

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

1564-1616

■ Biography

He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564, probably on St George's day (April 23rd); his father, was a glovemaker and his mother came from the rich Arden family. In 1582 he married Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a farmer. In the mid-1580s he moved to London. In the capital, Shakespeare started a brilliant theatrical career, and became a **successful** and well-known **playwright**.

From 1594 onwards, he became associated with 'The King's Men', the most stable and prosperous drama company of the Elizabethan age. With them, Shakespeare worked for the rest of his career as an actor, a playwright and a stockholder, investing money both in the building of a new playhouse (The Globe, in 1599) and in the acquisition of the indoor Blackfriars Theatre (1608). In 1597 he bought the largest and finest house in Stratford, where he finally retired until his death in 1616.

The Merchant of Venice

Dates and sources *The Merchant of Venice* was written between 1596 and 1597 and performed for the first time in 1600.

Plot Bassanio is in love with Portia, a rich and beautiful lady from Belmont, an imaginary city near Venice. Portia cannot decide for herself who to marry.

In fact, her father's will stipulates that her suitors must choose among three chests, one of gold, one of silver, and one of lead, and only the man who chooses the chest with her portrait inside will win Portia's hand in marriage. Bassanio asks his friend Antonio, a rich and well-known merchant, for a loan. Antonio has invested all his money in his ships, which are at sea carrying silk and spices, so he has no cash to lend Bassanio. Thus he borrows 3,000 gold coins from Shylock, a Jewish moneylender. Shylock lends him the money on the condition that if Antonio does not repay his debt within three months, he will take a pound of his flesh.

News arrives that Antonio's ships have been lost at sea. Shylock is very excited because he will be able to cut a pound of flesh from his enemy. He explains that Antonio hates him because he is Jewish, and then delivers a famous monologue in defence of the humanity of Jews. Meanwhile Bassanio chooses the correct chest and wins Portia's hand and her wealth. A double marriage is celebrated: Portia and Bassanio, Nerissa (Portia's maid) and Gratiano (Bassanio's friend). When they learn the news that Antonio is about to lose a pound of his flesh, Bassanio and Gratiano head back to Venice to help him.

Nobody succeeds in persuading Shylock to show mercy. When he is about to cut Antonio's flesh, Portia and Nerissa, disguised as a lawyer and lawyer's clerk, point out that Shylock must not spill a drop of blood, since blood is not mentioned in the contract. Shylock is defeated. Furthermore, according to the law, any alien who threatens the life of a Venetian citizen will be punished

for attempted murder. Thus Shylock (a Jew and therefore an alien) is punished by the Duke of Venice with the confiscation of his wealth and a forced conversion to Christianity.

Themes In Shakespeare's time Jews were excluded by law from many professions and consequently obliged to find alternative employment. One in which they excelled was lending money with interest, an occupation forbidden to Christians, since it was considered usury, a serious crime.

Their prosperity caused envy so they were depicted as greedy, deceptive and evil. In Venice, although Jews were tolerated, above all because they were useful: as moneylenders, they played an important part in the Venetian economy. As a result, Venice became the site of a large Jewish ghetto.

Shylock the Jew, Antonio the Christian. *The Merchant of Venice* reflects the anti-semitic tradition. **Shylock the Jew** has all the characteristics of the typical villain. He is revengeful and plans his revenge coldly and with determination. He rejoices at the news of the loss of his ships. At the trial he shows no mercy. Yet he is **more than just a villain**. The way Shakespeare depicts him makes the audience sympathise with him in spite of his flaws. Shylock's bitterness is given plenty of justifiable reasons. First of all, years of being ridiculed by Antonio. At the end of the play his loneliness and the intense humiliation he suffers make the audience side with him.

On the other hand, **Antonio the Christian**, presented as a respectable, wealthy merchant and a loyal, generous friend, **hides something vicious in his nature**. Protected by the laws he bullies Shylock whenever he meets him. At the trial, when he could show Christian mercy and forgiveness, he seeks revenge instead and presses the court to inflict on his enemy the degrading punishment of his conversion to Christianity.

Hath a dog money?

William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-97), Act I, Scene 3

Antonio meets Shylock to borrow the money he needs for his friend Bassanio. They discuss and negotiate the terms of the loan.

Before you read

1. **CRITICAL THINKING** What is money-lending usually associated with? Write down a few notes about the topic, then exchange them with your classmates.

Venice. A public place.

SHYLOCK Three thousand ducats; 'tis a good round¹ sum.

Three months from twelve; then, let me see; the rate² –

ANTONIO Well, Shylock, shall we be beholding³ to you?

SHYLOCK Signior Antonio, many a time and oft

5 In the Rialto you have rated⁴ me

About my moneys and my usances⁵:

Still have I borne it with a patient shrug⁶,

For sufferance⁷ is the badge⁸ of all our tribe.

You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,

10 And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine⁹,

And all for use of that which is mine own.

Well then, it now appears you need my help:

[...]

