

# To what extent do you feel that the merchant of venice

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



The Merchant of Venice is a middle comedy written during the Elizabethan period with a typical comic ending: the couples pair off, the rings are exchanged. There is feasting and drinking. There are also a number of comic characters. However, it also includes some very cruel moments which create tension through the play. Starting with its comic structure, Antonio is asked for a loan by Bassanio, his dearest friend, but he cannot help, since all his fortune is invested in his ships at sea. Therefore, he goes to a moneylender, Shylock, a Jew.

The Jew refuses to charge him any interest; instead, he wants a pound of flesh if the debt is not paid on time. Because of this, the comedy at this point is replaced by a cruel mercenary atmosphere. Contrary to Antonio's and others' expectations, Antonio's ships are lost at sea, which means that he cannot repay Shylock's loan. As a result, a cruel trial opens in court; Antonio prepares to lose his life. Shylock, showing the cruel streak in his character, refuses all pleas of money from Antonio and the Duke himself.

Here, the mood of the play is dominated by a tense atmosphere of inhumanity and despair. It would appear that the cruelty is towards the piteous merchant, Antonio, but actually, when the trial comes to the final decision, the situation is completely changed and turned back on to Shylock by Portia. She points out all the laws against Shylock, who finally leaves the court a broken man. This is where the cruelty is mixed with the comedy. However, as the action comes to an end, happy events happen, such as, the couples pair off and there is drinking, feasts and weddings.

This overall plot shows that the story is indeed a comedy mixed with some events of cruelty. Verbal humour is one of the features of comedy. This suggests that the characters in the story are not taking life seriously. In Act 1 Scene 1, as Antonio sighs that he is the man who plays a sad part on the world stage, Gratiano jokes that he would like to be the fool instead. 'Let me play the Fool. With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come...' On the surface, he contributes humour to the play. Portia is also another character who makes sarcastic jokes.

As she says in Act 1 Scene 2, 'I had rather be married to a death's head with a bone in his mouth than to either of these'. This means she would rather be married to a hideous skull or a dead man but not to the two princes. Some characters are clowns, such as Gratiano, Launcelot and his blind father, Gobbo. Gratiano smiles and takes life easy. He tries to cheer up Antonio and jokingly accuses him of deliberately looking sad in order to win a reputation for serious wisdom. He is also a talkative and high-spirited man in the way he behaves and acts.

In Act 2 scene 3, he says, 'if I do not put on a sober habit, talk with respect, and swear but now and then, wear prayer books in my pocket, look demurely, nay more, while grace is saying, hood mine eyes thus with my hat, and sigh and say 'amen', use all the observance of civility like one well studied in a sad ostent to please his grandma, never trust me more.' This is what he says to Bassanio, which is evidence that he is not a serious man in many ways. He always tries to raise the joyful atmosphere in the play.

Shakespeare uses his light-hearted character to create a cheerful atmosphere which is a part of comedy.

A further example of comedy in the play is when Gratiano and Nerissa act a hilarious argument at the end of the play. Nerissa complains that Gratiano has lost her wedding ring. He explains that he gave it to the judge's clerk at Venice in return for his great service to Antonio; but Nerissa pretends to suspect that the ring was given to a girl. An amusing pretended argument between lovers always makes fun. The audience know that Nerissa went unrecognized in the trial scene and they are enjoying the trick that she is playing on Gratiano.

In Act 2 scene2, the most ridiculous scene is that Launcelot fools with his father. Old Gobbo arrives in search of his son, whom he has not seen for years and whom he does not recognize on the street. Launcelot plays a joke on him, by pretending to him that his son is dead and the old man is fooled: 'oh heaven! This is my true-begotten father who being more than sand-blind, high gravel-blind, knows me not. I will try confusions with him'. This idea definitely belongs to a comedy, but in some ways, Launcelot's treatment of his father could be seen as cruel.

It would be like an old disabled man, trying hard to find his only relative, his son, but being told that he had died, and realizing that he would be alone for the rest of his life. How sad and cruel it would be to lose a dear son. The bond however between Antonio and Shylock shows the brutal aspects of the play. Shylock lends his money to Antonio and wants his flesh if he cannot

pay back on time: 'If you repay me not on such a day... let the forfeit be nominated for an equal pound of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken in what part of your body pleaseth me.

He emphasizes that the pound of flesh cannot be replaced by any pleas of mercy and refuses offers of a loan many times over. He feels intense hatred for Antonio as he is a Christian: 'O father Abram, what these Christians are, whose own hard dealings teaches them suspect the thoughts of others! He wants to take his life by this bond, which is actually revenge. He takes it to the court. The trial is an important part in the play as it both represents cruelty and humour. The cruelty mostly comes from the treatment towards Shylock.

