

A Guide to
**THE MERCHANT
OF VENICE**

by William Shakespeare



Alistair McCallum

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Setting the scene

Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* in or around 1597, when he was in his early thirties. For several years, he had been a member of London's leading theatre company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and already had a formidable reputation as a playwright; in particular, his recent plays *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had proved hugely popular.

The continuing success of *The Jew of Malta*, Christopher Marlowe's play of the early 1590s, may have influenced Shakespeare in his choice of subject-matter; however, in Shylock, the Jewish moneylender of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare created a far more complex, nuanced character than his counterpart in Marlowe's play. Although there had been virtually no Jews living in the country for hundreds of years, anti-Semitic sentiments were commonplace in Shakespeare's England. These feelings erupted when, in 1594, Queen Elizabeth's physician, Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese Jew who had converted to Christianity, was suspected of attempting to poison the Queen; these events too may have influenced the creation of Shylock.

The presence of this outsider figure, together with the subject of moneylending – another highly charged topic of the day – and the threat of violent onstage revenge, placed as they are alongside the play's elements of traditional fairy-tale romantic comedy, can make *The Merchant of Venice* an uncomfortable work. However, this has not deterred generations of directors, actors, readers and critics from tackling the play, and it remains enduringly popular.

“The Merchant of Venice is a richly complicated work in which several themes are presented in the framework of a traditional comedy ... the play illustrates a theme that occupied Shakespeare in most of his comedies, the triumph of love over false and inhumane attitudes towards life.”

Charles Boyce, *Shakespeare A to Z*

High stakes

The Republic of Venice is a busy, prosperous centre of international commerce. Majestic trading-ships from all over the world bring valuable, exotic goods to the city's port; and in the bustling commercial marketplace, merchants risk fortunes on shipping precious cargoes across the high seas.

One such merchant is Antonio, a wealthy Venetian. Renowned for his generosity, he is highly regarded, and has many friends in the city. He has invested heavily in several trading ventures, and stands to increase his wealth even further.

The outlook seems bright for Antonio. Something, however, appears to be troubling him; and his friends want to find out more.

Curtain up

A strange sadness

I, i

In conversation with his friends Salarino and Salanio, Antonio reveals that he is in low spirits. The origin of his melancholy, however, is a mystery to him:

Antonio: In sooth¹ I know not why I am so sad.
It wearies me; you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn² ...

¹ *truth*

² *I have not yet discovered, I do not know*

His two friends are in no doubt; it is Antonio's anxiety about his precious cargoes, now at sea, that is weighing on his mind. They would both feel exactly the same, they insist, if their wealth were at the mercy of the oceans:

Salanio: Believe me, sir, had I such venture forth,¹
The better part of my affections would
Be with my hopes abroad.² I should be still
Plucking the grass to know where sits the wind,³
Peering in maps for ports and piers and roads ...

¹ *if I were involved in such risky enterprises*

² *most of my thoughts and emotions would be
with my merchandise out at sea*

³ *I would continually be scattering blades of grass
to check the direction of the wind*

“For the new commercial civilizations of the Renaissance, wealth glowed in luminous metal, shone in silks, perfumed the air in spices ... the 1590s were a period when London was becoming conscious of itself as wealthy and cultivated, so that it could consider great commercial Venice as a prototype. And yet there were at the same time traditional suspicions of the profit motive and newly urgent anxieties about the power of money to disrupt human relations ...”

C. L. Barber, *The Merchants and the Jew of Venice*,
1959

Antonio denies that he is excessively materialistic: perhaps it is simply his lot in life to be unhappy. Gratiano persists. Some people adopt a grave, calm demeanour, he claims, in the hope that they will be regarded as wise and profound. He urges Antonio not to put his well-being at risk by following their example:

Gratiano: Why should a man whose blood is warm within
Sit like his grandsire cut in alabaster?¹
Sleep when he wakes? And creep into the jaundice
By being peevish?

¹ *be still and lifeless, like the monument on the tomb of his dead grandfather*

Promising to continue with his lecture when they next meet, Gratiano takes his leave. Lorenzo, complaining that he can never get a word in edgeways in Gratiano's company, leaves with him.

A friend in need

Earlier, Bassanio had mentioned to Antonio that he was in love with a young lady, and had set his heart on marrying her. Now that the two men are alone, Antonio is keen to know more.