What should I say to you? Should I not say

'Hath a dog money? is it possible

15 A cur¹⁰ can lend three thousand ducats?' Or

Shall I bend low and in a bondman's key¹¹,

With bated breath¹² and whispering humbleness, Say this;

'Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last;

[...]

You call'd me dog; and for these courtesies

20 I'll lend you thus much moneys'?

ANTONIO I am as like to¹³ call thee so again,

To spit on thee again, to spurn¹⁴ thee too.

If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not

As to thy friends; for¹⁵ when did friendship take

25 A breed for barren metal of his friend¹⁶?

But lend it rather to thine enemy,

Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face

Exact¹⁷ the penalty.

SHYLOCK Why, look you, how you storm¹⁸!

30 I would be friends with you and have your love,

Forget the shames¹⁹ that you have stain'd²⁰ me with,

1. **round**: grande, sostanziosa

2. **rate**: tasso

3. **beholding**: in debito

4. **rated**: criticato

5. **usances**: interessi su prestiti

6. **shrug**: scrollata di spalle

7. **sufferance**: sopportazione

8. **badge**: marchio distintivo

9. **gaberdine**: mantello

10. **cur**: cane bastardo

11. **in a bondman's key**: con i modi di un servo

12. **With bated breath**: timorosamente, ansiosamente (letteralmente, con respiro trattenuto)

13. **I am as like to**: probabilmente mi ritroverò a

14. **spurn**: cacciarti via a calci

15. **for**: poiché

16. **take / A breed ... friend**: richiede al

proprio amico qualcosa in cambio di denaro (**breed**: ciò che è generato; **barren**: sterile)

17. **Exact**: esigere

18. **storm**: vi infuriate

19. **shames**: insulti

20. **stain'd**: coperto (letteralmente, macchiato)

Supply your present wants²¹ and take no doit
Of usance²² for my moneys, and you'll not hear me:
This is kind²³ I offer.

35 **BASSANIO** This were kindness.

SHYLOCK This kindness will I show.

Go with me to a notary, seal²⁴ me there
Your single bond²⁵; and, in a merry sport²⁶,
If you repay me not on such a day,

40 In such a place, such sum or sums as are
Express'd in the condition, let the forfeit²⁷
Be nominated for an equal²⁸ pound
Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
In what part of your body pleaseth me.

45 **ANTONIO** Content, i' faith: I'll seal to such a bond
And say there is much kindness in the Jew.

BASSANIO You shall not seal to such a bond for me:
I'll rather dwell²⁹ in my necessity.

ANTONIO Why, fear not, man; I will not forfeit³⁰ it:

50 Within these two months, that's a month before
This bond expires, I do expect return
Of thrice three times the value of this bond.
[...]

ANTONIO Yes Shylock, I will seal unto this bond.

21. **wants:** necessità

22. **doit / Of usance:** piccola somma
richiesta come interesse sul prestito

23. **kind:** gentilezza, umanità

24. **seal:** sottoscrivete

25. **bond:** contratto

26. **in a merry sport:** giusto per
scherzo (letteralmente, piacevole
divertimento)

27. **forfeit:** penale

28. **equal:** preciso

29. **dwell:** rimanere

30. **forfeit:** sarò privato (del pezzo di
carne)

Understanding the text

1. Tick the correct alternative.

a. The bond between Shylock and Antonio expires in

- 1. 12 months.
- 2. 3 months.
- 3. 60 days.

b. Remembering all the insults received from Antonio, Shylock

- 1. thinks that he must respond with humility to Antonio's insults.
- 2. wonders if he should refuse or accept Antonio's request.
- 3. tells him that he cannot lend him money, because Antonio sees him as a dog.

c. Antonio

- 1. promises he will never abuse Shylock again.

2. asks Shylock to lend him money as to a friend.

3. tells Shylock to lend him money as to an enemy.

d. Shylock says that

- 1. a storm will destroy Antonio's ships.
- 2. Antonio will have to pay interest for using his money.
- 3. if Antonio can't pay back his debt, what he wants in exchange for his money is something worthless.

e. The bond proposed by Shylock

- 1. worries Bassanio, who is afraid for his friend's life.
- 2. is nothing serious according to Antonio.
- 3. requires an interest twice times as high as the sum of money borrowed.

Rounding it up

2. **FIRST** Fill in the text with the words provided.

merciless • friendship • wrongs • provoke • understand • control • generous • revenge • advantage • temper

Shylock takes [1] of Antonio's 'weak' position to [2] him and emphasize the embarrassing situation in which the Christian merchant finds himself. He then humiliates him by offering to lend him money with no interest as a sign of [3] In other words, thanks to the apparently [4] conditions of the loan agreement, Shylock

is taking his [5], which will be accomplished by Antonio's death. Antonio reacts initially by showing self-assurance and defiance, then by losing his [6] The Jew, on the contrary, is in [7] of himself throughout the entire conversation. In spite of the [8] bond that Shylock forces on Antonio and his thirst for revenge, the Jew's memory of all the [9] done to him makes the readers [10], if not justify, the moneylender's reasons.