

The Merchant of Venice

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A research guide to Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice.

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"I will have my bond."

F. Murray Abraham as Shylock at the Broad Stage in Santa Monica, CA

photo credit: Gerry Goodstein

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Teaser Trailer

A mysteriously melancholy rich man, a dashing young lover in desperate need of cash, a moneylender with good reason to seek revenge, and a witty young woman with a knack for disguise -- these are the characters of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare's sparkling and troubling tragicomedy. Set in the magical city of Venice, where all nations meet and the clash of cultures can lead to startling violence, the story of Antonio, Shylock and Portia has been arousing controversies -- social as well as literary -- for four centuries with its astonishing mixture of elements: comedy that is both raucous and gentle, steely-eyed satire, intense compassion, tender love poetry, and the perpetual struggle between mercy and justice.

Note: This guide was originally developed for an April 2011 [Vision and Voices](#) event. It has been re-purposed as a general guide for learning more about the play.

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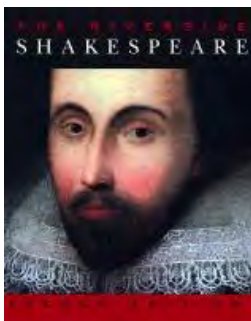
How to cite this

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Read more about the *Merchant of Venice* in [The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare](#).

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The Riverside Shakespeare



Also check out [The Riverside Shakespeare](#) for more information about the play, its history and critical reception.

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From The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare

- 1.1 Antonio, a Venetian merchant, will not be cheered up by his associates, even the frivolous Graziano. Left alone with his friend Bassanio, who already owes him much money, he learns of Bassanio's desire to woo an heiress of Belmont called Portia, for which Bassanio will need further money. Antonio urges Bassanio to borrow money on his credit for this purpose.
- 1.2 In Belmont, Portia reflects on her late father's will, which obliges her to marry whichever suitor correctly chooses between three chests of gold, silver, and lead: she speaks disparagingly of the suitors listed by her waiting-woman Nerissa. Nerissa speaks of Bassanio, but they are interrupted by news that a fresh suitor has arrived, the Prince of Morocco.
- 1.3 Bassanio is negotiating a loan of 3,000 ducats, for three months, with the Jewish usurer Shylock. When Shylock sees Antonio approaching he speaks in an aside of his hatred of him, but when Antonio arrives, Shylock, though reminding him of many public insults, speaks affably in defence of usury, and despite Antonio's renewed profession of enmity offers to lend the 3,000 ducats at no interest, insisting only—professedly in fun—that Antonio should sign a bond specifying that if he defaults Shylock will be entitled to a pound of his flesh.
- 2.1 The Prince of Morocco agrees to vow, before making his choice of casket, that if he chooses wrongly he will remain unmarried forever.
- 2.2 Lancelot Gobbo debates the morality of running away from his master Shylock, finally deciding to do so. When his blind father arrives he pretends to be a stranger and announces his own death, before revealing his identity and announcing his intention of leaving Shylock's service. When Bassanio enters, the Gobbos beg that Lancelot may join his staff, to which Bassanio agrees. Bassanio is subsequently met by Graziano, whom he permits to accompany him to Belmont on condition that he behave soberly.
- 2.3 Shylock's daughter Jessica bids farewell to Lancelot, giving him a letter to Bassanio's friend Lorenzo, with whom she plans to elope.
- 2.4 Lorenzo, among his revelling friends, receives Jessica's letter, which directs him to take her from her father's house, disguised as a page, that night.
- 2.5 Shylock, invited out to dine with Antonio and associates, bids farewell first to Lancelot and then, despite misgivings, to Jessica.
- 2.6 Lorenzo, disguised among his friends, receives Jessica as she climbs from her window disguised as a boy, bringing much of Shylock's gold and jewellery. Antonio urges Graziano to join Bassanio on board their ship for Belmont.
- 2.7 Morocco chooses between the three caskets, which all bear mottoes: the lead 'Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath', the silver 'Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves', and the gold 'Who chooseth me shall get what many men desire'. To Portia's relief he chooses the gold casket, which contains a death's head bearing a poem, 'All that glisters is not gold ...'

2.8

Salerio and Solanio, associates of Bassanio, discuss Shylock's anguish at the loss of his daughter, Antonio's tender parting from Bassanio, and rumours that a Venetian ship, possibly one of Antonio's, has been wrecked.

2.9

Portia's next suitor, the Prince of Aragon, chooses the silver casket, which contains a fool's head and another mocking poem. As he departs, news arrives that another, Bassanio, is approaching.

3.1

Solanio and Salerio are discussing the wreck of one of Antonio's ships when Shylock arrives and accuses them of complicity in Jessica's elopement: distraught, he is consoled only by the news of Antonio's losses, and promises to pursue his revenge against him as ruthlessly as would a Christian. Left alone with Tubal, Shylock learns of Jessica's extravagance with the money and jewels she took with her, alternating between grief at this and vengeful glee as he hears further of Antonio's impending bankruptcy.

