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THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

USC LIBRARIES RESOURCE GUIDE



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.

Academy Award winner F. Murray Abraham attacks the role of Shylock in this riveting update of the Bard’s darkest of comedies, in which religion, race and sexuality collide with love, family and justice. The currency of society and humanity has never been so changeable as in this Royal Shakespeare Company commissioned production, the first production by an American company to be invited to the RSC’s Complete Works Festival.

JOHN JACKSON of the **USC LIBRARIES** has selected the following resources to help you learn more about the play. More resources are available through the online version of this guide at libguides.usc.edu/merchantofvenice.

Synopsis

This synopsis is from *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, an e-resource available through the USC Libraries.

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- 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 Bassanio enters, Lancelot begs to 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 glistens 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 banters 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 bequeaths 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.

Selected Books

Blood Relations:

Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice

By Janet Adelman

Doheny Memorial Library: PR2825.A36 2008

William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice

By Harold Bloom

Leavey Library: PR2825.W56 2010

A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice

By S. P. Cerasano

Doheny Memorial Library: PR2825.R68 2004

Shylock is Shakespeare

By Kenneth Gross

Doheny Memorial Library: PR2825.G763 2006

Shakespeare and Venice

By Graham Holderness

Doheny Memorial Library: PR3069.I8H63 2010

The Merchant of Venice: New Critical Essays

By John W. Mahon

Doheny Memorial Library: PR2825.M37 2002

The Merchant of Venice

By Christopher McCullough

Doheny Memorial Library: PR2825.M225 2005

The Merchant of Venice:

Authoritative Text, Sources and Contexts, Criticism, Rewritings and Appropriations (Norton Critical Edition)

By William Shakespeare

Doheny Memorial Library: PR2825.A2M36 2006

Leavey Library: PR2825.A2M36 2006

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A peer-reviewed, online, multimedia Shakespeare journal.

Shakespeare Bulletin

A peer-reviewed journal of performance criticism, scholarship, and commentary on Shakespeare and Renaissance drama.

Shakespeare Quarterly

A peer-reviewed journal committed to publishing articles in the vanguard of Shakespeare studies.

Shakespeare Studies

An international volume published annually containing essays and studies by critics and cultural historians from both hemispheres.

USEFUL DATABASES

International Index to the Performing Arts

IIPA draws its current content from more than 270 international performing arts periodicals and covers a broad spectrum of the arts and entertainment industry. At least 80 journals included in IIPA focus on theater, ranging from Shakespeare Quarterly to Variety Magazine.

Literature Online (LION)

Virtual library containing over 350,000 literary texts together with full-text journals, author biographies and other critical and reference resources. Also contains all 38 of Shakespeare's plays in dramatised audio recordings and access of Oxford's Shakespeare Glossary.

MLA Bibliography

International coverage of over 2 million citations from more than 4,400 periodicals (including peer-reviewed e-journals) and 1,000 book publishers back to 1923.

Shakespeare Collection

Extensive collection of authoritative materials supporting literary, textual, historical and performance studies. Resources include the most recent Arden Shakespeare editions of the complete works, as well as editions and adaptations of Shakespeare's works, other works published during Shakespeare's time, prompt books, the Gordon Crosse Theatrical Diaries, criticism, reviews, images and reference.