

Can-U-Read

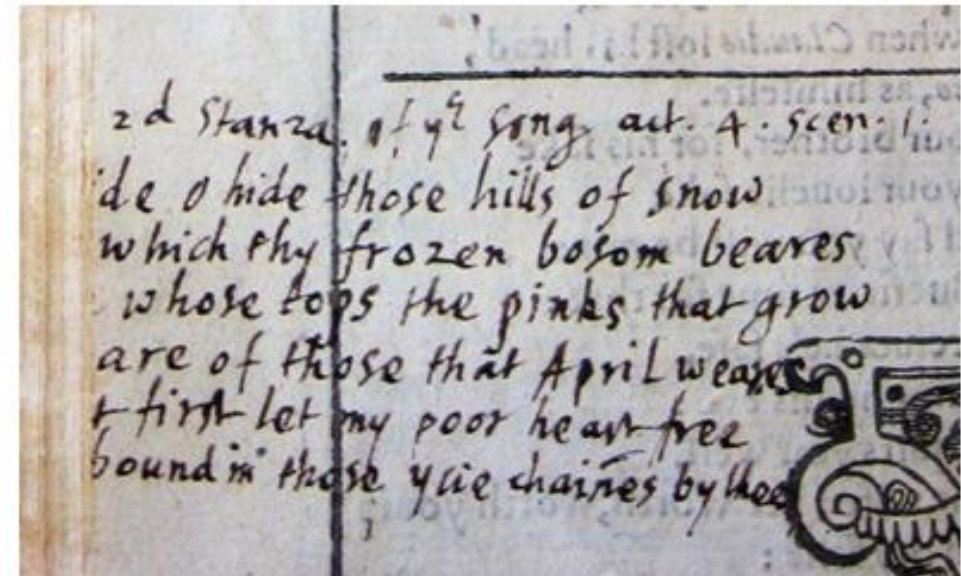
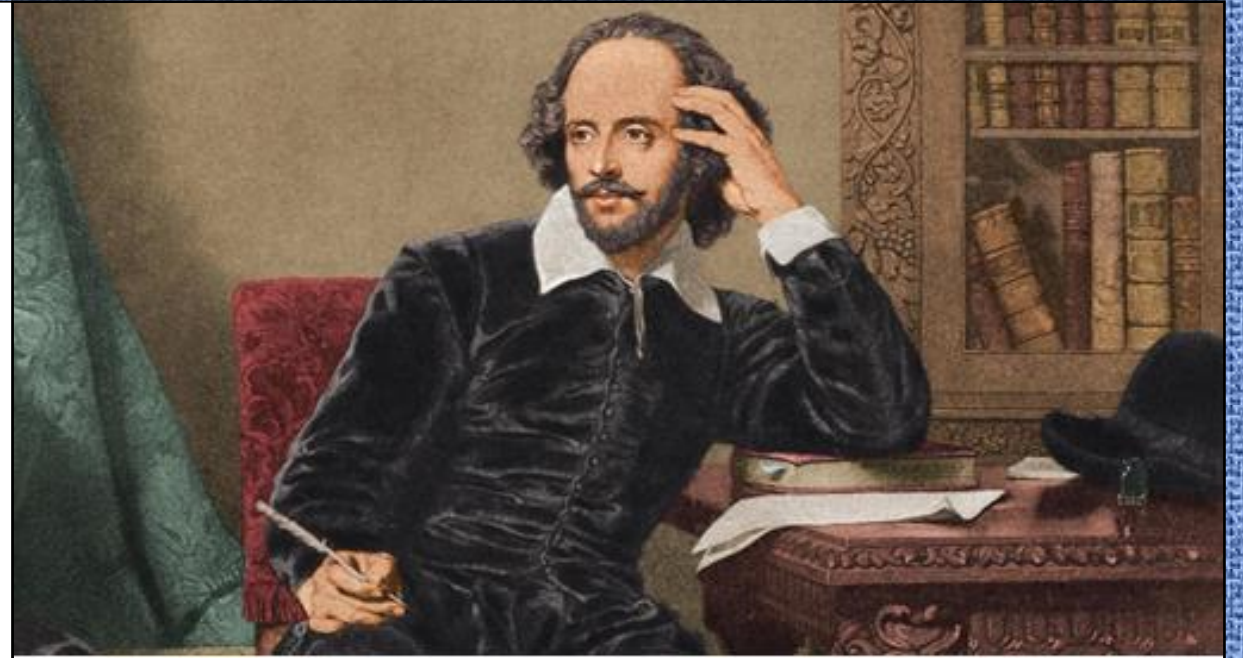
Merchant of Venice

William Shakespeare was a great writer who lived almost 500 years ago.

