

The Merchant of Venice: Story Text

The Bond and the Marriage Quests

In Venice lived a wealthy but melancholic merchant named **Antonio**. His dearest friend, **Bassanio**, a young Venetian noble who was heavily indebted, needed a large sum of money to court the rich heiress, **Portia**, who lived in Belmont. Antonio's money was tied up in merchant ships at sea, so he could not lend the money himself.

To help Bassanio, Antonio agreed to borrow the money from **Shylock**, a Jewish moneylender whom Antonio despised and often publicly humiliated for charging interest (usury). Shylock, nursing years of resentment, agreed to lend Bassanio **three thousand ducats** for three months.

Shylock proposed a "merry sport" bond: if Antonio failed to repay the loan on the agreed date, Shylock would be entitled to take **a pound of Antonio's flesh** from any part of his body. Antonio, confident in the return of his ships, signed the deadly bond.

Meanwhile, in Belmont, Portia was bound by a clause in her father's will: all suitors had to choose one of three caskets—one of gold, one of silver, and one of lead.

- The **gold** casket's inscription read: "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire."
- The **silver** casket read: "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves."
- The **lead** casket read: "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath."

Many princes tried and failed by choosing the gold or silver caskets. When Bassanio arrived, he was given the test. He wisely rejected the ostentatious gold and silver, choosing the humble **lead casket**. Inside, he found Portia's portrait, winning her hand, her wealth, and her estate. Portia also gave him a **ring** as a pledge, warning him never to part with it.

The Tragedy and the Trial

Bassanio's joy was short-lived. A letter arrived, stating that all of Antonio's merchant ships had been lost at sea. Antonio was ruined, and the bond was forfeit. Shylock, further enraged by his daughter **Jessica's** elopement with a Christian, **Lorenzo**, taking Shylock's money and jewels, was determined to exact the penalty. He refused all offers of repayment, demanding his pound of flesh in court.

Bassanio rushed back to Venice with Portia's money, offering Shylock six thousand, nine thousand, or even twelve thousand ducats, but Shylock was unmoved.

The case was brought before the Duke of Venice. Just as the Duke seemed helpless to prevent Antonio's death, a letter arrived introducing a brilliant, young, foreign lawyer named **Balthazar** (who was secretly Portia in disguise, accompanied by her maid, Nerissa, disguised as a law clerk).

"Balthazar" argued for the sanctity of Venetian law but then delivered the fatal blow to Shylock's case. She agreed that the bond gave Shylock the right to a pound of flesh, but stipulated two conditions:

1. The bond specifically states a **pound of flesh**—it does not mention blood. If Shylock shed one drop of Antonio's blood, his lands and goods would be confiscated under Venetian law.
2. The penalty must be **exactly** one pound—not one ounce more, nor one ounce less.

Trapped by his own insistence on literal justice, Shylock realized the impossibility of the task and agreed to take the money instead. Portia, however, declared that since Shylock had refused the money in open court and insisted on the flesh, he must now take the flesh *under the impossible conditions* or lose everything.

The Judgment and the Rings

Having attempted to take the life of a Venetian citizen, Shylock was found guilty. His wealth was confiscated: half for Antonio and half for the state. Antonio intervened, asking the Duke to spare Shylock the state's half, and for Antonio's half, he proposed two conditions:

1. Shylock must sign a will leaving his entire estate to Jessica and Lorenzo upon his death.
2. Shylock must immediately **convert to Christianity**.

Shylock, broken and defeated, was forced to accept these terms and left the court.

After the trial, Bassanio, out of overwhelming gratitude to "Balthazar," gave away the **ring** Portia had made him swear never to part with. Antonio also gave the ring he received from the supposed law clerk (Nerissa, disguised) to "Balthazar."

The two disguised women soon returned to Belmont and revealed their identities to their stunned husbands, playfully scolding them for parting with their rings before ultimately forgiving them. The couples were happily united, and the story concluded with the joyful news that some of Antonio's ships had, unexpectedly, returned safely after all.