

## Developing Sensitivity to Literature through *The Merchant of Venice*

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Dear fellow teachers,

Welcome to a reading of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. It's a great play by the master craftsman and I hope we will spend an exciting time studying this play together in an effort towards coming to grips with as many interesting aspects of it as possible.

As a first step, please go through the plot summary provided – to refresh the minds of those who have read it at least once and have taught it to students at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels **and** to initiate into reading it for those who have not had the opportunity or time to read it yet. I hope this is just the beginning of an intensive process of collaborative exploration. Let me assure you that we will have a lot to think about and do during this process of exploration – exploration of plot, themes, characters, literary devices, and language use. Let's begin our journey now.

**TASK 1:** The play has a main plot and a few sub-plots interwoven together in a seamless manner. Let's read the plot summary and find out the main plot and the sub-plots.

- a) What, do you think, are the key points of the play?
- b) What are the sub-plots and how are they linked to the main plot?
- c) Who are the main characters in the play and what happens to each of them at the end?

- d) Who do you feel sorry for, and why? Remember that we have only read the plot summary and we haven't started reading the play yet.

### Plot Summary

Antonio is a wealthy and respected merchant of Venice. One of his close friends Bassanio wants to marry a wealthy heiress, Portia, who lives in Belmont. He needs money to visit Belmont and seek her hand to marry him. He doesn't have money, so he requests Antonio to lend him some. Unfortunately, Antonio doesn't have the money to give to Bassanio, as his ships are still at sea. He suggests borrowing money from a moneylender and agrees to stand as the generator for Bassanio. They approach Shylock, a Jewish money lender for the loan.

For a long time, Shylock has been bearing a grudge and hatred against Antonio because Antonio has "abused" Shylock and other money lenders like him for landing money at very high rates of interest. Shylock and other money lenders like him for lending money at very high rates of interest. Shylock, therefore, agrees to lend Bassanio three thousand ducats, but instead of charging any interest, he wants Antonio to sign a bond; according to the bond, if Antonio were to fail to return the money in three months, Shylock will cut a pound of flesh from Antonio's body. Despite Bassanio's protest, Antonio agrees to this bond, for he is hopeful of his ships returning to Venice, when he will have the money to repay the loan.

In the meantime, Portia is vexed that none of his suitors is appealing to her. Besides, according to her father's will, only the suitor who chooses the right casket with her portrait in it from among three caskets – gold, silver and lead – can marry her, she has no other choice in the matter. She and Nerissa, her lady-in-waiting remember Bassanio from one of his visits to Belmont earlier and Portia fondly hopes that he will be successful in the test and marry her.

Bassanio travels to Belmont along with his close friend Gratiano, chooses the correct casket and they both get engaged to Portia and Nerissa respectively. The brides to be give their partners their rings to wear, they caution their husbands against losing the rings at any cost. Amidst joyous moments, Bassanio receives a letter from Antonio saying that his ships have been lost at sea and that he may not live to see Bassanio again if Shylock chooses to go by the bond. Portia and Nerissa ask Bassanio and Gratiano to go back to Venice and be at Antonio's side at this moment. In the meantime, Lorenzo, a friend of Antonio and Bassanio falls in love with Shylock's daughter Jessica, who elopes with him, taking with her a lot of her father's wealth – cash and jewelry. Shylock's servant Launcelot also leaves his master and joins the service of Bassanio. Shylock is wild with anger and he resolves to enforce the bond against Antonio more than ever when the time comes.

The case of Shylock versus Bassanio is taken to the court presided over by the Duke of Venice. After Bassanio and Gratiano leave Belmont for Venice, Portia sends a letter to her uncle Doctor Bellario, who is a doctor of law in Venice. In the court, Antonio is ready to suffer punishment for the sake of Bassanio. Disguised as a lawyer and his clerk respectively, Portia and Nerissa enter the court, having been sent by Doctor Bellario to appear for the defendant Bassanio. Portia hears the case out and offers three

times the money owed to Shylock, but he declines the offer. He has earlier declined twice the amount offered by Bassanio. Shylock demands his "pound of flesh:" from Antonio as per the bond.

