



The Merchant of Venice

KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

Context – The play was written by William Shakespeare at some point between 1596 and 1599.

Shakespeare's Time – Shakespeare wrote his plays at the time of two monarchs: **Queen Elizabeth I** and **King James I**. *The Merchant of Venice* was written fairly early in Shakespeare's career, during the relatively more optimistic years of Queen Elizabeth – this is when Shakespeare wrote the majority of his comedies, before the darker tragedies that he created during the reign of James I.



Elizabethan England and Italy – Shakespeare frequently engaged with Italy in his plays, leading many to believe that he travelled there between the late 1580s and early 1590s. Italy was a place that Shakespeare's contemporaries would have had a keen interest in; it was already an **advanced** and **beautiful** place for travel. Shakespeare's depictions of many areas of Italian life at the time are deemed largely accurate.



Religion – The heavy religious presence is evident across several parts of *The Merchant of Venice*. This is reflective of a society across Europe that was **deeply religious** (predominantly catholic or protestant). Several characters demonstrate their **commitment to Christian values**, such as Antonio, Bassanio, and Portia. Shylock (a Jew), however, is portrayed as the antagonist of the play. The traits that he demonstrates, such as being greedy, cold and selfish, were common stereotypes associated with Jews in Shakespeare's time. This has led a number of critics to label the play as being anti-Semitic. At the time, Shakespeare was writing, Jews had been banished for around 300 years. Shakespeare's audiences would have had little knowledge about people of the Jewish faith beyond prejudice and rumour. It is likely that they would not have questioned the cruel treatment of the outcast Shylock as people would today.



Patriarchal Society – Society throughout the Middle Age and at Shakespeare's time was **patriarchal** – women were considered inferior to men. This was also the case in much of Europe, including Italy. Women belonged to their fathers (or brothers if their fathers had died) and then their husbands, and so Portia, for example would have been expected to obey the commands of her father. Portia actually subverts many expected traits of women at the time. Women were expected to be passive and submissive, whereas Portia is autonomous and creative.



Sources – As with many of Shakespeare's plays, the basic plot outline is borrowed from preexisting texts. For example, the forfeit of a merchant's deadly bond was a common tale in England in the 16th Century. *Pecorone*, written by Giovanni Fiorentino in 1558, influenced a number of the same plot elements, for example the 'pound of flesh.'



Main Characters – Consider what Shakespeare intended through his characterisation of each of the below...

Shylock – Shylock is a Jewish money-lender in Venice, who acts as the play's main antagonist. He is angered by the treatment that he receives at the hands of Venice's Christians and seeks to exact his revenge through a bloodthirsty payment demand of a pound of Antonio's flesh. Although seen by other characters as an evil monster, Shylock does demonstrate a more human side on occasion. This enables the audience to view him as product of cruel circumstances.

Portia – Portia is a wealthy heiress from Belmont. She is considered extremely beautiful, and she is also exceptionally intelligent. She is bound by a will left by her father, which decrees that she may only marry a man who is able to choose correctly among three caskets. Whilst bound by the rigid nature of the will, Portia shows a sense of cunning and creativity in exploring loopholes in its stipulation. These skills are eventually used to save Antonio from Shylock's knife.

Quote: *'and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?'* (III.i)

Quote: *"The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven"* (IV.i)

Antonio – Antonio is the play's title character, who displays generosity to Bassanio. However, he remains passive and melancholy throughout, and the source of his sadness is never truly revealed. He is something of a hopeless depressive, unable to even generate the energy to defend himself against execution. He is also an anti-Semite, who enjoys mocking Shylock.

Bassanio – Bassanio is a close friend of Antonio, and a kinsman in Venice. He seeks to borrow money from Antonio in order to woo Portia. Whilst he enjoys a lavish lifestyle, he has poor financial control, and can make hasty choices. Whilst he is a poor businessman, he is a skilled and astute suitor, being Portia's only love interest to choose the correct casket.

Quote: *"Pray God Bassanio come / To see me pay his debt, and then I care not"* (III.iii)

Quote: *"To unburden all my plots and purposes How to get clear of all the debts I owe."* (I.i)

Jessica – Jessica is Shylock's daughter. However, she hates living in his house, and she turns her back on his strongly Jewish beliefs in order to elope with a Christian suitor: Lorenzo. She seems embarrassed to be related to her father. She sells off a valuable turquoise ring that her deceased mother had left to her father. Jessica associates her father's rude behaviour with his being Jewish, and so seems to eagerly anticipate becoming Christian.