3.2

Though Portia begs him to postpone his choice, Bassanio, to the accompaniment of a song ('Tell me, where is fancy bred ...?'), reflects prudently on the caskets' mottoes and correctly chooses the lead one: within is a picture of Portia and a poem which instructs him to claim her with a kiss. Portia formally gives herself and her estate to him, with a ring which she urges him to wear forever. Graziano now announces that Nerissa has promised to marry him should Bassanio succeed; Portia and Bassanio give their blessing. Lorenzo and Jessica arrive, together with Salerio, who brings Bassanio a letter from Antonio: it tells him that, all his seaborne ventures having failed, he is at Shylock's mercy. Bassanio explains to Portia that Antonio incurred this lethal debt on his behalf, and she immediately postpones their marriage, sending him to Venice with money in the hopes of persuading Shylock to let Antonio live.

3.3

On the eve of the pound of flesh falling due, Shylock refuses to hear Antonio's pleas for mercy.

3.4

Portia hands over her house to Lorenzo's keeping, saying she and Nerissa will stay in a nearby convent while Bassanio and Graziano are in Venice, but after Lorenzo's departure she sends her servant Balthasar on an errand to her relative, the lawyer Bellario, and explains to Nerissa that the two of them will in fact go to Venice in male disguise.

3.5

Lancelot banter with Jessica about her conversion to Christianity. Jessica and Lorenzo speak admiringly of Portia and Bassanio.

4.1

Before the Duke, Shylock, though offered his 3,000 ducats, insists on his pound of flesh. Bassanio offers twice the sum, which Shylock also refuses. Antonio professes a stoical acceptance of death while Shylock sharpens his knife. The Duke threatens to adjourn the court until he has received legal advice from Bellario: instead he receives a letter sending a young expert in his place, Balthasar, who is really Portia in disguise, accompanied by Nerissa as clerk. Portia speaks eloquently to Shylock, urging him to show mercy, but he refuses, and she concedes his legal right to the pound of flesh. Bassanio and Graziano, in Portia and Nerissa's hearing, each tell Antonio they would sacrifice their wives to save him. Antonio has exposed his breast for Shylock's incision when Portia announces that since the bond mentions no blood, Shylock's estate will be forfeit to the state if he sheds any while cutting his pound of flesh. Baffled, Shylock accepts 9,000 ducats in place of the flesh, but Portia insists he is entitled only to the flesh, not even to the 3,000 ducats he originally loaned. Shylock is about to leave when Portia announces that as an alien who has sought to kill a Venetian he is liable to the death penalty, and his possessions must be divided between Antonio and the state. The Duke spares Shylock's life and offers to waive the state's claim to half Shylock's wealth, requiring only a fine. Antonio in his turn says he will only borrow half Shylock's estate and give it after Shylock's death to Lorenzo, to whom he insists Shylock bequeath all his other possessions, and he further insists that Shylock should convert to Christianity. Shylock leaves, unwell. The disguised Portia and Nerissa, gratefully offered gifts by Bassanio and Graziano, demand their respective wedding rings: at Antonio's insistence the men hand them over.

5.1

Lorenzo and Jessica, outside Portia's house, listen to music by moonlight. Portia and Nerissa, no longer disguised, return home, followed separately by Bassanio, Antonio, and Graziano. Nerissa upbraids Graziano for giving her ring to the clerk, and Bassanio soon has to admit he gave his to the lawyer. Portia and Nerissa claim they will not sleep with their husbands, but only with the lawyer and his clerk: only when a penitent Antonio intercedes on Bassanio's behalf does Portia produce the ring again, at first claiming to have obtained it in bed from the lawyer before revealing her deception. Portia further gives Antonio news that three of his argosies have arrived safely, and gives Lorenzo the deed by which Shylock has made him his heir.

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First Folio

Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, histories & tragedies, published according to the true originall copies. London, printed by Isaac Jaggard and Edward Blount, 1623. (image links to facsimile)



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Useful databases

- **International Index to the Performing Arts Full Text** 
IIPA covers nearly all aspects of performing arts, from scholarly studies to snapshots of popular culture.
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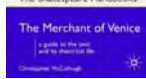


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Merchant of Venice (2004)



Publisher: Sony Pictures Classics

Special features: Commentary with director Michael Radford and actress Lynn Collins [audio feature]; The merchant of Venice: Shakespeare through the lens [featurette] (30 min.); The Teachers' Guide weblink [requires a DVD-ROM drive]; Previews (10 min.).

Cast: Al Pacino (Shylock), Jeremy Irons (Antonio), Joseph Fiennes (Bassanio), Lynn Collins (Portia), Zuleikha Robinson (Jessica), Kris Marshall (Gratiano), Charlie Cox (Lorenzo), Heather Goldenhersh (Nerissa), Mackenzie Crook (Lancelot Gobbo), John Sessions (Salerio), Gregor Fisher (Solanio), Ron Cook (Old Gobbo), Allan Corduner (Tubal), Anton Rodgers (The Duke), David

Harewood (Prince of Morocco), Antonio Gil-Martinez (Aragon).

Summary: "Intolerance of the Jews was a fact of 16th century life even in Venice, the most powerful and liberal city state in Europe. By law the Jews were forced to live in the old walled foundry or 'Geto' area of the city. After sundown the gate was locked and guarded by Christians. In the daytime any man leaving the ghetto had to wear a red hat to mark him as a Jew. The Jews were forbidden to own property. So they practiced usury, the lending of money at interest. This was against Christian law. The sophisticated Venetians would turn a blind eye to it but for the religious fanatics, who hated the Jews, it was another matter... "

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