Seemingly to speak in favour of Shylock, Portia the lawyer concedes his legal right after making sure he waives his right to the money. Shylock praises the young lawyer's legal acumen and wisdom, and prepares to cut Antonio's flesh from his body. At this point, Portia drops a bombshell: she insists that, according to the bond, Shylock is entitled to take only one pound of flesh, not a little more nor a little less. Moreover, in cutting the flesh from Antonio's body, not a drop of his blood should be spilt.

Shylock now realizes that he has been trapped and cannot have the pound of flesh, so he is willing to take the money. Portia tells him it is too late now, as he has already forfeited his right to the 3,000 ducats owed to him. He faces imprisonment and death. Antonio agrees to forgive him provided that he becomes a Christian and leaves his wealth to his daughter Jessica and Lorenzo. Shylock agrees to these conditions and the Duke spares Shylock's life. The Duke awards half of Shylock's assets to Antonio and the other half goes to the state. Shylock leaves the court crestfallen and beaten emotionally.

There is a comic twist to the tale now. Eager to show his gratitude to the young lawyer, Bassanio is forced to part with the ring given to him by Portia; similarly, Gratiano gives away Nerissa's ring to the lawyer's clerk. Portia's party and Bassanio's leave for Belmont separately. Portia and Nerissa demand their rings from their husbands. After some teasing, they reveal who the lawyer and his clerk actually were. Antonio is also informed that ships have returned. They are all happy including Jessica and Lorenzo, who are pleased to hear of their inheritance from Shylock.

All's well that ends well!

I hope you have read the plot summary. You may recall the first task (TASK 1) assigned on the play and I am sure you have noted down your responses to the questions posed therein.

a) I hope you have marked **the key points of the action** in the play from the plot summary. We will come back to this later, after we have had an overview of the plot act wise. It will help us to go over the key points of action to reconfirm our understanding.

b) The **main plot** of the play, you will agree, is the one concerning 'the merchant of Venice' Antonio and the Jewish moneylender Shylock – the ill will the latter bears against, and the opportunity he gets to take revenge on, the former, the former's misfortune in not being able to repay the money borrowed for Bassanio, Shylock taking the matter to court to demand his 'pound of flesh' from Antonio's body, and the sudden turn of events that beat the moneylender legally, financially, and emotionally.

The **sub-plots** that are interwoven around the main plot are: the mutual love between Bassanio and Portia that enables Antonio to be saved from Shylock's vengefulness and the test of Bassanio's love for her after the court battle is over; AND Shylock's daughter Jessica falling in love with Lorenzo, a Christian and friend of Antonio and Bassanio.

c) In TASK 2, you were asked to match the **main characters** of the play with brief descriptions of their roles in the play. The purpose of this task was to reinforce your understanding of the key roles played by each of the main characters in the overall plot. I hope you have

attempted the task successfully. Keep these brief descriptions of the characters for further elaboration later, after you have read the play in full, but as you go along you may be able to add more details about each character. For this purpose, you may create a mindmap for each character.

d) Who do you feel sorry for, and why? Do you feel sorry for Antonio for not being able to repay the loan of Bassanio and, consequently, for being at the mercy of the greedy and vengeful Shylock and nearly losing his life? On the other hand, do you feel sorry for Shylock for being mistreated and humiliated by Antonio and his friends, and for being forced by the clever 'Portia' to forgo the loan amount as well as his wealth and to give up his religion? As you go on reading the play, you may find evidence of either. You may then decide whose character emerges as the more powerful at the end.

### **An Overview of the Structure of the Play and its Setting**

**TASK 3:** Have a look at the structure of the play (i.e., the number of Acts and Scenes in each Act) and the setting for each scene. Every play of Shakespeare is in FIVE Acts and each Act is divided into a few scenes. Each scene has a different setting; sometimes consecutive scenes may have the same setting.

