

# The Merchant of Venice

12



1. When we think of 'famous friends', what are some of the names that come to mind?
  - a. Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn
  - b. Archie and Jughead
  - c. Harry Potter and \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Why do you think friends are important?
  - a. We can share our ups and downs with friends.
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_



Let us read a play about a good man whose generosity in helping his friend in his time of need could have ended in tragedy.



## CHARACTERS:

SHYLOCK	A Jewish moneylender in Venice
ANTONIO	A merchant from Venice and Bassanio's dear friend
BASSANIO	A gentleman of Venice, a kinsman and close friend of Antonio
PORTIA	A wealthy heiress from Belmont and Bassanio's wife
NERISSA	Portia's lady-in-waiting and confidante
THE DUKE OF VENICE	The ruler of Venice
COURTIERS	

## PART 1 SCENE I



## SETTING

The Rialto<sup>1</sup> in Venice

**NARRATOR** Antonio, a merchant of Venice was the kindest and most courteous<sup>2</sup> man in the city. His best friend was a nobleman<sup>3</sup> named Bassanio, a fine young man but a little extravagant<sup>4</sup>. Bassanio had nearly used up all the wealth that his father had left him by spending lavishly<sup>5</sup> on

<sup>1</sup>**Rialto**: an area in Venice known for its markets  
<sup>2</sup>**courteous**: polite, respectful or considerate in manner  
<sup>3</sup>**nobleman**: a man who belongs by rank, title or birth to the aristocracy; a peer  
<sup>4</sup>**extravagant**: spending more money than one can afford  
<sup>5</sup>**lavishly**: impressively, extravagantly



good clothes and other luxuries. Bassanio loved a beautiful rich woman named Portia. He wanted to win her hand and thought he could do so by giving her rich gifts. So he asked Antonio for some money. Although in favour of the marriage, Antonio had no money to lend Bassanio just then, as he was waiting for his ships to bring in their cargo<sup>6</sup>. Since Bassanio needed the money urgently, Antonio said he would borrow it from Shylock, a professional moneylender.

*Enter Bassanio with Shylock*

SHYLOCK Three thousand ducats<sup>7</sup>.

BASSANIO Aye sir, for three months, for which, as I told you, Antonio shall be bound.

SHYLOCK Antonio shall be bound? Well, Antonio is a good man.

BASSANIO Have you heard anyone say he is not?

SHYLOCK No, no, no; my meaning in saying he is a good man is that his worth is sufficient; yet a lot of his wealth is not in cash. Most of it is invested in cargos that are in ships bound for faraway ports such as Tripolis, the Indies, Mexico and England. Hmm ... after all, ships are only wooden boards and sailors only men; there are pirates<sup>8</sup>, storm and possible shipwrecks<sup>9</sup> to be taken into account ... However, despite all this, his wealth is sufficient. I think I may take his bond for three thousand ducats.

*Enter Antonio*

BASSANIO This is Signor Antonio.

SHYLOCK (*aside*<sup>10</sup>) I hate him because he lends out money free of interest and brings down the rates for all us moneylenders in Venice. If I can once catch him at a disadvantage, I can feed the ancient grudge<sup>11</sup> I bear him. He berates<sup>12</sup> me in public, where all merchants gather, criticizing my bargains<sup>13</sup> and my fairly-gained profit, which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe if I forgive him!

What does Shylock mean when he says ships are only wooden boards and sailors only men?



(*to Antonio*) A fair morning to you, good Signor<sup>14</sup>! We were just speaking of you.

ANTONIO Do you know how much money we want?

SHYLOCK Yes, three thousand ducats for three months; but I am surprised. I thought you neither lent nor borrowed money with interest. You have publicly criticized me for doing so, many times and called me a cut-throat<sup>15</sup> and a dog—now you have come to borrow money from me?

ANTONIO I still don't approve of what you do, but my friend needs money urgently, so do not lend it to me, except as you would lend it to an enemy—then you will be able to take the penalty<sup>16</sup> if I am not able to repay it in time.

