

The Merchant of Venice

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Level 4

Retold by Chris Rice

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Contents

	page
Introduction	v
The Characters in the Play	x
Act 1	1
Act 2	12
Act 3	28
Act 4	41
Act 5	55
Activities	65

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Introduction

I will prove my kindness. Go with me to the legal clerk's office, and sign this agreement for me: if you fail to repay me on time, a pound of flesh will be cut from the part of your body of my choice.'

Shylock, a greedy, unpopular money-lender, is talking to Antonio, a successful merchant who needs a loan and will agree to a very unusual condition. If Antonio cannot repay the loan in three months' time, Shylock will cut a pound of flesh from his body.

The loan is for Antonio's friend Bassanio, who also lives in the Italian city of Venice at some time during the 14th century. Bassanio wants to marry Portia, a rich, clever woman who lives outside Venice in place called Belmont. But he has a problem: he has no money and a lot of debts, and Portia has many other admirers from all over the world who are much richer than he is.

Not for the first time, Bassanio asks Antonio to lend him money. Antonio is glad to help his dear friend, but he has no cash either. All his money has been spent on business adventures abroad, which he hopes will make him richer. Unwilling to destroy his friend's chance of happiness, he borrows money from his enemy, Shylock. Antonio is not worried by the strange agreement. He is sure that his ships will return with a fortune from abroad before he has to repay the loan. But Bassanio is not so sure. What will happen if something goes wrong and Antonio's ships do not return? Will Shylock *really* take his pound of flesh? And why has Shylock made Antonio sign such a terrible agreement?

As the title suggests, money plays an important part in *The Merchant of Venice*. In the 14th century, Venice was the business capital of Europe. Antonio, the merchant of the title, has made a lot of money with his international business adventures. Shylock earns his living as a money-

lender. Portia has been left a great fortune by her father. Bassanio's debts are the cause of Antonio's problems. And the different business methods of Antonio and Shylock are one of the reasons why the two men are enemies; unlike Shylock, whose religion allows it, Antonio never charges interest on the money that he lends.

But *The Merchant of Venice* is much more than a play about money and business. It is about human desire and its power to change people's lives. For example, money appears at first to be at the centre of Shylock's life; when his daughter runs away with her Christian lover and her father's jewellery and money, Shylock is more worried about the jewellery and money than about her safety. But later we see that his feelings of hate for Antonio are even more powerful than his love of money. He would rather have a pound of Antonio's flesh than a payment of three times the amount of the loan. His desire for revenge becomes so strong that it eventually destroys him.

Shylock is not the only person whose life changes greatly as the story progresses. At the beginning of the play, both Bassanio and Antonio seem to be worried only about money. Antonio cannot stop thinking about his ships at sea, and Bassanio wants to escape from a life of debt. But it soon becomes clear that Antonio's desire to help his friend is more important to him than making a profit, and that Bassanio will put his love for his friend even above his desire for the woman he loves.

Loyalty and love are important in the play. Bassanio and Antonio help each other whenever they can. Portia is loyal to her father's wishes and will only marry the man who passes the test that he has left behind for her admirers after his death. She also helps Antonio, who she has never met, simply because he is her future husband's friend. And both Bassanio and Gratiano get into serious trouble with their future wives when they fail an important test of loyalty.

There are many other subjects in *The Merchant of Venice* that are equally interesting and important for us in modern times. One is the difference between appearance and reality. *The Merchant of Venice* is

a story full of masks, curtains, secrets and confusion! Shylock hates Antonio, but seems willing to help him and calls his cruel agreement with Antonio a 'kind offer'. Portia's admirers fail her father's test when they prefer shiny gold and silver boxes to an ordinary lead one. While Shylock's daughter dresses as a boy to escape from her father, her lover and his friends wear masks when they take her away. Portia and Nerissa also dress as men when they appear at the Duke's court. Things are never what they seem in this play!