Gratiano – Gratiano is a friend of Bassanio, and accompanies him to Belmont to woo Portia. Whilst Bassanio courts Portia, Gratiano meets and falls in love with her lady-in-waiting: Nerissa. Gratiano is an extremely coarse and loquacious character, as becomes clear when Bassanio needs to warn him of his conduct before they travel. Gratiano is an insulting critic of Shylock throughout the trial, reacting in horror to Shylock's lack of mercy and compassion.

Quote: *"Alack, what heinous sin is it in me To be ashamed to be my father's child?"* (II.iii)

Quote: *"The bargain of your faith, I do beseech you Even at that time I may be married too."* (III.ii)

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Love versus Material Wealth – The Christian characters are shown on the surface as valuing relationships over business ventures. For example, Bassanio seems to be careless with money, and yet his will to develop relationships with others (e.g. Portia and Antonio) leads to him becoming extremely rich by the end of the play. Characters who value money and profit over relationships, on the other hand, are seen as outcast and destitute. This is put forward as a Jewish trait. Shylock, for example, laments the loss of material wealth more than the loss of his daughter. This being said, he also rejects wealth in order to seek justice.



Marriage – Marriage in the play is associated with a number of different feelings and purposes, as opposed to simply romantic love. Marriage is the chance for Jessica to escape her unhappy household, for example, and provides Bassanio with the opportunity to gain vast material wealth. Marriage in the play is seen as a quest, a venture, in order to secure a better life.



Mercy versus Justice – The dispute between Shylock and the Christian characters reaches its climax over the issue of mercy. Whilst Shylock is legally correct, the others expect him to be merciful as this is seen as the way of God in Christianity. However, insists on getting his pound of flesh, as in his eyes this would ensure that he has justice for wrongdoings against him. In his eyes, this is a far more attractive proposition.

Scene-by-Scene Summary – Take note of the key quotations from each scene.