He seems to be the villain all the way through, but he, in some ways, is depicted as a victim. In Act 4 Scene 1, Shylock is preparing to win Antonio's flesh and being so inhuman that he does not allow Antonio to have a surgeon to attend his wounds because it was not named in the bond. Just before he takes his flesh, Portia warns Shylock that if he sheds a drop of Christian blood, then all his property will be confiscated. This is certainly impossible to do. He then agrees to accept the triple payment of the debt, but Portia insists that he must keep to the strict terms of the bond.

He must cut a pound of flesh exactly, otherwise he loses all his goods: 'Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more but just a pound of flesh. ' Shylock is unsettled by this and nervously asks merely for the money. However, Portia will allow only the flesh nominated in the bond, to be taken at the

Jew's peril. At this point, Shylock attempts to leave the court, but Portia detains him and informs him of another law, by which an alien who plots against the life of a Venetian may lose his life and property.

The final condition of pardon is that Shylock becomes a Christian. This would be the cruelest thing to happen from Shylock's point of view but to the audience, it would have a comical twist. He finally leaves the court a broken man. From here the treatment towards Shylock is absolutely ferocious. He is being forced and has no choice. The language Portia uses is callous, too. When Shylock asks 'Is that the law', she then replies: 'Thyself shall see the Act. For as thou urgest justice, be assured thou shalt have justice more than thou desirest.'

The justice that Shylock wants is cruel and Portia is suggesting that the justice Shylock will get will be even more cruel. The clown, Gratiano, breaks into the conversation and laughs, 'O learned Judge! Mark, Jew: a learned judge.' He keeps on repeating this, which seems comic but ruthless. Nevertheless, the defeat of Shylock is followed by his own suffering, which, to the audience is highly amusing. Furthermore, Nerissa acting as the legal clerk and Portia as the Doctor of Laws is entertaining because only the audience knows the truth.

The merchants of Venice and Shylock hate each other because of their religions. As we know, Shylock is a Jew, who is totally an alien in the world of Christians. This brings in many disagreements that happen between both sides. Shakespeare uses this to create an antagonistic situation. Apart from

the bond with Antonio, Shylock is also treated badly by the others, for instance, in the trial, Gratiano keeps on using his own words against him.

As Shylock cries: 'A Daniel come to judgement; yea a Daniel!...' Gratiano says: 'A second Daniel; a Daniel, Jew! Shylock also said: 'Tis very true. O wise and upright judge...' and when he is upset, Gratiano baits him with: 'O upright judge! Mark, Jew-O learned judge!' From this, we can see that Shylock is not always the one to treat others badly, he is sometimes treated badly himself and baited by the others as he is an alien and Jew. This play is particularly rich in famous Shakespearean speeches and aphorisms.

It is also meaningful, telling the audience about the feelings and emotions of characters. Shylock makes some powerful speeches to express himself: 'To bait fish withal; if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half... I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimension... fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means... if you prick us, do we not bleed?... if a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example?' This is a very long emotional speech in Act 3 Scene 1, which Shylock uses to plead for equality of treatment.

He is angry and demands understanding that Jews have the same feelings as Christians, and, when wronged, they too will seek revenge. By this we can feel that it is cruel that every one picks on him and criticizes him for being merciless towards the Christians. Another example of him being treated brutally is in the trial when he says: 'Nay, take my life and all, pardon not

that: You take my house when you do take the prop that doth sustain my house; you take my life when you do take the means whereby I live. '

To him, money is the most important thing in his life. As Portia raise that all his property will be confiscated, it is very ruthless as he will therefore lose everything in his life at the situation of missing a daughter, losing property and the trial towards Antonio. He claims that if they are going to take over his money, they should take his life at the same time. He would rather die than living alone on the street. In conclusion, this play is a typical comedy with also cruel plot, which gives interest to the play.

To its end, Portia makes fun of Bassanio telling him that she slept with the doctor in return for the ring, but then she confesses the whole story of how she was the doctor, and Nerissa the clerk, at the court in Venice. Other good news is that Antonio's ships 'are richly come to harbour'. Finally the joy of Antonio and the lovers are complete, and here ends the wonderful play. From this play, it makes us understand more about people's emotional response and the way we should behave. It is very appealing to our imaginations and gives us a wider sensitivity to what we see and so is life enhancing.