

The Merchant of Venice

Schools' synopsis by Rebecca Lenkiewicz

'Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?... If you prick us do we not bleed?'

The *Merchant of Venice* is a play about prejudice, love, loss and gain.

Antonio is the 'Merchant'. He is depressed and has no idea why. His ships are out at sea and coming back with various treasures. His great friend Bassanio visits him and asks to borrow a large sum of money. He has borrowed from Antonio before and lost it all. But this time he needs it in his attempt to win and marry Portia.

Portia is an heiress and lives outside of Venice itself in Belmont. She is rich, beautiful and brilliant. Bassanio is in love with her and he thinks she is interested in him.

There is a challenge for any man who wants to claim Portia. He must choose between three caskets. One is gold, one silver and the last is lead.

Antonio feels for Bassanio - he would lend him the money if he had it but all his capital is tied up with the return of his ships. Antonio suggests that his credit might be good for a loan in town. Bassanio tries Shylock who is a money-lender and a Jew.* Shylock has suffered insults from Antonio in the past so when he now joins them, Shylock counters their request with this reminder to Antonio:

'Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last, / You spurned me such a day, another time
You call'd me dog; and for these courtesies / I'll lend you thus much moneys?'

Shylock does agree though to a loan of three thousand ducats. But with one shocking condition. If his money is not returned within three months then Shylock will reclaim his bond in the form of a pound of Antonio's flesh. He will be entitled to cut into whichever part of Antonio's body that he wishes to. Bassanio is chilled by this violent request but Antonio assures him that the money will be safely returned to Shylock as his ships are all soon coming in. That there is no danger. The bond is agreed upon.

Shylock's daughter Jessica runs off secretly with Lorenzo, a Christian. Shylock is angry and bereft.

All of Portia's suitors have chosen the wrong casket and she is very relieved. Bassanio arrives to view the caskets and read their riddles. Portia is worried that he will make the same mistake as she wants to marry him. He decides on the leaden casket and in doing so, he wins her. Bassanio marries Portia while his friend Gratiano weds her maid Nerissa who he has been wooing.

But now there is terrible news from Venice. Antonio's certain his ships have in fact floundered at sea. His whole fortune has gone under. He has been arrested on account of his debt to Shylock. Portia sweeps away Bassanio's fears saying she will pay back six thousand ducats to Shylock. But Shylock refuses this offer of doubled repayment. The only settlement he will accept is his pound of flesh which the lawful contract has promised him.

A court is held to confirm whether Shylock can butcher Antonio or not. Shylock speaks for himself. He brings a sharp knife and a pair of scales, eager to slice out Antonio's heart. Portia and Nerissa dress up as a young lawyer and a clerk. Bassanio and Gratiano watch the proceedings but do not recognise their wives. Portia conducts a brilliant defence and tries to change Shylock's mind:

'The quality of mercy is not strain'd,/It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath.'

But Shylock is adamant and the court has to concede that the law is on his side however bloody. He prepares his knife for the fatal incision. Just as he is about to slash into Antonio's chest Portia decrees that yes he is indeed entitled to a pound of flesh. But that he must observe this:

'This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood' and the flesh must weigh exactly a pound. If Shylock sheds blood or the bloodless flesh weighs an ounce outside an exact pound then he will be tried for murder.

Shylock puts down his knife. Portia goes in for the kill. Shylock has attempted to murder a Venetian citizen therefore he must be executed. Unless he gives half of his money to Antonio and the other half to the State. Antonio protests that Shylock can keep his half but that Shylock must now convert to Christianity. Shylock agrees, beaten, sick with the disgrace and humiliation.

Bassanio and Gratiano are so impressed by the 'lawyer' and his 'clerk' that they give them their wedding rings when they request them. Later Portia and Nerissa ask where are their rings? The men are panicked but the women finally confess to having been disguised. There is fresh news about Antonio's ships: they have been saved.

* Being Jewish meant that a person was a secondary citizen in seventeenth century Venice because Judaism was frowned upon by the Christians who were in power there.