchant and Marlowe's Other Play" (Mahon and Mahon: 95–106) sees parallels with Doctor Faustus (ca. 1588–92) as well. The Jew of Malta was revived in 1594 when Dr. Rodrigo Lopez was executed.

The commedia dell'arte could also have furnished hints for The Merchant of Venice. Pantaloon is a greedy Venetian householder with a large knife, greedy servants, and an errant daughter. In commedia dell'arte, Graziano is a stock figure, a physician usually in conflict with Pantaloon, as Gratiano sharply attacks Shylock. Like his commedia dell'arte counterpart, Shakespeare's Gratiano is presumptuous and garrulous. Sometimes in commedia dell'arte, the character is cuckolded, as Gratiano fears he has been (5.1.265).

Shakespeare's plays are replete with biblical allusions, none more so than The Merchant of Venice. The story that Shylock tells of Laban, Jacob, and the parti-colored sheep comes directly from Genesis 30:25–43. Shylock is well versed in the New Testament as well. He observes that Antonio resembles a publican (1.3.41) and refers to Jesus' driving devils into pigs (Mark 5:1–13; Merchant 1.3.33–35). Shylock's exclamation "My deeds upon my head!" (4.1.202) echoes Matthew 27:25, in which the Jews declare, "His blood be on us and on our children." Blind Gobbo's blessing his hairy son (2.2) derives from Isaac's blessing Jacob, again in Genesis. Jessica's claim that she will be saved through her husband (3.5.15–16) recalls 1 Corinthians 7.14. Portia's famous speech about mercy draws on the Sermon on the Mount, Daniel, and Ecclesiasticus. Antonio's statement "I hold the world but as the world" (1.1.77) alludes to Matthew 6:15–20, which is about laying up stores in heaven rather than on Earth. The poem inside the silver casket says that its metal has been tried in the fire seven times (2.9.63), a line based on Psalm 12:6.

**Date and Text of the Play**

The Stationers' Register, Register C, records the following entry for July 22, 1598, for James Roberts:

> Entred for his copie vnder the handes, of bothe the wardens, a booke of the Marcaunt of Venyce or otherwise called the Iewe of Venyce. Prouided that yt bee not printed by the said James Robertes; or anye whatsoeuer without lycence first had from the Right honorable the lord Chamberlen.

This may have been a blocking entry, intended to prevent piracy. Whatever the entry's intent, it shows that The Merchant of Venice had been written by 1598, and the title appears in the list of Shakespeare's comedies in Francis Meres's Palladis Tamia, printed a few months later. At 1.1.27, Salerio refers to a ship called the Andrew. In his June 1596 raid of Cadiz, the earl of Essex captured two Spanish galleons, the San Matias and the San Andrés, and brought both ships back to England. The latter vessel was renamed the Andrew. These references as well as the play's style indicate that Shakespeare composed the work between 1596 and 1598.
On October 28, 1600, Thomas Hayes placed the following entry in the Stationers' Register, Register C: "Entred for his copie vnder the handes of the Wardens & by Consent of mr Robertes. A boke called the boke of the merchant of Venyce." Roberts printed the text for Thomas Hayes (or Heyes), probably using either Shakespeare's foul papers or a scribal transcription of that original. An indication that the foul papers served as copy text is that in the speech prefixes, Shylock is sometimes named and sometimes listed as "Iew" (Jew). Launcelot's speech prefixes sometimes use his name and sometimes refer to him as "Clowne." Also, Shakespeare had not yet sorted out Antonio's two friends with the similar names, who at the beginning of Act I are listed as Salaryno and Salanio. Elsewhere, the latter is called Solanio, the former Salerio. In 1619, Thomas Pavier attempted to produce an unauthorized quarto edition of Shakespeare's plays. He printed 10 titles before he was caught and forced to stop; one of these was The Merchant of Venice, bearing the false imprint of 1600 and supposedly printed by J. Roberts. This second quarto edition of the play (Q2) was based on the 1600 quarto (Q1). The text that appears in the 1623 First Folio (F1) is also based on Q1. Neither quarto divides the play into acts or scenes. F1 added act divisions. The scene breaks were created by various 18th-century editors.