However, Bassanio does not answer his friend directly. Instead, he reminds Antonio of the precarious financial situation that he is in, freely admitting that he is the victim of his own extravagance:

Bassanio: 'Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,
How much I have disabled mine estate¹
By something showing a more swelling port
Than my faint means would grant continuance.²

¹ *used up my wealth*

² *by displaying a rather more lavish lifestyle than my limited resources would allow*

Bassanio emphasises that he is not complaining about his situation or the more frugal life that he is now obliged to live. His only aim is to pay off his debts, and the greatest of these is to Antonio, who has been very generous to him.

Bassanio goes on to reveal that he has found a way to solve all his financial problems, and he wants his friend to be the first to know:

Bassanio: To you, Antonio,
I owe the most in money and in love,
And from your love I have a warranty
To unburden¹ all my plots and purposes
How to get clear of all the debts I owe.

¹ *this love permits me to disclose*

Antonio immediately promises that he will help Bassanio in any way that he can. Bassanio, however, continues in a roundabout manner. He describes how, as a child, he would sometimes lose an arrow; the best way to find it, he recalls, was to shoot another in the same direction, keeping a close eye on it. In the same way, he implies, a further loan from Antonio may well lead to the recovery of all the money he has lent in the past.

Antonio responds impatiently. His love for Bassanio is such that no lengthy explanations or justifications are necessary; if he needs help, he should ask directly. Antonio will be offended, he declares, if Bassanio doubts his sincerity.

Bassanio now comes to the point. He is, as Antonio mentioned, in love, but money is also involved:

Bassanio: In Belmont is a lady richly left,¹
And she is fair and, fairer than that word,
Of wondrous virtues. Sometimes from her eyes
I did receive fair speechless messages.
Her name is Portia ...

¹ *in possession of a large inheritance*

A succession of admirers

I, ii

At her home in Belmont, Portia is complaining to her waiting-woman Nerissa. Portia's father died recently, leaving her a considerable inheritance of money and property: however, his will also included instructions that prevent her from choosing her own husband.

Nerissa has little sympathy for her mistress, advising her to be content with her good fortune. Portia agrees that this would be a wise attitude, but insists that the theory and practice of wisdom are two different things. Sensible advice is often blithely ignored, particularly by the young and spirited:

Portia: The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree; such a hare is madness the youth, to skip o'er the meshes¹ of good counsel the cripple.

¹ *nets, traps*

Even on the question of Portia's marriage, Nerissa refuses to commiserate, taking the side of her mistress's father:

Portia: I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none?

Nerissa: Your father was ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspirations.

Nerissa now mentions the unconventional arrangement that Portia's father has made for her marriage. In order to gain Portia's hand, suitors will have to choose between three caskets, one of gold, one of silver, and one of lead. Nerissa is confident that, however strange the procedure might seem, it will produce the right husband for Portia.

Portia now describes the suitors she has already encountered. They are all, in their different ways, totally unsuitable. The first, a Prince of Naples, was obsessed with his horse:

Portia: Ay, that's a colt¹ indeed, for he doth nothing but talk of his horse ... I am much afeard my lady his mother played false with a smith.²

¹ *inexperienced, impulsive youth*

² *had an affair with a blacksmith*

The next, a central European Count, was unbearably sombre and humourless. He was followed by a Frenchman who, by contrast, was wild and unpredictable. An Englishman came next. Although he was handsome, language proved an insurmountable barrier:

Nerissa: What say you then to Falconbridge, the young baron of England?

Portia: You know I say nothing to him, for he understands not me, nor I him. He hath neither Latin, French nor Italian ... He is a proper man's picture,¹ but, alas, who can converse with a dumb-show?

¹ *in terms of good looks, he is the ideal man*

To make matters worse, the baron had strange, confused dress sense, having apparently obtained his clothes from a variety of countries; and he became involved in a violent scuffle with the Scottish lord who arrived at the same time.

Finally Nerissa mentions the German suitor. Portia, appalled at the young man's drinking, shudders at the thought of him:

Nerissa: How like you the young German, the Duke of Saxony's nephew?

Portia: Very vilely in the morning, when he is sober, and most vilely in the afternoon, when he is drunk. When he is best, he is a little worse than a man, and when he is worst he is little better than a beast.