From your study of the number of scenes in Act and the settings for the scenes, what kinds of inferences or conclusions can you make? What do these suggest to you about Shakespeare's stagecraft? This is an exercise in predicting and making reasonable guesses about the key points of action in the play. For instance, how many scenes are there in Acts 4 and 5 compared to the number of scenes in Act 2? What are the common settings used in this play? How do the

settings alternate? Remember that there is no right or wrong answer; your guesses and predictions are as good as anyone else's.

### Act 1

Scene 1: Venice – A street

Scene 2: Belmont – A room in Portia's house

Scene 3: Venice – A public place

### Act 2

Scene 1: Belmont – A room in Portia's house

Scene 2: Venice – A street

Scene 3: Venice – A room in Shylock's house

Scene 4: Venice – A street

Scene 5: Venice – Before Shylock's house

Scene 6: Venice – Before Shylock's house

Scene 7: Belmont – In Portia's house

Scene 8: Venice – A street

Scene 9: Belmont – A room in Portia's house

### Act 3

Scene 1: Venice – A street

Scene 2: Belmont – A room in Portia's house

Scene 3: Venice – A street

Scene 4: Belmont – A room in Portia's house

Scene 5: Belmont – A garden

### Act 4

Scene 1: Venice – A court of Justice

Scene 2: Venice – A street

### Act 5

Scene 1: Belmont – Avenue to Portia's house

### Main Characters

**TASK 2:** Match the characters with their descriptions.

Character	Description
Jessica	Heiress to a great fortune. She is one of Shakespeare's most intelligent and shrewd heroines. Her late father had decreed in his will that she should marry only the suitor who chooses the correct casket (out of three caskets) containing her portrait.
Lorenzo	Shylock's young daughter who falls in love with Lorenzo and elopes with him dressed as a boy. She dislikes her father and is not happy to live with him in his house.
Shylock	The wealthy 'Merchant of Venice'. He sometimes lends money, but doesn't charge interest. In this play, he borrows money for Bassanio from a Jewish moneylender.

Nerissa	A typical Elizabethan lover and nobleman, generally careless in spending his money. In this play, he requests his close friend to lend him money so that he can appear rich when he tries to win Portia's love.
Antonio	A Jewish moneylender, who believes that, as a moneylender, it is his right to charge interest, so he is hated for his greed. Christians also hate him for his religion.
Portia	Portia's merry lady-in-waiting and confidante, who sympathizes with Portia in her predicament about her lack of freedom in choosing her husband.
Bassanio	The light-hearted friend of Bassanio. He never gets tired of talking and goes with him to Belmont, where he falls in love with Nerissa.
Gratiano	A friend of Antonio and Bassanio. He woos and wins Jessica's love.

### Key to the Matching Task (TASK 2)

Character	Description
Portia	Heiress to a great fortune. She is one of Shakespeare's most intelligent and shrewd heroines. Her late father had decreed in his will that she should marry only the suitor who chooses the correct casket (out of three caskets) containing her portrait.
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Bassanio	A typical Elizabethan lover and nobleman, generally careless in spending his money. In this play, he requests his close friend Antonio to lend him money so that he can appear rich when he tries to win Portia's love.
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Nerissa	Portia's merry lady-in-waiting and confidante, who sympathizes with Portia in her predicament about her lack of freedom in choosing her husband.
Lorenzo	A friend of Antonio and Bassanio. He woos Jessica and wins her love.
Gratiano	The light-hearted friend of Bassanio. He never gets tired of talking and goes with him to Belmont, where he falls in love with Nerissa.

**[NOTE: What is published here is the initial part of a series of materials posted for an online workshop on Shakespeare being conducted using *Edmodo* by Prof. S. Rajagopalan on behalf of ELTAI.]**

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