**Synopsis**

**Brief Synopsis**

The play unfolds over a period of three months. In the opening scene, Bassanio appeals to Antonio, a rich Venetian merchant, for a loan that will allow him to woo Portia, a rich heiress who lives in Belmont. If Bassanio gains her hand, he will be able to repay all the money he has previously borrowed from Antonio. Antonio replies that all his money is tied up in his business ventures abroad, but he will allow Bassanio to use his credit to raise the needed money.

The scene then shifts to Belmont, where Portia laments that she cannot choose her husband. Rather, she is bound by her dead father's will to wed the man who correctly guesses which one of three caskets contains her picture. Portia's lady-in-waiting, Nerissa, assures her that because her father was a religious man, the lottery he devised will ensure that Portia marries the man she loves.

Back in Venice, Bassanio and Antonio arrange for a loan of 3,000 ducats for three months from the Jewish moneylender Shylock. Rather than charging interest, Shylock states that as a jest, Antonio should agree to forfeit a pound of flesh if the loan is not repaid in the time stipulated. Bassanio urges Antonio not to sign such a bond, but Antonio replies that he will easily repay the money a month before it is due.

While the Prince of Morocco prepares to choose a casket at Belmont, in Venice Shylock's servant Launcelot Gobbo resolves to leave his old master and go to serve Bassanio, and Shylock's daughter, Jessica, prepares to elope with the Christian Lorenzo. That evening, disguised as a boy, she flees with her lover, as Bassanio and Gratiano set off for Portia's house. There, Morocco and then the Prince of Arragon choose the wrong casket, the former opting for the golden one, the latter for the silver.

Back in Venice, Shylock laments his daughter's flight and vows revenge on Antonio, whose ships have been reported lost. Unaware of his friend's plight, Bassanio in Belmont tells Portia of his love for her, and she expresses hers for him. He wins her by choosing the correct (lead) casket. Gratiano, who has accompanied Bassanio to Belmont, announces that he has won Nerissa's love as well. Each woman gives her fiancé a ring, which the men vow to keep as long they live. The lovers' celebration is cut short as Salerio arrives with news of Antonio's inability to repay Shylock. The merchant therefore faces death at the hand of his creditor. Portia tells Bassanio to marry her and then hasten to Venice with ample funds to repay Antonio's loan. She says that she and Nerissa will await the men's return.

Once Bassanio and Gratiano leave, Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves as men, Portia as a lawyer, Nerissa as her clerk, and travel to Venice. The women appear in court, where, through a legalistic ruse, Portia saves Antonio's life. Shylock is forced to convert to Christianity, make Lorenzo and Jessica his heirs, and surrender half his wealth to Antonio, who will use it in trust until Shylock's death, when that money, too, will go to Shylock's daughter and son-in-law. In payment for her services, Portia requests only Antonio's gloves and Bassanio's ring. Bassanio at first refuses her, but at Antonio's urging, he yields. Nerissa secures Gratiano's ring as well.

When Portia, Nerissa, Bassanio, Gratiano, and Antonio arrive at Belmont, the women accuse their husbands of giving their rings away to Venetian lovers. The men protest their innocence, but the women seemingly remain incredulous. The wives finally produce the rings, claiming that they received them for sleeping with the lawyer and his clerk. Portia soon
relieves the men's anxiety by revealing the truth, and she informs Antonio that three of his ships that were rumored lost have in fact come to harbor safely.

Act I, Scene 1

Antonio, the title character, enters in the midst of a conversation with Salerio and Solanio. Antonio observes that he does not know why he is sad. His two friends suggest that he is concerned about his business affairs. When Antonio rejects that suggestion, Solanio says that the merchant must be in love; Antonio dismisses the idea. Bassanio enters with Lorenzo and Gratiano; Salerio and Solanio depart. Gratiano comments on Antonio's melancholy appearance, which he, too, attributes to financial worries. To Antonio's denial, Gratiano responds that Antonio must then be sad by choice.

Lorenzo and Gratiano leave Antonio and Bassanio alone. The latter declares that he wants to wed Portia, an heiress in Belmont, but to woo her he needs to borrow money, since he squandered his estate as well as whatever Antonio had previously advanced him. He hopes Antonio will again be his creditor. Antonio replies that all his money is tied up in his business ventures abroad, but he will serve as surety for any loan Bassanio raises.