Act 1 Scene 1	Antonio discusses his sadness with Salanio and Salarino. He agrees to guarantee a loan for Bassanio so that he can woo Portia.	<i>In Belmont is a lady richly left, And she is fair, and, fairer than that word.</i>
Act 1 Scene 2	In Belmont, Portia laments the many men who have tried to marry her, who could not guess the correct of the 3 caskets (a clause in her father's will). She expresses admiration for Bassanio.	<i>Your father was ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspirations.</i>
Act 1 Scene 3	Bassanio loans the money from Shylock, a Jewish lender who hates Antonio. Although there is no interest, the late payment punishment would be a pound of Antonio's flesh.	<i>Express'd in the condition, let the forfeit Be nominated for an equal pound Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken</i>
Act 2 Scene 1	The Prince of Morocco wishes to marry Portia. Proclaiming his own bravery, he asks to be led to the three chests, even though he knows that if he is wrong, he can never marry.	<i>Mislike me not for my complexion, The shadowed livery of the burnished sun, To whom I am a neighbor, and near bred.</i>
Act 2 Scene 2	Launcelot and Gobbo, Shylock's servants, convince Bassanio to employ them. He agrees. Bassanio also agrees to allow Gratiano to accompany him to Belmont, provided he behaves himself.	<i>To be rul'd by my conscience, I should stay with the Jew my master... God bless the mark!, is a kind of devil; ...to run away from the Jew, I should be ruled by the fiend.</i>
Act 2 Scene 3	Shylock's daughter, Jessica, tearfully bids goodbye to Launcelot. She gives him a note for Lorenzo (Bassanio's friend). She wishes to marry him, leave her father, and convert to Christianity.	<i>Alack, what heinous sin is it in me To be ashamed to be my father's child?</i>
Act 2 Scene 4	Gratiano, Lorenzo, and others conspire to help Jessica escape.	<i>How I shall take her from her father's house,</i>
Act 2 Scene 5	Shylock warns Launcelot that Bassanio won't be as lenient as he. Feeling trouble brewing, he tells Jessica to keep the windows shut.	<i>What, Jessica!—Thou shalt not gormandize As thou hast done with me—what, Jessica!—</i>
Act 2 Scene 6	Jessica escapes, with the help of Gratiano, Salarino, and Lorenzo (who is late), taking with her a casket of Shylock's gold and jewels. Gratiano then leaves to set sail with Bassanio.	<i>Beshrew me but I love her heartily, For she is wise, if I can judge of her, And fair she is, if that mine eyes be true.</i>
Act 2 Scene 7	Back in Belmont, the prince chooses the gold casket - the wrong choice. Portia is glad to see him go.	<i>But here an angel in a golden bed Lies all within. Deliver me the key;</i>
Act 2 Scene 8	Solanio and Salarino recount Shylock's rage at finding his daughter and ducats gone. They hope that Antonio is able to pay his debt. They recall how Antonio would not let Bassanio think of debt or danger as he went to court Portia.	<i>"My daughter, O my ducats, O my daughter! Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats! Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter,"</i>
Act 2 Scene 9	The Prince of Arragon tries and fails to win marriage to Portia (selecting the silver casket). Bassanio arrives.	<i>Madam, there is alighted at your gate A young Venetian, one that comes before.</i>
Act 3 Scene 1	Shylock expresses his hatred of Antonio to Solanio and Salarino, and his desire to use the cruelty that Christianity has taught him. He is overjoyed to hear that Antonio's ships have been wrecked.	<i>I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?</i>
Act 3 Scene 2	Bassanio insists on choosing the casket. With a little hint here and there, he chooses the correct casket (the lead one). Nerissa and Gratiano admit that they too have fallen in love. Lorenzo and Jessica arrive with Salarino, who gives Bassanio a letter from Antonio, revealing his ships are ruined. Bassanio rushes to Verona to be with his friend, before Shylock gets his pound of flesh.	<i>What, no more? Pay him six thousand, and deface the bond. Double six thousand, and then treble that, Before a friend of this description For never shall you lie by Portia's side With an unquiet soul. You shall have gold To pay the petty debt twenty times over:</i>
Act 3 Scene 3	Shylock, throwing Antonio in jail, insists on his bond: 'a pound of flesh.' Antonio thinks Shylock's claim will be upheld by the Duke.	<i>I'll have my bond. Speak not against my bond. I have sworn an oath that I will have my bond.</i>
Act 3 Scene 4	Portia explains to Lorenzo how she and Nerissa will live in a monastery in a state of prayer until Bassanio returns. Secretly, however, she plots with her servant, Balthasar, to don men's clothes and pay an incognito visit to Verona.	<i>Of lineaments, of manners, and of spirit; Which makes me think that this Antonio, Being the bosom lover of my lord, Must needs be like my lord.</i>
Act 3 Scene 5	Jessica says to Launcelot that her soul will be saved by converting to Christianity. She then heavily praises Portia to Lorenzo.	<i>He tells me flatly there is no mercy for me in heaven, because I am a Jew's daughter;</i>
Act 4 Scene 1	The trial begins. The Duke suggests that Shylock means only to scare Antonio, but Shylock insists that he wants his bond, citing his hatred. Bassanio arrives and offers Shylock 6 times the original loan, but Shylock refuses. A letter reveals that a Dr Bellario is sending a young lawyer named Balthasar (Portia in disguise) to decide on the matter. She lectures Shylock about mercy, but he insists that he offer none. As Shylock prepares to cut Antonio open, Portia reminds him that not one drop of blood can be spilled, for the bond does not entitle him to this. Shylock backpedals, asking for the money instead, which is denied. For threatening the life of a Venetian, Shylock is then stripped of his estate. Antonio returns this to him, on the condition that he convert to Christianity.	<i>Make room, and let him stand before our face.— Shylock, the world thinks, and I think so too, That thou but ledest this fashion of thy malice To the last hour of act, and then, 'tis thought, Thou wilt show thy mercy and remorse more strange Than is thy strange apparent cruelty; And where thou now exacts the penalty, Which is a pound of this poor merchant's flesh,</i>
Act 4 Scene 2	Portia (still in disguise) convinces Bassanio to part with his ring. With Nerissa, she conspires to get Gratiano to part with his.	<i>His ring I do accept most thankfully, And so I pray you tell him.</i>
Act 5 Scene 1	Everyone arrives back in Belmont. After jesting the men over the rings, Portia and Nerissa reveal their roles in the trial. It is announced that some of Antonio's ships have miraculously arrived back at port, and that Lorenzo stands to inherit Shylock's fortune.	<i>I would out-night you, did no body come: But, hark, I hear the footing of a man.</i>

Dramatic Devices in *The Merchant of Venice*

Features of a Comedy

Dramatic Irony	In the court scene (A4 S1), the audience knows that the lawyer is actually Portia, but the other characters do not.	Playful Language – Puns, quips and vibrant figurative language are written into the text to demonstrate wit.
Soliloquy	The quality of mercy is not strained (Spoken by Portia, A4 S1)	Misunderstandings/ Confusion/ Deception – Humour is derived from characters' shrouded perceptions of reality.
Aside	In A1 S3, (lines 37–57) Shylock's aside shows that he holds hatred for Antonio, and relishes getting one over him.	Underlying Critique – Shakespeare ridicules some of the issues in society, e.g. systems of class, love and honour.
Foreshadowing	Bassanio's financial carelessness with his estate foreshadows his financial carelessness in lending money from Shylock.	Happy Ending – Normally involving a marriage.

