

The Merchant of Venice

William Shakespeare

TIMELESS SHAKESPEARE



– BACKGROUND –

Bassanio asks his friend Antonio for money to woo the heiress Portia. Antonio borrows the money from Shylock, a Jewish moneylender. Because Shylock hates all Christians—and Antonio in particular—he foregoes his usual interest. Instead, he asks for a pound of Antonio's flesh if the money is not repaid in three months. Then Antonio's business goes bad. He loses all his money and is unable to repay Shylock. Now even angrier toward Christians because of his daughter's elopement with one, Shylock wants his pound of flesh. All looks hopeless until Portia shows up at the trial, dressed as a judge. Will she be clever enough to render a fair judgment and thus save poor Antonio's life?

– CAST OF CHARACTERS –

THE DUKE OF VENICE, PRINCE OF MOROCCO,

and **PRINCE OF ARAGON** Suitors to Portia

ANTONIO A merchant of Venice

BASSANIO Antonio's friend

GRATIANO, SOLANIO, and SALERIO Friends of
Antonio and Bassanio

LORENZO In love with Jessica

SHYLOCK A Jewish moneylender

TUBAL Another Jew, and friend of Shylock

LANCELOT GOBBO Servant to Shylock and later Bassanio

OLD GOBBO Lancelot's father

LEONARDO Servant to Bassanio

BALTHAZAR and STEPHANO Servants to Portia

PORTIA A wealthy lady of Belmont

NERISSA Portia's waiting-maid

JESSICA Shylock's daughter

OFFICERS OF THE COURT OF JUSTICE, a JAILER, SERVANTS,
and **ATTENDANTS**

ACT 1

| Scene 1 |

A wharf in Venice, Italy, in the sixteenth century.

Antonio is talking to his friends **Salerio** and **Solanio**.

ANTONIO (*sighing*): I don't know why
I'm so sad. This mood wearies me.
You say it wearies you, too.
But just how I caught it, found it,
or came by it,
I do not know. I feel so sad,
I hardly even know myself.

SALERIO: Your mind is tossing on the ocean.
(*pointing toward the sea*) It's out there,
Where your ships with their billowing sails
Lord it over the common working boats.

SOLANIO: Believe me, if I had taken the risks
That you have, I would be worried, too.
Anything that put my investments at risk
Would make me sad.

SALERIO: As I blew on my hot soup to cool it,
I'd catch a chill when I thought
What harm a strong wind might do at sea.
As I looked at the sand in an hourglass,
I'd think of shallow waters and sandbanks

And see one of my ships stuck in the sand.
Every time I went to church, the holy
stones
Would make me think of dangerous rocks.
They'd only have to touch my delicate
ship
To scatter all her spices into the sea
And clothe the wild waters with my silks!
One moment I'd be rich—
And the next I'd be worth nothing.
How miserable I would be
If such a thing happened!
You can't fool me. I know Antonio must
Be worrying about his merchandise.

ANTONIO: Believe me, that's not it. I'm lucky.
My investments are not all in one ship
Or all in one place. Nor is all my money
At risk at this time. So my merchandise
Is not what is making me sad.

SOLANIO (*teasing*): Why, then, you must
Be in love!

ANTONIO (*protesting*): Not at all!

SOLANIO: Not in love, either? Then let us say
You are sad because you are not merry.
And, if you wanted to, you could laugh.

(*Bassanio, Lorenzo, and Gratiano enter.*)

Here comes Bassanio, your noble kinsman.

Gratiano and Lorenzo are with him.
(seeing his chance to leave) Farewell!
 We'll leave you now with better company.

SALERIO *(also seeing his chance):*

I would have stayed to cheer you up
 If worthier friends had not stopped me.

ANTONIO: That's good of you, but I take it
 Your own business calls you.
 This gives you the chance to leave.

SALERIO *(to the newcomers):* Good morning!

BASSANIO *(warmly):* Gentlemen both!
 When shall we have a laugh together, eh?
 You're almost strangers! Must it be so?

SALERIO *(eager to get away):* Yes, yes. We'll get
 together one of these days.

(Salerio and Solanio exit.)

LORENZO: Bassanio, now that you have
 Found Antonio, we will leave you.
 Remember that we're meeting for dinner.

BASSANIO: I'll be there!

GRATIANO: You don't look well, Antonio.
 You let things get you down.
 Don't worry so much. Believe me,
 You don't seem like yourself lately.

ANTONIO: I take the world as it is, Gratiano,
 A stage, where every man must play a part,
 And mine a sad one.

GRATIANO: Let me play the fool, then.

