



The Merchant of Venice

The Merchant of Venice is a play by William Shakespeare. It was written in England back in 1596. This was the time when Queen Elizabeth I was reaching the end of her reign¹ and was in the middle of a conflict with Spain. She spent more and more time at the theatre, and Shakespeare had to write more and more plays.



cruel way he usually treats him¹². What happens in the play, though, is that one of Antonio's friends, Lorenzo, is in love with Shylock's daughter, Jessica, and the two elope¹³ together. When Shylock discovers this and the fact that she has converted from Judaism to Christianity, he is furious¹⁴.

Meanwhile, Bassanio does go and woo Portia, and he wins her as his wife through a challenge set up by her deceased¹⁵ father. His friend Gratiano marries Portia's waiting woman, Nerissa, at the same time. Weeks pass, though, and Antonio loses all his money through a series of shipwrecks¹⁶. Because of this, when the time comes to pay back the loan, he has no money. Shylock, still furious about his daughter as well as about all that the "Christian" merchants have done to him, determines¹⁷ that he really will cut a whole pound of flesh from Antonio.

Bassanio finds out that Antonio has been arrested¹⁸, and so he and Gratiano leave Portia and Nerissa to go try to pay for his release. Meanwhile, the two women disguise themselves as men and go to court as a lawyer and clerk to defend Antonio. They win the case and Antonio is released, and the play ends with all of them returning separately to Portia's house, having a lovers' quarrel¹⁹, and then ending happily ever after despite everything.

People travel from far and wide to see the Globe, the theatre which Shakespeare ran in London. His plays are still performed there, and though originally only men acted in the roles, now women act in different parts as well. Whoever plays the different roles, the audiences still love them. Some people find

Shakespeare difficult to read because the wording is an older form of English. Anyone wanting to know something of the English language, however, has to read at least one of Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare actually created a lot of phrases used in the English language today, such as "pomp²⁰ and circumstance" and "sorry sight." Not only that, but he is also said to have added some 3,000 words to the Oxford English Dictionary. So you see, Shakespeare is not just important to English culture, but also vital to the English language itself!

There are a number of ways to make Shakespeare more accessible today. You can buy a copy of the play with the Shakespearean English on one side and modern English on the other. You can look it up on the web: try this site, for instance. <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/>

Popular teen movies in America such as "She's the Man" and "10 Things I Hate About You" are both movies based on Shakespeare's plays. Some very creative people have even come up with something called "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, Abridged²¹," which is a play in itself involving only three people. Together, they act out every single one of Shakespeare's plays in a very irreverent²² but funny manner—at a very fast speed. If you search the title on YouTube, you can find clips of their show... If nothing else, get a copy of one of the plays and try to put on your own production with friends. It always helps to act out plays instead of silently reading them.

The Merchant of Venice turns on themes that we will find familiar, despite²³ the



Venice was an exotic setting for the poorly travelled English community and ideal for a story like *The Merchant of Venice* to take place. Moreover, Jews had been banished² from England several hundred years before, and so the presence of Jews in the play was also fascinating.

The Merchant of Venice is disguised as³ a comedy (meaning, a happily-ever-after ending, not a humorous plot⁴), and it deals with⁵ questions of right and wrong, love and hate, mercy⁶ and justice, judgment and forgiveness, and good and evil. It tells the story of a Christian merchant named Antonio, who agrees to take a loan⁷ on the condition that he pays for it with a pound of his own flesh⁸ if he does not pay it back on time with money. He gives the loan to his good friend Bassanio, who uses it to woo⁹ a beautiful heiress¹⁰ named Portia.

Now, the man from whom he borrows the money is a Jew named Shylock, who holds a grudge¹¹ against Antonio because of the