In his time he wrote many stories, poems, and plays about love, fighting, hatred, sadness, revenge, and peace.

Some of his best writings are still very well known today.

Even though he wrote so long ago, his writings still have meaning today.



Venice is a city in Italy. It is surrounded by water. Even its streets are water.

People have lived in Venice for a long time. The town has been very rich and powerful.

At the time of this story, part of the city belonged to Jews. The Jews hated the Venetians, but the Venetians hated the Jews even more.



A Jew



A Venetian

Our story starts with Shylock, who is a Jew. Because he is a Jew, the law of Venice forces him to wear a stupid red hat. Shylock hates the hat.



Antonio is a man of Venice. He is a merchant. A merchant travels far away to buy things and bring them back to sell. He makes his money by trading for things people want.



Another law says that Jews can't own farms or land in Venice. Shylock makes money by loaning it out. People pay it back with a little extra. They pay him for the **use** of the money. Shylock is like a bank.



Antonio and Shylock hate each other. Antonio thinks that Shylock's business is unfair. They are not friends. Nothing would make Shylock help Antonio. Nothing would make Antonio ask for help.



One of Antonio's good friends is young Bassanio. Bassanio is a lot of fun and a bit silly. He used to be rich, but now most of his money is paying off loans he took to pay for parties. It was fun but now he is kind of poor.



Bassanio asks Antonio to help him one last time. He wants some money so he can go off and marry a rich orphan girl. If we can just get a little more money his should earn enough to pay everything back.



But Antonio doesn't have any extra money right now. He just sent out a bunch of ships and he won't have any more money until they come back. By then she might be married.



Antonio has a better idea. He offers to take out a loan in his own name to help Bassanio. Any amount of money that Bassanio may need to win the girl.



Together they go to Shylock to ask for some money. Antonio says that they should forget the past and be friendly. Shylock remembers that Antonio was mean to him just last week. Shylock does not want to help. But Shylock also thinks how great it would be to hurt Antonio.



He offers to loan them the money, but only if Antonio will agree to some odd terms. If Bassanio doesn't return the money, Shylock will cut a pound of flesh from Antonio's body. Antonio agrees. He trusts Bassanio and his ships will be back long before the loan is due. He can afford the risk.



So Bassanio sails off to meet the orphan girl. He is excited and happy to be going. He will be back in plenty of time to pay off that old Shylock!



In the meantime, things do not go well for Antonio. All his ships are lost. He cannot pay back Shylock. Now he must ask Shylock for mercy. After all, what could Shylock want with a pound of flesh?



Shylock says that Antonio is always mean to him and now Shylock has power over him. If he uses the flesh to catch fish, so what? Antonio made fun of him always and laughed at the Jews. Why shouldn't he be mean back?



Shylock says that even Jews have eyes, hands, senses, feelings. They eat the same, get sick, feel the weather. “If you poke me with a needle, won't I bleed? If you tickle us, don't we laugh? If you were to poison us, wouldn't we die? And if you are mean to us, shouldn't we get revenge?”

Antonio can see that there is no way he will get mercy from Shylock.

In the meantime Bassanio has made his way to the home of Portia. She was orphaned when her rich father died. He set up a test to pick the right man to marry her.

Her father made three boxes of gold, silver, and cardboard. To marry Portia, a man must choose the right box.



But oh, what men have come to marry her! The worst kind of men have come. Drunken, ugly, stupid, silly, vain... just the worst kinds of men. She doesn't want to marry them, but she won't have choice if they pick the right box.

Choose me to get what many man desire.

Choose me to get all you deserve.

Choose me to risk all you have.

Shylock says that Antonio is always mean to him and now Shylock has power over him. If he uses the flesh to catch fish, so what? Antonio made fun of him always and laughed at the Jews. Why shouldn't he be mean back?



Shylock says that even Jews have eyes, hands, senses, feelings. They eat the same, get sick, feel the weather. “If you poke me with a needle, won't I bleed? If you tickle us, don't we laugh? If you were to poison us, wouldn't we die? And if you are mean to us, shouldn't we get revenge?”

Antonio can see that there is no way he will get mercy from Shylock.

But Portia is not the only one looking for love. Shylock has a daughter named Jessica. Young Lorenzo has fallen in love with her and wants to marry her, even if she is a Jew. But Lorenzo is poor and cannot afford a wife. How will they ever get married?



Jessica has her own solution. One night when her father is away, she steals some of his money and runs off with Lorenzo. She doesn't want to be a Jew anymore. She just wants to be Lorenzo's wife.



