

The merchant of venice essay examples

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



The Merchant of Venice would be notable if it simply coined the phrase “A Pound of Flesh;” however, there are other distinctions that set it apart even for an author as notable as Shakespeare. In act III scene one there is a speech that contains the quote, “If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that” (III. i. 53–57). This play also contains the speech that begins “The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven. Upon the place beneath. . . .” (IV. i. 179–197). That speech stands in sharp counterpoint to the earlier lines.

This play also contains two notable character types, Portia Shakespeare’s first strong woman and a Shylock Jewish usurer that is someone who evokes sympathy, even empathy and understanding instead of the customary contempt that most Christians held most Jews in. Perhaps this is who Sir Walter Scott was thinking of when he penned his characters of Jessica and her father in *Ivanhoe*. In the remainder the play resembles many of Shakespeare’s other romantic plays. There is a courtship, confusion and resolution. There are moral lessons, some bawdy comedy and a few ideas the more retrospective audience members might find worth thinking about. The action opens with a conversation among friends and particularly between Antonio and Bassanio. Bassanio has a problem, he loves a wealthy heiress, Portia, they met earlier and he feels she might return his affection, but he needs the resources to travel in style to court her, and he does not have them. Antonio does not have the cash on hand either, so he borrows it from Shylock, a Jewish moneylender who has suffered abuse from many

affluent Christians, and from Antonio in particular. Shylock sees an opportunity for revenge and agrees to lend Antonio the money most unusual terms. Instead of interest, he gets an agreement that if Antonio defaults he must pay with a pound of his own flesh. Even with these odd, and perilous terms Antonio agrees and Bassanio has his money to court Portia. To sharpen Shylock's hatred, his servant Lancelot quits to work for Bassanio. Even closer to his heart, Shylock's daughter Jessica elopes with Antonio's friend Lorenzo.

Romance becomes the focus of the central portion of the play. In the beginning Portia talked to Nerissa, her lady-in-waiting about unsuitability of her suitors, how she did not like that her father's will put her in the positions where she had to marry the man who chose the right casket, and how she enjoyed a prior visit from Bassanio. The central portion of the play opens with two other suitors selecting first the gold, then the silver caskets, and being wrong. When Bassanio and his traveling companion Gratiano affairs move quickly between Bassanio and Portia, they declare their love he pick the right box, and they are happy. As quickly as that moves along there is time for Gratiano to court and win Nerissa. The ladies each give their men the gift of rings the men swear they will never remove them. The couples decide on a double wedding but celebrations are cut short by the news that Antonio's ships were lost at sea. Bassanio and Gratiano rush back to Venice try to save Antonio's life. Portia and Nerissa, disguised as men go to Venice as well.

Portia and Nerissa succeed where Bassanio and Gratiano fail. Antonio's life is spared, because although he owes the pound of flesh, Shylock cannot shed a

drop of his blood. The judgment rendered is generally liberal in the context of what the average Jew could expect from a Christian court. Now all that is left is for the guys to explain themselves about how they came to give away those rings that they swore would never leave their fingers. The ladies are kind, all is revealed and all is forgiven. The words “ and they lived happily ever after” could almost be inserted here.

The great difference between the written play as it would have been presented in Shakespeare’s day and the 1973 TV movie version comes from the setting and costuming. Shakespeare sent many of his romances in passionate Italy. His English audience was ready to accept the concept of love and passion, but things like that happened somewhere else, certainly not in London. Accordingly, Shakespeare chose Italy and often Venice as a believable location for these passionate, and often comedic exchanges. This allowed for rich costuming lavish or sparse sets as circumstances dictated, in short the Venetian setting was beyond the experience of his audience so he had the freedom to create the physical scenes and social structures that would best move along the action in his plays.

Conversely, in 1973, Victorian England was sufficiently removed from everyday life to make the play believable. The language and the phrasing fits well into those scenes. It is more believable for audiences from the 1970s and in later years that Shakespearian English could be delivered in Victorian England than in Italian speaking Venice of the 16th century. The soft “ English Rose” scenes were designed to fit this concept. The relatively sparse sets are designed to lend a timeless element to the play. It is the concept that an English garden has a somewhat timely element, as do the English

courthouses.

Interestingly, these changes in century, continent and scene do not take away from the power of Shakespeare's play and characters. Portia is quite comfortable in an English garden surrounded by soft pink roses. Shylock's character loses nothing in the transition. We can see how society took its toll on the man. His anguish at being a Jew, who never the less is a man who bleeds, who feels, who dies, and who seeks revenge. In other circumstances, for other men his demands for a pound of flesh would seem monstrous, from a man who after a life of abuse suffered the loss of his daughter, is if not justifiable but understandable. As to Portia and Nerissa, well strong, intelligent, witty, beautiful women belong where ever we are lucky enough to find them.

Once again, audiences need that little bit of distance to become immersed and involved in this play. It is almost as if they feel it could happen, perhaps it could happen to you, but not here, not now and not to me. Never the less, the story and the lessons it teaches will long have its place in the hearts, minds and consciences of its audiences.

Works Cited

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