Act I, Scene 2

At Belmont, Portia, like Antonio, complains of her sadness. Portia, however, has a clear reason for her discontent. According to her dead father's will, she cannot choose a husband. Rather, she must wed whoever solves the riddle of the three caskets. One of these—the gold, the silver, or the lead—contains Portia's picture; he who guesses correctly, and only he, may marry her. Those who choose wrongly are sworn never to wed. Nerissa, Portia's attendant, assures her that her father's test will produce the right husband.

Nerissa then asks Portia's opinion of her current suitors. Portia responds with a satiric verbal portrait of each. Nerissa informs her lady that she need not fear having to marry any of them because they have all declined the test. Then Nerissa recalls Bassanio; both she and Portia remember him fondly. As the scene ends, four suitors depart, but a new one, the Prince of Morocco, arrives.

Act I, Scene 3

Bassanio asks Shylock for a loan of 3,000 ducats for three months; Antonio will guarantee repayment. As the merchant approaches, Shylock, in his only soliloquy, declares that he hates Antonio because the merchant is a Christian but even more because by borrowing money without interest, Antonio lessens Shylock's profits. Moreover, Antonio is anti-Semitic and publicly condemns Shylock's dealings.

Antonio states that though he never charges or pays interest, he will make an exception to help Bassanio. Shylock tries to justify his charging interest by citing the story in Genesis of Jacob, Laban, and the parti-colored sheep, but Antonio denies the relevance of that account. Asked again whether he will lend Antonio the money, Shylock recounts Antonio's numerous insults. Antonio remains impenitent. He tells Shylock to lend the money as to an enemy.

Shylock retorts that he wishes to befriend Antonio. Rather than charging interest, he will require only a "merry bond" (1.3.173), stipulating that if Antonio defaults on his loan, Shylock may take a pound of Antonio's flesh from any part of the merchant's body the lender chooses. Bassanio urges Antonio not to sign such a dangerous document, but Antonio reassures his friend that he will be able to repay the money well before it is due.

Act II, Scene 1

At Belmont, the Prince of Morocco urges Portia not to shun him because of his skin color. Portia replies that she does not judge by sight alone. Moreover, she must abide by the result of the casket lottery. Morocco wishes that he could win her through heroic action. She reminds him that there is only one way he can gain her hand; if he fails, he never can marry. He agrees to try his luck after dinner.

Act II, Scene 2
Act II, Scene 3

Jessica tells Launcelot that she will miss him. She hands him a letter for Lorenzo, with whom she plans to elope that night.

Act II, Scene 4

Lorenzo, Gratiano, Salerio, and Solanio plan a masque to entertain Bassanio and his dinner guests that evening. Launcelot appears and hands Lorenzo Jessica's letter. Lorenzo instructs Launcelot to reassure Jessica of his intention to come to her that night. Launcelot sets off on his errand, and Salerio and Solanio leave to prepare for the night's revelry. Lorenzo tells Gratiano of his plan to elope and gives his friend Jessica's letter to read as they exit.

Act II, Scene 5

In front of his house, Shylock warns Launcelot that his new master, Bassanio, will prove less generous than Shylock has been. As Shylock talks to his now former servant, he keeps calling for Jessica, who finally appears. He tells his daughter that Bassanio has invited him to dinner; he gives her his keys and orders her to lock up his house. When Launcelot promises Shylock a masque, he warns Jessica not to look out the window at the festivities. Launcelot whispers to Jessica that a Christian worth seeing will pass by. To Shylock's question of Launcelot's message to her, Jessica replies that he merely has said goodbye. When Launcelot leaves, Shylock expresses delight at having rid himself of his servant, who, Shylock says, is lazy and a big feeder. Now Launcelot will cost Bassanio some of his borrowed money. Shylock leaves, again telling Jessica to lock up his house. She bids him farewell and observes that she is about to lose a father, he a daughter.

Act II, Scene 6

In front of Shylock's house, Gratiano and Salerio await Lorenzo. When Lorenzo arrives, he calls to Jessica. Disguised as a boy, she appears on the balcony and asks who is summoning her. Lorenzo identifies himself. Does he love her, she asks. He assures her that he does; she responds by tossing him a casket filled with ducats. She then goes back inside to get more money from her father's store and lock up the house.