Shylock is even more angry now. He has decided to cut out Antonio's heart. He blames all the Venetians for his daughter's theft. He is sure one of them stole her away. He has nothing left but his revenge.



Things look pretty bad for Antonio, will Bassanio return in time? Will he lose his life because he helped his friend?



In Portia's home, no one has guessed correctly. Inside the gold box was a skull and this message.

All that glitters is not gold.

Many a man his life has sold,

Just to have me to hold.

*But dead men's bodies will still mold,
Because their hearts are dead and cold.*



Another prince chose the silver box.

There are fools in silver hid.

Such a one within my lid.

Even when you get to wed,

You still will be a foolish head.

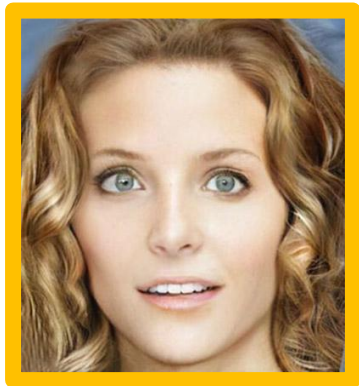
And all the more you'll be a dunce

If you do not leave at once.



Finally Bassanio comes to guess. He picks the cardboard box and finds Portia's picture inside.

*You chose not by my pretty face
And in my heart, you'll find a place
Turn to where the lady is
And claim her with a loving kiss.*



Just as soon as they are married, Bassanio gets a sad letter from home. Antonio is in terrible trouble. He has to take the money from Portia and race home to save his friend.

Before he goes, Portia asks him to make one promise. "Take this ring," she says, "and you will always have my love if you have this ring." Bassanio promises and races back to Venice.



Bassanio came back in time to pay Shylock, but the deadline is past. Shylock says he won't take the money—he wants his pound of flesh. “Even for nine times as much I would not let Antonio go.”



The prince asks for a young lawyer to help Antonio, but the lawyer says that Shylock has the right to exactly what was promised. The lawyer begs Shylock to let him go. Shylock says the lawyer is wise, but he will not let Antonio go!



Just as Shylock is about to cut into Antonio, the lawyer stops him. Only what was promised! Not one drop of blood. Not one ounce more or less. Take anything else and you will die!



Shylock gives up on his bargain and Antonio lets him go. They all thank the young lawyer for finding a solution. Bassanio says he is very wise and Bassanio would like to give him something in thanks for saving his friend.



The young lawyer says, “Well, let me have that ring then.”

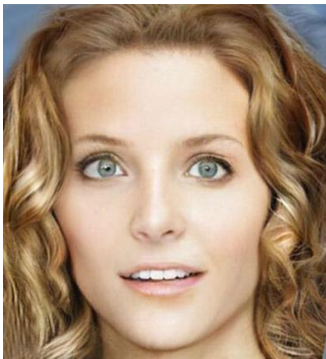
Bassanio doesn't know what to do. Should he break his promise to his new wife or show himself to be ungrateful to this man.



Bassanio decides that his wife will understand the situation. He gives the young lawyer the ring and goes home to Portia.



Imagine his surprise when he gets back and finds that Portia has the ring. She tells him that a young lawyer came by and offered the ring in exchange for some kisses. He is very mad, but she tells him it is his own fault for giving up the ring.



Bassanio doesn't know what to say. Just then Portia pulls out a fake beard. She was the young lawyer! She tells him that she expected him to keep his promise just as she keeps hers. He promised never to break a promise again.



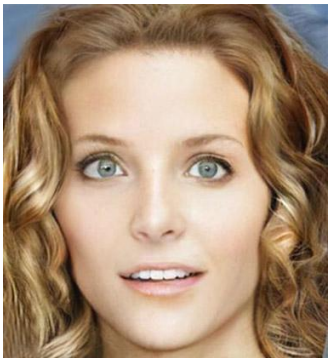
So, what can we learn from the story? Shylock sounds like a mean, bad person, but was he? Many Jews were treated very badly at the time. All those laws were put in place to stop him from being happy. If you were treated this badly, how would you act?



Maybe the way the play is written makes Shylock sound even worse. His own daughter ran away from him. How good could he be? Remember that this is just a story. Shylock is just a character. No one is ever 100% evil.



What about Bassanio and Portia? Did they learn a lesson? Maybe we should remember to keep our promises. We should also remember to keep our marriages sacred. And if we choose based on how pretty someone is, we are being vain fools.



And what about Antonio? Antonio's choices put him in real danger. Sometimes our choices are equally dangerous. We have to be wise and make good choices. We may not have a friend like Portia to save us.

