

# Merchant of venice

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Merchant of Venice I agree with the statement saying that the main issues of The Merchant of Venice are credited to the development of Shylock and Portia. Throughout the story, the characters of Shylock and Portia are the ones who raise many significant matters to do with Venetian society and even our society today. Shylock's experiences in the story bring up topics of racism and revenge, while through the character of Portia, issues such as justice, mercy and the role of women in a patriarchal society, are explored. However, I also believe that through the other characters of Bassanio and Antonio, important subjects of friendship and loyalty are established. One of the most predominant issues expressed in The Merchant of Venice would be race. In the play, it is evident through the behaviours of the other characters, that the Jewish people in Venetian society were largely looked down upon and regarded as inferior. We are definitely able to see this kind of unjust treatment towards the Jewish people through the character of Shylock, who was stereotypically depicted as a spiteful moneylender. In their society, Christianity and Judaism were not just religions, but racial identities that defined a person's status. Shylock is labelled with dehumanising insults by Antonio and is referred to as a " misbeliever", a " cut-throat dog" and a " cur". Antonio curses Shylock's religion and ethnicity by mocking him and consistently mentioning what he sees as idiosyncrasies of Judaism. This can be seen through Shylock's professional practice of charging interest, causing Antonio to be resentful towards all the Jewish moneylenders. He also physically demonstrates his disdain by kicking and spitting on Shylock. Shylock expresses his frustration in the discrimination of Jews in his " Hath not a Jew eyes" speech, which is perhaps the most famous passage in the

text. In his speech, he asks " if you prick us do we not bleed? " insisting that Jews and Christians share a common humanity. Shylock also exposes the hypocrisy of the Christian characters who are always talking about love and mercy — Yet their words do not reflect on their actions as they alienate Shylock merely because he is Jewish. Through the character of Shylock, revenge is another topic that Shakespeare places emphasis upon. As a Jew, Shylock has had to experience much suffering due to Christians, as shown in the instances with Antonio. Jessica, his beloved daughter, has also fled his household to elope with a Christian and taken his money and possessions. These negative experiences in his life heighten his desire to gain revenge on Antonio for all that he has suffered as a Jew. In Act 3, Shylock seems to focus all his pent up anger and distress on Antonio, repeating again and again the phrase " Let him look to his bond" to assert how determined he is to take his " pound of flesh". When Salarino asks what good is Antonio's flesh to Shylock, Shylock declares that " If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge", meaning that the suffering of Antonio will fulfil his desire to get even and make up for the emotional torment he has endured. Shylock then speaks of a Christian's " humility" with sarcasm. The " humility" of a Christian, Shylock says, ceases when a Christian is harmed, as the Christian takes revenge. Revenge is the Christian's course of action and will also be Shylock's solution to his sufferings, as proclaimed in the quote: " The villainy you teach me I will execute". The Merchant of Venice also focuses on the issues of mercy and justice, which are portrayed through the character of Portia, whose views on mercy are particularly strong. The notions of mercy and justice were certainly conveyed in her famous speech on the " quality of

mercy" and in her actions towards Shylock. Going into the trial, Portia knows that she has the upper hand, but rather than immediately identifying the detrimental flaw in Shylock's contract, she gives him an opportunity to show mercy. Portia states that mercy and justice should go hand in hand as "mercy seasons justice". She acknowledges that Shylock is justified to his "pound of flesh," but she pleads with him to forego justice and show mercy, as "in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation", emphasising that mercy, not justice, will save us. She asserts that mercy is something that will be rewarding by the giving and the taking, as "it is twice blest". Just like how we all "pray for mercy", "that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy" — meaning that since we are saved by God being merciful towards us, we should also be merciful to others. When Shylock dismisses her appeal and demands for justice as he "craves the law", she warns Shylock about the irony for insisting on justice without mercy — that eventually someone will do the same when dealing with him. The role of women in a patriarchal society was another main topic of the play that was represented through Portia. During this point in time, women were not deemed as highly as men. Furthermore, a woman's identity was constructed by the man they married. Instead of being able to dictate her own decisions, Portia had to be subjected to the luck of a suitor choosing the right casket. We are shown that Portia is controlled by her father as she states to Nerissa that, "I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father". Her words clearly evoke her obedience and demonstrate the lack of authority she has over her own life. However, Portia is self-assured and thinks nothing of entering the

male world of justice and business. She has to disguise herself as a man to participate in the trial, but rather than finding that as an insult, Portia finds humour in it because she knows that she can outwit the men at their own game. Portia transcends her expected role in society as a demure and submissive female as she displays her prowess in the courtroom, creating a memorable moment with her “quality of mercy” speech. Portia using ethics and intelligence to manipulate the law to her advantage was something that men of that time would not believe a woman to be capable of. The fact that Portia, a woman, is able to sway the courts is significant when speaking of the role of women in a male-dominated society. Although many of the main issues were developed through Shylock and Portia, I also believe that Bassanio and Antonio should be credited to expressing the important issues of friendship and loyalty. From the play, we can see that the two characters value each other very much as close friends. Antonio shows that he is willing to do anything for his friend and even makes a deal with Shylock in order to lend money to Bassanio, so that Bassanio could pursue Portia. Furthermore, when Antonio is at a chance of dying, Bassanio remains loyal to their friendship and seems to choose it over love. He states that life itself, his wife Portia and the entire world “are not with me esteem’d above thy life”, meaning that he would do anything for Antonio and that he was worth more to him than anything else. Through the development of the characters Shylock and Portia in Shakespeare’s play *The Merchant of Venice*, many substantial issues were addressed. Issues such as racism, revenge, mercy, justice and the role of women in a male-dominated society, were all very prevalent in Venetian society during the times of Shakespeare, and were all

represented very well through these two characters and various others.

Shylock and Portia raise numerous important topics, not only significant to Venetian society, but also relevant to our society today.