Lorenzo intends for Jessica to serve as a torchbearer in the masque to be presented at Bassanio's house, but Antonio arrives to inform the men that Bassanio is leaving for Belmont immediately. The masque, therefore, is canceled.

Act II, Scene 7

At Portia's house, Morocco confronts the three caskets. Twice he reads their inscriptions aloud before selecting the golden one. When he opens it, he finds the picture of a death's head and a poem telling him that he chose foolishly. He leaves, much to Portia's relief.

Act II, Scene 8

Back in Venice, Salerio and Solanio mockingly report Shylock's grief at the loss of his daughter and his money. Solanio comments that Antonio will suffer if he does not repay his loan in time. Salerio replies that a ship has foundered in the English Channel; he hopes this is not one of Antonio's. He then describes Antonio's affectionate parting with Bassanio. The two leave to comfort the merchant.
Act II, Scene 9
At Belmont, the Prince of Arragon is ready to select a casket. He reviews the rules: If he chooses wrongly, he must never reveal which casket he picked, never marry, and depart immediately. He reads the inscriptions aloud and then decides on the silver container. When he unlocks it, he finds a picture of an idiot and a poem calling him a fool. As soon as he departs, a messenger announces the arrival of a Venetian. Nerissa hopes the new suitor is Bassanio.

Act III, Scene 1
On a Venetian street, Solanio and Salerio discuss the loss of one of Antonio's ships. Shylock enters and accuses them of being party to his daughter's elopement. He then declares that Antonio should beware his bond. Salerio asks what good Antonio's flesh will do Shylock, who retorts that it will feed his revenge. He declares that Antonio has repeatedly insulted and hindered his moneymaking, and only because Shylock is Jewish. He then delivers his famous "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech (3.1.59–73), concluding that just as Christians avenge themselves on Jews who wrong them, he will avenge himself on Antonio. Tubal enters as Salerio and Solanio leave to join Antonio. Tubal has gone to Genoa in search of Jessica. He has heard about her but has not found her. He alternately reports on Jessica's extravagance, plunging Shylock into lament, and on Antonio's losses, which delight Shylock. Shylock instructs Tubal to hire a sherrif's officer to arrest Antonio for debt as soon as the bond falls due.

Act III, Scene 2
At Belmont, Portia confesses her love for Bassanio and urges him to put off choosing a casket, for if he chooses incorrectly, she will lose the pleasure of his company. Bassanio replies that delay is torture; he wants to learn his fate immediately. Portia orders music to be played, and someone sings a song about infatuation's originating in appearance. Bassanio recognizes that "The world is still deceived with ornament" (3.2.74) and so chooses the lead casket, which contains Portia's image and a poem praising his choice. The scroll instructs him to claim his bride with a kiss.

Bassanio asks Portia whether she truly is his. She responds that she and all she owns belong to him. To symbolize her gift, she gives him a ring. If he loses it or gives it away, she will know that he no longer loves her. He swears that only death can part him from her ring. Nerissa and Gratiano congratulate the happy couple. Then Gratiano asks permission to marry Portia's attendant.

Lorenzo, Jessica, and Salerio enter. Salerio gives Bassanio a letter from Antonio. Alarmed by Bassanio's reaction to the letter, Portia asks about its contents. He informs her of Antonio's bond. According to the letter, all of Antonio's ships have sunk. The loan is now due, and Shylock demands the forfeit. Jessica interjects that her father swore he would prefer Antonio's flesh to repayment of the loan 20 times over. Learning the sum owed, Portia instructs Bassanio to marry her and then hasten to Venice with ample money to cover Antonio's debt.

Act III, Scene 3
Antonio's jailor has allowed him out of prison to plead with Shylock, who remains obdurate. Solanio says that the duke will set aside the bond, but Antonio says that Venice is too dependent on foreign trade to abrogate a contract.

Act III, Scene 4
Lorenzo praises Portia for allowing Bassanio to return to Venice before consummating their marriage and assures her that Antonio merits her sacrifice. Portia replies that Antonio must resemble Bassanio, so she is rescuing one who is like her own soul. She then commits the management of her estate to Lorenzo. She and Nerissa, Portia claims, will go to a nearby monastery to pray. She dispatches her servant Balthazar to Padua to her cousin, Doctor Bellario, who will give him notes and clothes. Balthazar is to bring these to Portia, who will await him at the ferry to Venice. Alone with Nerissa, Portia says that they will disguise themselves as men and join their husbands.