Nerissa reassures Portia that all the suitors she has seen so far are due to return home without undertaking the task of choosing the correct casket. Portia is greatly relieved:

Portia: I am glad this parcel of wooers are so reasonable, for there is not one among them but I dote on his very absence, and I pray God grant them a fair departure.

Nerissa mentions that another gentleman, a Venetian, visited Belmont when Portia's father was still alive: he was a far more suitable match, in her opinion, than any of her recent suitors. Portia remembers the man, and recollects that his name was Bassanio. However, before they can pursue the subject further, a servant enters: he announces that yet another suitor, the Prince of Morocco, is on his way.

“When we meet Portia in Belmont we see that although she is a noble or patrician woman with wealth and status, she is also imprisoned by her father’s decree that whichever suitor passes the casket test shall marry her. Shakespeare presents marriage metaphorically as a form of containment and trafficking of women, specifically within aristocratic circles; in this case, a daughter is being controlled from the grave.”

Farah Karim-Cooper, *Questions of Value*
in *The Merchant of Venice*, 2016

An uncomfortable meeting

I, iii

Back in Venice, Bassanio is in search of a loan. He is talking to Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, and has asked for three thousand ducats, to be repaid within three months.

Shylock, taking his time, mulls over Bassanio's request. Bassanio has explained that the merchant Antonio will be guarantor for the repayment of the loan. Shylock suggests that there might be cause for concern:

Bassanio: ... Shall I know your answer?

Shylock: Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound.¹

Bassanio: Your answer to that.

Shylock: Antonio is a good man.

Bassanio: Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?

Shylock: Ho, no, no, no, no. My meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that he is sufficient,² yet his means are in supposition.³ He hath an argosy⁴ bound to Tripoli, another to the Indies ...

¹ *responsible, liable*

² *wealthy enough to provide security*

³ *uncertain, at risk*

⁴ *large merchant ship*

Shylock dwells for a while on the dangers of carrying goods by sea. Finally, however, he declares that he is prepared to lend Bassanio the money. He wishes to talk first to Antonio about guaranteeing the loan, and Bassanio asks him to join them for a meal. Shylock is dismissive:

Shylock: Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into.¹ I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you and so following. But I will not eat with you, drink with you nor pray with you.

¹ *Jesus was reputed to have driven demons from a possessed man into a herd of swine*

At this point Antonio himself arrives. Shylock knows him, and in an aside reveals that he despises the merchant:

Shylock: How like a fawning publican¹ he looks.
I hate him for he is a Christian;
But more, for that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis,² and brings down
The rate of usance³ here with us in Venice.

¹ *public official, tax collector; lackey*

² *because, in his naivety, he lends money freely*

³ *interest, return*

Usury – the lending of money at interest – was a hugely controversial subject in Elizabethan England. There was a widespread sentiment (backed up by scripture) that charging interest was immoral, along with a sense of nostalgia for an imagined past when money was lent freely between friends. At the same time, however, moneylending at high rates of interest was rife, and was a frequent cause of bankruptcy and misery at all levels of society.

Usury was made legal in 1571, when the law permitted lenders to charge a maximum of ten percent interest. However, unofficial moneylending at higher rates continued; Shakespeare's father, for example, was prosecuted twice for this offence. Legal or not, the practice was generally frowned on:

“For the Elizabethans, in transition from feudalism to a mercantile, capitalist economy, usury was a living issue of debate ... Merchants needed credit for their trading. So did actors – Shakespeare’s company, the Chamberlain’s Men, built the Globe with money borrowed at interest and repaid with difficulty ... Usury was tolerated with distaste; the usurer was reviled.”

John Goodwin, Royal Shakespeare Company
programme notes, 1965

Antonio, in turn, despises the Jews, and frequently disparages them in public. If Shylock can find an opportunity for revenge, he is determined to take it.

Shylock explains to Bassanio that he does not have the full amount to hand, but will easily be able to obtain what he needs from one of his fellow Jews. Pretending to notice Antonio for the first time, he greets him politely. Antonio responds cautiously, emphasising that he would never normally become involved with usury:

Shylock: ... Rest you fair,¹ good signior,
Your worship was the last man in our mouths.²
Antonio: Shylock, albeit I neither lend nor borrow
By taking nor by giving of excess,³
Yet, to supply the ripe wants⁴ of my friend,
I'll break a custom.

