

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

Character Notes

Jews were banned from England by King Edward 1 in 1290. They were allowed to stay if they converted to Christianity. Shakespeare's audience would not have known Jews, except from legend. A Jewish doctor from Spain who had converted was executed by Queen Elizabeth I for a plot against her life.

DUKE OF VENICE

The ruler of Venice, who presides over Antonio's trial. Although a powerful man, the duke's state is built on respect for the law, and he is unable to help Antonio.

PORTIA

A wealthy heiress from Belmont. Portia's beauty is matched only by her intelligence. She is bound by a clause in her father's will that forces her to marry whichever suitor chooses correctly among three caskets. Fortunately, her true love, Bassanio, chooses correctly and they are married. Far and away the cleverest of the play's characters, it is Portia, in the disguise of a young law clerk, who saves Antonio from Shylock's knife.

PRINCE OF MOROCCO

A Moorish prince who seeks Portia's hand in marriage. The prince of Morocco seeks to win her by picking one of the three caskets. Certain that the caskets reflect Portia's beauty and stature, the prince of Morocco picks the gold chest, which proves to be incorrect.

THE PRINCE OF ARRAGON

An arrogant Spanish nobleman who also attempts to win Portia's hand by picking a casket. Like the prince of Morocco, however, the prince of Arragon chooses unwisely. He picks the silver casket because the third – of lead – is beneath him. The silver casket reveals a message calling him an idiot.

BASSANIO

A gentleman of Venice, and a kinsman and dear friend to Antonio. Bassanio borrows money from Shylock with Antonio as his guarantor, in order to woo the wealthy Portia. Bassanio's honesty and true love for Portia means he succeeds in winning her hand when confronted with the trial of the caskets.

ANTONIO

A successful merchant whose love for his friend Bassanio prompts him to sign Shylock's contract. At the time of signing he feels certain that there is no risk in the deal but when all his ships are lost at sea he finds himself in a situation in which he owes Shylock a pound of his own flesh. Antonio is a mercurial figure, often inexplicably melancholy and, as Shylock points out, possessed of an incorrigible dislike of Jews.

NERISSA

Portia's lady-in-waiting and confidante. She marries Graziano and escorts Portia to Venice by disguising herself as a law clerk.

GRAZIANO

A friend of Bassanio's who accompanies him to Belmont. A coarse and garrulous young man, Graziano is Shylock's most vocal and insulting critic during the trial. While Bassanio courts Portia, Graziano falls in love with and weds Portia's lady-in-waiting, Nerissa.

LORENZO

A friend of Bassanio and Antonio, Lorenzo is in love with Shylock's daughter Jessica. He schemes to help Jessica escape from her father's house, and he eventually elopes with her to Belmont.

SALERIO

A Venetian gentleman, and friend to Antonio, Bassanio, and Lorenzo. Salerio escorts the newlyweds Jessica and Lorenzo to Belmont, and returns with Bassanio and Graziano for Antonio's trial. He is often almost indistinguishable from his companion Solario.

SOLARIO

A Venetian gentleman, and frequent counterpart to Salerio.

SHYLOCK

A Jewish moneylender in Venice. When Antonio first asks Shylock for the loan he offers it without interest on condition that Antonio will apologise for the racist way he has treated him in the past. Antonio refuses and Shylock demands a forfeit of a pound of Antonio's flesh if Antonio is unable to re-pay the loan on time. Although seen by the rest of the play's characters as an inhuman monster, Shylock has many poignant points to make about the plight of a Jew in Christian Venice. Some argue that the cruelty of his punishment at the end (when he loses all his wealth – half of which is given to the disinherited daughter Jessica – and is forced to convert to Christianity) makes Shylock the victim of this play.

JESSICA

Although she is Shylock's daughter, Jessica hates life in her father's house and elopes with a young Christian gentleman, Lorenzo. Shylock is furious at her betrayal and disinherits her. Since she elopes with some of his money he appears to care more for the lost money than his lost daughter. She converts to Christianity to marry Lorenzo. At the end of the trial she is given half her father's wealth and the rest is confiscated by the state.

LAUNCELOT GOBBO

Bassanio's servant. A comical, clownish figure who is especially adept at making puns, Launcelot leaves Shylock's service in order to work for Bassanio.

TUBAL

A Jew in Venice, and one of Shylock's friends.