<sup>6</sup>cargo: goods carried on a ship, aircraft or motor vehicle <sup>7</sup>ducats: a gold coin used in European countries in the past <sup>8</sup>pirates: persons who attack and rob ships at sea <sup>9</sup>shipwrecks: destruction of a ship at sea by sinking or breaking up, for example in a storm or after striking a rock <sup>10</sup>aside: (in drama) something that a character says to the audience, but which the other characters on stage are not intended to hear <sup>11</sup>grudge: feeling of anger or dislike <sup>12</sup>berates: criticizes or speaks angrily about or to someone <sup>13</sup>bargains: agreements between two or more people or groups as to what each will do for the other <sup>14</sup>Signor: Italian form of a title used to address a man <sup>15</sup>cut-throat: (of a person) using ruthless methods in a competitive situation <sup>16</sup>penalty: punishment for breaking a law or a contract



**SHYLOCK** (to Bassanio) Just listen to him! He is so angry, yet I want to make friends with him, forget the past and lend him the money without taking a *doit*<sup>17</sup> of interest. (to Bassanio and Antonio) Just come with me to a notary<sup>18</sup> and we will sign a bond in merry sport<sup>19</sup>. If you do not repay me on the stipulated<sup>20</sup> day, let the penalty be a pound<sup>21</sup> of your flesh, to be cut off from whatever part of your body I choose.

**ANTONIO** Done! I'll sign such a bond and say there is much kindness in you, Shylock.

**BASSANIO** You shall not sign such a bond for my sake. I'd rather do without the money.

**SHYLOCK** What sort of people are these, whose own hard hearts make them suspect<sup>22</sup> the kindness of others! What use is a pound of human flesh to anyone? I am only doing this as a gesture<sup>23</sup> of friendship—if you accept it, well and good. If not, farewell.

**ANTONIO** Yes, Shylock, I will sign the bond.

*Exit Shylock*

**ANTONIO** He grows kind.

**BASSANIO** I mistrust fair terms and a villain's mind.

**ANTONIO** Come on, in this there can be no dismay<sup>24</sup>. My ships come home a month before the day.



<sup>17</sup>*doit*: a low-value silver coin that was a unit of currency in the past <sup>18</sup>*notary*: a lawyer with the authority to witness when someone signs a document <sup>19</sup>*merry sport*: by being a sport, for the sake of fun <sup>20</sup>*stipulated*: stated clearly and firmly <sup>21</sup>*pound*: a unit of weight equal to 0.454 kg <sup>22</sup>*suspect*: doubt the genuineness or truth of <sup>23</sup>*gesture*: something that you say or do to show a particular feeling or emotion <sup>24</sup>*dismay*: concern and distress caused by something unexpected



## PART 2 SCENE I

### SETTING:

Belmont in Italy

**NARRATOR** A lot has happened since the last scene. Bassanio has visited Belmont, a town in Italy, using the money he borrowed from Antonio to make a grand appearance before Portia. He has also wooed<sup>25</sup> and won the fair lady. The scene opens just after Portia and Bassanio have been married. As they stand in front of Portia's fine house, surrounded by their friends and attendants, a messenger from Venice rides up with a letter for Bassanio.



**MESSENGER** Sir! There is a letter for you from Antonio.

*Bassanio opens the letter and begins to read it—he is visibly upset by the contents.*

**PORTIA** (to her attendant, Nerissa) There must be some very bad news in that letter—some good friend in trouble or worse—for Bassanio to react in this way.

(to Bassanio) What is the matter, my lord? Please tell me.

**BASSANIO** Do you remember my dear friend Antonio, about whom I told you? The generous friend who was bound to repay my loan or forfeit<sup>26</sup> one pound of his own flesh?