Act III, Scene 5
In Belmont, Launcelot teases Jessica, saying she is damned because she is not a Christian. She replies that she will be saved through Lorenzo. Launcelot then blames her husband for converting her because increasing the number of Christians will raise the price of pork. Lorenzo enters, and Jessica repeats Launcelot’s comments. Lorenzo replies that the servant has impregnated a Moor. He instructs Launcelot to bid the servants prepare for dinner. After some verbal sparring, Launcelot leaves. Jessica praises Portia; Lorenzo praises himself, and the two go off to eat.

Act IV, Scene 1

In a Venetian courtroom, the duke expresses sympathy for Antonio, who says he is prepared to suffer the loss of his flesh. Shylock is summoned. When he appears, the duke tries to cajole him into abandoning his suit. Shylock refuses to relent. Bassanio offers to pay 6,000 ducats, but Shylock insists on the terms of his bond.

The duke now declares that he will adjourn the court unless Bellario, "a learned doctor" (4.1.105), appears to judge the case. At that moment, Salerio reports the arrival of a messenger from Padua. Bassanio tries to comfort Antonio, who again asserts his readiness to die. Disguised as a lawyer's clerk, Nerissa enters and hands the duke a letter. As the duke reads, Shylock sharpens his knife on the sole of his shoe. Gratiano curses Shylock; the moneylender remains impervious to Gratiano's railing.

The duke reads the letter aloud. It states that Bellario is too ill to attend the trial, but he is sending Balthazar (i.e., Portia dressed as a man) in his stead. Balthazar enters and declares that since Antonio's flesh is forfeit legally, Shylock must show mercy. When Shylock bristles at her "must," she responds with her famous "Quality of mercy" speech (4.1.184–202). Shylock, unmoved, rejects Bassanio's offer of twice the sum of the debt.

Portia twice offers Shylock 9,000 ducats, which he still refuses. She then asks Shylock to summon a physician to prevent Antonio's bleeding to death. Shylock replies that the contract does not mention a physician.

Antonio bids farewell to Bassanio, who says that he would sacrifice Portia to save his friend. Portia notes that his wife would not approve of that speech. Gratiano declares that he wishes his own wife were dead so she could intercede for Antonio in heaven. Nerissa retorts that if his wife heard him say so, an argument would ensue.

Shylock demands that Portia pronounce her judgment, and she grants him his pound of flesh. As he steps forward to claim it, she stops him: If he sheds any blood, his property will be forfeit to the state. He now asks for the 9,000 ducats instead. Bassanio begins to hand over the money, but Portia stops him. Shylock shall have only his bond. If he takes more or less than a pound of flesh, his life is forfeit and his goods will be confiscated. Shylock says he will settle for 3,000 ducats, but Portia maintains that he has publicly refused repayment.

Shylock abandons his suit and prepares to leave the court, but Portia has not finished with him. He is an alien, not a Venetian citizen. If an alien conspires against a Venetian, the plotter's life is forfeit; half his goods will go to the intended victim, and the other half belongs to the state. Shylock is subject to those penalties. The duke immediately pardons his life and offers to limit the state's claim to a fine. Antonio adds that he will keep his half to use during Shylock's lifetime; after Shylock's death, this money will go to Lorenzo and Jessica. Antonio also requires Shylock to convert to Christianity and draft a will leaving his estate to Jessica and Lorenzo. The duke declares that if Shylock refuses, he will be executed. Shylock yields to these terms and leaves.

Portia declines the duke's invitation to dinner and Bassanio's offer of 3,000 ducats as payment. When he insists that she take something for her efforts, she requests Antonio's gloves and Bassanio's wedding ring. Bassanio protests that he promised his wife never to part with it. Portia replies that she has well earned that ring but leaves without it. Antonio pleads with Bassanio to give away the ring, and Bassanio sends Gratiano to catch up with the "lawyer" and hand the ring to "him."

Act IV, Scene 2

Gratiano overtakes Portia and gives her the ring. In an aside to Portia, Nerissa says she will try to get her ring from Gratiano.