However, the play appears to present a view from Shakespeare's time of the difference between Christians and people of other religions which is unacceptable to many people today. Antonio, a Christian, is kind and generous to his friends. Shylock, a Jew, is dishonest, greedy and cruel. Antonio and Portia teach the Christian message of forgiveness, but Shylock is only interested in punishment and revenge. Such a simple picture of good and bad may understandably be offensive today, but it reminds us that people in the past had different ideas. In the 16th century, when *The Merchant of Venice* was written, Jews were seen as outsiders because of their religion, appearance and fondness for money. People in Shakespeare's London laughed at foreigners, and it was common for them to be cruel and rude about Jews, although Jews lived more comfortably in London than in some other European cities. However, Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* is one man, with his own character, who does not seem to have many friends, even of his own religion, and Shakespeare's plays are still performed four hundred years after his death for good reason; in so many other ways his work is timeless, which is why it is still enjoyed so much today.

The Merchant of Venice was Shakespeare's twelfth play, and it was written between 1596 and 1598. Since then, it has been performed around the world on stage, television, radio and in film. There have been many films of the play, including one by Orson Welles; mysteriously, when the film was almost completed, parts of it were lost, and have never been found again. The most recent film of

The Merchant of Venice came out in 2004, with Al Pacino as Shylock, Jeremy Irons as Antonio and Joseph Fiennes as Bassanio.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is the most famous writer of plays in the English language. He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, in England. Although he went to a good school, he did not go to university. In 1582, when he was eighteen years old, he married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years older than him. They had three children. Soon after the birth of twins, Hamnet and Judith (in February 1585), however, Shakespeare left Stratford for London. Not much is known about his early life in London, but by 1592 he was famous as an actor and writer. Over the next twenty years he wrote thirty-seven plays, including *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1594-1596), *Hamlet* (1600-1602), *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* (1604-1606) and *The Tempest* (1610-1612). He also wrote many famous poems. His plays were very popular, and many of them were acted in front of King James I.

Reading and acting the play

You can read *The Merchant of Venice* silently, like every other story in a book. You will have to imagine the places, people's clothes and their voices from the words on the page.

But Shakespeare did not write *The Merchant of Venice* as literature for reading; he wrote it for actors on a stage. You can read the play in a group with other people, which is very different from silent reading. When you speak the words, you can bring the characters in the play to life. They can sound happy or sad, worried or angry. You can add silences and important noises, like the sound of music. You can also stop and discuss the play. What does this person mean? Why does he or she say that?

But you can have even more fun if you act the play. Although *The Merchant of Venice* does not have as much action as other Shakespeare plays, it has a lot of emotional speeches and arguments. It has many exciting scenes as well as several funny ones. The girls can have great fun dressing up as boys and confusing the male characters in the play!

You should think about the equipment and furniture that you will need in the different scenes. Many of the conversations happen in the streets of Venice, but in Portia's rooms, for example, you will need nice tables and chairs. You will need some special equipment, too, like knives, scales and documents. And don't forget the large curtain and three boxes in Portia's house. In some scenes there are only two or three people talking, but other scenes will be more crowded. Think, for example, where people should sit or stand in the courtroom scene in Act 4.

The Merchant of Venice is a wonderful play. You can read it or act it but, most important of all, you can have fun and enjoy it!

The Characters in the Play

THE DUKE OF VENICE

ANTONIO, a merchant of Venice

BASSANIO, Antonio's friend

GRATIANO, a friend of Antonio and Bassanio

SALERIO, a friend of Antonio and Bassanio

SOLANIO, a friend of Antonio and Bassanio

LORENZO, in love with Jessica

SHYLOCK, a Jewish money-lender

JESSICA, Shylock's daughter

TUBAL, Shylock's friend

LAUNCELOT GOBBO, Shylock's servant

OLD GOBBO, Launcelot's blind father

PORTIA, the Lady of Belmont

NERISSA, Portia's servant

THE PRINCE OF MOROCCO, Portia's admirer

THE PRINCE OF ARRAGON, Portia's admirer

BALTHASAR, Portia's servant

STEPHANO, Portia's servant

A MESSENGER from Bassanio

A MESSENGER from Antonio

TWO SERVANTS of Bassanio

A PRISON GUARD

OTHER SERVANTS in Portia's house

MUSICIANS at Portia's house

FOUR FOLLOWERS of the Prince of Morocco

SERVANTS of the Prince of Arragon

SERVANTS, LORDS and COURT OFFICIALS at the Duke's court



Antonio



Bassanio



Shylock



Portia



Gratiano



Launcelot Gobbo



Jessica