Let mirth and laughter give me wrinkles,
And let my emotions get heated with wine
Rather than let my heart cool with sighs.
Why should a warmblooded man
Act like a stone-cold statue of his
grandfather?

I tell you what, Antonio—
And I speak out of friendship—
Some men have faces that never change.
They stay still, hoping to be thought of as
Wise, serious, and important.

Antonio, I know men whose reputation
For being wise is based on saying nothing.
I am very sure that, if they would speak,
They would prove themselves fools.
I'll tell you more about this another time.
But don't go fishing for this fake reputation
With melancholy as your bait, Lorenzo.
(*to Antonio*): Farewell for now.

I'll end my speech after dinner.

LORENZO: Yes, we'll see you at dinnertime.

I must be one of those silent wise men,
For Gratiano never lets me speak.

GRATIANO: Be my friend two more years—
You'll forget the sound of your own voice!

ANTONIO (*to Gratiano*): I guess I'd better start
talking, then.

GRATIANO: If you like. Silence is only good
In dried ox tongues and young maids!

(Gratiano and Lorenzo exit.)

ANTONIO: What do you think of that?

BASSANIO *(laughing)*: He talks more trash
Than any man in Venice! Any truth
Gratiano speaks is like two grains of wheat
Hidden in two bushels.
Look all day, and when you find them,
They are not worth the search!

ANTONIO: Well, tell me now,
What lady takes your fancy?
You promised to tell me about her today.

BASSANIO *(serious now)*: Antonio, you know
Only too well that I've been spending
My inheritance by living beyond my means.
I'm not angry about having to cut back—
But my main goal is to pay the great debts
that my extravagant living has cost me.
I owe the most to you, Antonio, in money
And in friendship. Because we are friends,
I dare to speak freely about my plans to
Get clear of all the debts I owe.

ANTONIO: Bassanio, tell me everything.
If your plan is honorable—as you are—
Be assured that my purse, my person, and
All my resources are open to you.

BASSANIO: In my schooldays,

If I lost one arrow,

I shot another in the same way. I watched
Its flight carefully to see where the first fell.

By risking both, I often found both.

I tell this childhood story

Because my new plan is very similar.

I owe you much and—blame my youth—
What I owe is lost.

But if you would shoot another arrow

The same way you shot the first,

I'll either find both or bring the second one

Back to you again. Then I'll gratefully

Stand by the first debt I owed you.

ANTONIO: You know me well enough.

By doubting that I'd help you, you hurt me
More than if you had wasted all I have.

Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it!

BASSANIO: There is a rich heiress

In Belmont. She is beautiful and virtuous.

Sometimes I have received silent messages

From her eyes. Her name is Portia.

The world is not ignorant of her worth,

For the four winds blow in famous suitors

From every coast. Antonio, if only I had

The money to compete with these suitors,

I'm convinced I could win her hand.

ANTONIO: You know that my wealth is tied up

In cargoes at sea. I do not have the cash,
 Nor do I have anything to sell right now.
 So go to Venice. See what my credit can do.
 Stretch it to the limit to finance your trip
 To Belmont and the fair Portia. Go right

now

And ask around, and so will I. See
 where money is to be had.

Borrow it on my credit or good name.

Either way, it comes out the same.

(Bassanio and Antonio exit.)

| Scene 2 |

*The hall at Portia's house at Belmont. **Portia** is talking with her maid, **Nerissa**.*

PORTIA: Honestly, Nerissa, my little body is
 weary of this great world.

NERISSA: You would be better off, dear lady,
 if you had as much misery as you have
 good fortune. As I see it, those who have
 too much are as miserable as those who
 have too little. Excess gives you white
 hair and makes you old before your time!
 Moderation leads to a longer life.

PORTIA: Good sentences, and well-said.

NERISSA: They'd be better if well-followed.

PORTIA: If doing were as easy as knowing what to do, poor men's cottages would be palaces. It is a good preacher who follows his own instructions. I'd rather teach twenty how to act than be one of the twenty to follow my own teaching! The brain might try to control the emotions, but a hot temper leaps over a cold rule. Youth ignores good advice because it's a handicap. But all this reasoning won't help me choose a husband. Oh, dear! (*sighing*) That word "choose"! I may neither choose whom I like, nor refuse whom I dislike. So the will of a living daughter is curbed by the will of a dead father. Isn't it unfair, Nerissa, that I can neither choose nor refuse?

NERISSA: Your father was very virtuous, and good men are often inspired on their deathbeds. The lottery he set up is a worthy idea. Given a choice of gold, silver, or lead—with you as the prize for the correct choice—only the right man will choose correctly. How do you feel about the princely suitors who have already come to seek your hand?

PORTIA: Please name them. And as you do so, I will describe them for you. Then you