Act V, Scene 1
On a moonlit bank in front of Portia's house in Belmont, Lorenzo and Jessica converse. Messengers arrive to report the imminent return of Portia, Nerissa, and Bassanio, who promptly appear. Gratiano and Nerissa begin to quarrel about his missing ring. Portia sides with Nerissa, saying that Bassanio would never surrender the ring she gave him. Gratiano replies that Bassanio gave his ring to the judge who requested it. Portia feigns shock when Bassanio confesses. She declares that she never will sleep with him until he produces that token, and Nerissa says the same thing to Gratiano. When Bassanio pleads with his wife, she insists that he gave the ring to a lover. He maintains that the judge had it. In that case, Portia says, she will be as liberal as he. He gave the judge her ring; she will give him her body. Nerissa maintains that she will sleep with the lawyer's clerk who received her ring.

Bassanio begs forgiveness, and Antonio promises to stand pledge for his friend that he never will break another promise to Portia. Portia hands Antonio a ring to give to Bassanio, who should guard it more carefully than he did the last one. Receiving the token from Antonio, Bassanio recognizes it as the one he gave away. Portia says she recovered it by sleeping with the judge. Nerissa produces her ring, which she claims she got by sleeping with the clerk.

Gratiano is stunned to think that he and Bassanio have been cuckolded, but Portia discloses the ruse. She also informs Antonio that three of his ships have safely reached harbor. Nerissa hands Lorenzo Shylock's will, which bequeaths his estate to the young man and his bride. Portia summons everyone inside, where she will more fully explain the recent events. The play ends with a bawdy pun by Gratiano.

**Character List**

**Antonio** The melancholy merchant of Venice, Antonio is devoted to his friend Bassanio.

**Shylock** This rich Jewish moneylender bears a long-standing animosity against Antonio for the latter's harsh treatment of him.

**Bassanio** Of noble birth, Bassanio has squandered his fortune and much of Antonio's as well.

**Solanio** A friend of Antonio.

**Salerio** Another of Antonio's friends.

**Lorenzo** A friend of Antonio. He is in love with Jessica.

**Gratiano** Irrepressible, bawdy friend to Antonio and Bassanio.

**Tubal** Shylock's fellow Jew and confidant.

**Launcelot Gobbo** Shylock's servant and then Bassanio's. Launcelot enjoys teasing others.

**Old Gobbo** Launcelot's blind father.

**The Duke of Venice** A nominally powerful figure who possesses little true authority.


**Film and Video Productions**

Douglas, Morse, dir. *The Merchant of Venice*. With Tom Yarrow (Shylock), Ed Martineau (Bassanio), Patrick Werner (Antonio), Lizzy Carter (Portia), and Stephanie Bain (Jessica). Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 2009.


Hal, Burton, dir. *The Merchant of Venice*. With Michael Hordern (Shylock), Denis Quilley (Bassanio), Rachel Gurney (Portia), and Veronica Wells (Jessica). BBC, 1955.

Horrox, Alan, dir. *The Merchant of Venice*. With Bob Peck (Shylock), Benjamin Whitrow (Antonio), and Haydn Gwynne (Portia). Channel 4, 1996.


Radford, Michael, dir. *The Merchant of Venice*. With Al Pacino (Shylock), Joseph Fiennes (Bassanio), Jeremy Irons (Antonio), Lynn Collins (Portia), and Zuleikha Robinson (Jessica). Sony Pictures, 2004.

Sichel, John, dir. *The Merchant of Venice*. With Laurence Olivier (Shylock), Joan Plowright (Portia), Jeremy Brett (Bassanio), and Louise Purnell (Jessica). Associated Television, 1973.

———, dir. *The Merchant of Venice*. With Antony Holland (Shylock), Alan Gray (Bassanio), and Trish Grange (Portia). West Coast Actors Company, 1976.

Welles, Orson, dir. *The Merchant of Venice*. With Orson Welles (Shylock), Charles Gray (Antonio), and Irina Maleeva (Jessica). 1969.

**The Prince of Morocco** Moorish suitor of Portia; of noble mien.

**The Prince of Arragon** Another of Portia's suitors, overly certain of his own worth.

**Portia** Intelligent, independent heiress of Belmont.

**Nerissa** Portia's lady-in-waiting.

**Jessica** Shylock's daughter, who longs to escape from his control.


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