¹ *welcome, make yourself at home*

² *we were just talking about you*

³ *interest*

⁴ *urgent needs*

Shylock defends the practice of charging interest, quoting the Old Testament story of Jacob, who profited as a shepherd from his astuteness and knowledge of sheep-breeding. Antonio is unmoved, and remarks to his friend that this demonstrates the Jew's wicked nature:

Antonio: Mark you this, Bassanio,
The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.
An evil soul producing holy witness
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,
A goodly¹ apple, rotten at the heart.
O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!

¹ *fine, attractive*

In the 1970s, a copy of the complete works of Shakespeare was smuggled into the prison on South Africa's Robben Island, which held many political prisoners including Nelson Mandela. The book, which became known as the 'Robben Island Bible', was passed around secretly from cell to cell, and many prisoners underlined passages in the text that they found particularly significant.

The anti-apartheid activist and senior African National Congress member Walter Sisulu, who was imprisoned on Robben Island for over twenty-five years, chose one of Shylock's speeches from *The Merchant of Venice*:

*Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.*

Shylock's proposal

Antonio asks for confirmation that Shylock will indeed lend the money. Before answering, Shylock reminds him of the mistreatment he has suffered at Antonio's hands, often in the Rialto, Venice's public meeting-place for the city's merchants:

Shylock: Signior Antonio, many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have rated¹ me
About my moneys and my usances.²
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
For sufferance³ is the badge of all our tribe.
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine⁴ ...

¹ *criticised, reviled*

² *the interest I charge*

³ *endurance, tolerance of oppression*

⁴ *cloak*

Shylock questions whether it is fitting to lend money in the circumstances. Antonio replies, defiantly, that he will not change his views or his behaviour. He does not want the money as a gesture of friendship. In fact it would be to Shylock's advantage to think of him as a foe, in case the debt is not repaid:

Antonio: ... lend it rather to thine enemy,
Who, if he break,¹ thou mayst with better face²
Exact the penalty.

¹ *breaks his word; fails to repay*

² *justification*

The mood changes suddenly as Shylock assures the men that he wishes to be on friendly terms with them, and to forget about past insults. To their surprise, he offers to lend them the money without demanding any interest at all. Instead he suggests that, as a joke, they include an unusual clause in their agreement:

Shylock: Go with me to a notary,¹ seal me² there
Your single bond,³ and, in a merry sport,
If you repay me not on such a day,
In such a place, such sum, or sums, as are
Expressed in the condition, let the forfeit
Be nominated for an equal⁴ pound
Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
In what part of your body pleaseth me.

¹ *official with the authority to draw up contracts*

² *agree, put your hand to*

³ *simple promise to repay*

⁴ *just; exact*

Antonio immediately accepts the offer. His friend is unwilling to go along with the idea, but Antonio persuades him that repayment will not be a problem. He will soon be in possession of enough valuable merchandise to pay the debt many times over, so the threat of removing a pound of flesh is irrelevant:

Antonio: Content, in faith: I'll seal to such a bond
And say there is much kindness in the Jew.

Bassanio: You shall not seal to such a bond for me;
I'll rather dwell in my necessity.¹

Antonio: Why, fear not, man, I will not forfeit it;
Within these two months, that's a month before
This bond expires, I do expect return
Of thrice three times the value of this bond.

¹ *I would prefer to continue living in financial hardship*

Shylock insists that his offer is valid and benevolent. The penalty clause is just a joke; even if the debt were not repaid, what good would a pound of human flesh be to him in reality? Antonio agrees to guarantee the loan, and Shylock sets off to obtain the money. The three of them are to meet again shortly at the notary's office.

Antonio is delighted at the agreement, but Bassanio remains wary. However appealing the offer may be, he is convinced that the Jew is inherently untrustworthy:

Antonio: The Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind.

Bassanio: I like not fair terms and a villain's mind.

The figure of the villainous moneylender was a familiar one to an Elizabethan audience. Unlike Shylock, however, the typical usurer would not have been Jewish; there had been very few practising Jews in England for almost three hundred years, since their expulsion from the country in 1290.

"Shakespeare was not drawing from life in the 1590s when he created his memorable Jewish moneylender, Shylock ... since their banishment in the thirteenth century there had been no Jews living publicly in England, although historians have found evidence of a small, secret community in Elizabethan London. But Shylock, although he is present in only five scenes of the play, has become its most prominent character, with a cultural presence towering over his role in the plot."

Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith, *30 Great Myths about Shakespeare*, 2013