

PLOT SUMMARY OF *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

Bassanio, a virtuous but spendthrift gentleman of Venice, seeks to woo and marry Portia, a rich heiress living in nearby Belmont. But he needs money in order to compete with his rival suitors, and approaches his close friend, the merchant Antonio, for a loan. Since all his own wealth is tied up in a large cargo of goods at sea, expected home soon, Antonio agrees to borrow the sum himself from the Jewish moneylender Shylock. Resentful of the prejudice he has previously endured, Shylock nevertheless agrees to lend Antonio the money on the frivolous condition that if Antonio fails to pay it back after three months, he must permit Shylock to cut a pound of flesh from his body. Antonio signs a bond to that effect, and the deal is settled.

The terms of Portia's marriage have been determined by her late father's will: each of her suitors must choose between three symbolic caskets (made of gold, silver, and lead) – on pain of remaining single ever afterwards if they make the wrong choice, and this has deterred a series of worthless chancers, as Portia's maidservant Nerissa reminds her. To their relief, when the Prince of Morocco, and later the Prince of Aragon, take the test, they both fail, each rejecting the leaden casket in favour of, respectively, the showier gold and silver ones.

Meanwhile, Shylock's clownish servant Launcelot Gobbo has deserted his master to work instead for Bassanio; and Shylock's daughter Jessica, assisted by Bassanio and Gratiano before their departure for Belmont, successfully elopes with their friend Lorenzo during the Venice Carnival, along with a stolen casket of her father's gold and jewels. Shylock rails against his misfortune – but then news comes that all Antonio's ships have been lost at sea. Shylock vows to collect his pound of flesh in revenge.

News of Antonio's imprisonment reaches Belmont in the jubilant aftermath of Bassanio's successful choice of the lead casket, much to the relief of Portia (who has fallen in love with him) – and to Nerissa, who has fallen in love with Gratiano. The couples are betrothed, and both men sworn to wear their fiancées' rings forever. Bassanio and Gratiano hurry back to Venice – closely followed by Portia and Nerissa. Entrusting her home to the newly-arrived Lorenzo and Jessica, Portia disguises herself as a male lawyer from Padua (with Nerissa as her clerk), and appears for the defence at Antonio's trial. But what can Portia possibly say against the terms of Shylock's legally binding "pound of flesh"? And what can Bassanio say when the triumphant lawyer asks nothing for payment – except his engagement ring?