This is what he has written in his letter:

*Dear Bassanio,*

*My ships have all met with misfortune<sup>27</sup>; my creditors are demanding repayment and my bond to Shylock is forfeit, and since in paying it, it is impossible that I should live, I would like to see you once before I die, so make haste<sup>28</sup> to Venice.*

*Antonio*

**PORTIA** What is the sum he owes on your behalf?

<sup>25</sup>wooed: tried to gain the love of (a woman), especially with a view to get married    <sup>26</sup>forfeit: have something taken away because you have done something wrong    <sup>27</sup>misfortune: bad luck    <sup>28</sup>haste: excessive speed or urgency of movement or action; hurry



BASSANIO Three thousand ducats

PORTIA Three? Take six, take nine, before you let such a good friend be harmed for your sake!

MESSENGER It is of no use, Madam. Shylock refuses to take anything but the pound of flesh.

BASSANIO I must hasten away to Antonio's side and try and plead<sup>29</sup> with Shylock.

*Exit Bassanio*

Why is Bassanio upset on reading Antonio's letter?

## SCENE II

### SETTING

The courtroom in the Duke's palace, Venice.

PORTIA (to Nerissa) Come, Nerissa, we have work, which Bassanio knows nothing of.

NERISSA Why, madam, what can we do?

PORTIA We can try to enlist the help of <sup>30</sup> my cousin Dr Bellario, a learned lawyer—he will advise us.

NARRATOR The Duke, Antonio, Bassanio, Shylock and many other courtiers are present, trying in vain to change Shylock's mind. Shylock, unmoved<sup>31</sup> by their pleas, is sharpening his knife on the sole of his shoe, ready to cut off a pound of Antonio's flesh. Even the Duke is powerless to refuse Shylock his pound of flesh, as changing the law would harm trade in Venice. However, the Duke has called Bellario to settle the case. A messenger has just come from Bellario to say that although he is ill, he has sent a young lawyer, Dr Balthazar.

*Enter Dr Balthazar, who is Portia in disguise, attended by Nerissa, disguised as a lawyer's clerk. Portia has come to court dressed as Balthazar in order to help her husband and his friend.*

DUKE You are welcome, young Dr Balthazar. Are you familiar with the dispute<sup>32</sup> the court is trying to settle today?

PORTIA I am, indeed. Which is the merchant and which is the moneylender?

DUKE Antonio and Shylock, stand forth<sup>33</sup>.

PORTIA (to Shylock) The terms of your case are strange indeed, yet within the law.

(to Antonio) You stand in great danger from him, do you not?

ANTONIO Aye, so he says.

Who did Portia disguise herself as? Who was her clerk?

<sup>29</sup>plead: make an emotional appeal <sup>30</sup>enlist the help of: persuade someone to help <sup>31</sup>unmoved: not affected by emotion or excitement <sup>32</sup>dispute: a disagreement or an argument <sup>33</sup>stand forth: come forward



PORTIA Do you admit to signing the bond?

ANTONIO I do.

PORTIA Then Shylock must be merciful<sup>34</sup>.

SHYLOCK What can force me to be merciful? Tell me that!

PORTIA Mercy is a quality that cannot be forced. It must fall as gently and naturally as the rain falls on the earth below it. Mercy is doubly blessed<sup>35</sup>, for it blesses the one who shows mercy as well as the one who receives it. It is one of the qualities of God himself, and human beings come closest to God when they show it. Therefore, Shylock, though you ask for justice from this court, remember that if all of us only got what we deserved, we would be in a sorry state<sup>36</sup>. That's why we all pray for mercy, and therefore we should learn to show it to others.

SHYLOCK My deeds upon my head! I demand the law and my pound of flesh!

ANTONIO Most heartily I beseech<sup>37</sup> the court to pronounce<sup>38</sup> judgement.

PORTIA Why then, it is this—you must prepare yourself for the knife. Do you have the scales ready, Shylock?

SHYLOCK I have them, O excellent young judge! (to Antonio) Come, prepare!



<sup>34</sup>merciful: showing mercy; compassion or forgiveness shown towards someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm  
<sup>35</sup>doubly blessed: very fortunate <sup>36</sup>sorry state: sad or bad state <sup>37</sup>beseech: beg <sup>38</sup>pronounce: announce publicly



**PORTIA** Wait a little, Shylock. This bond does not give you a single drop of blood, so if, in cutting off the pound of flesh, one drop of Antonio's blood is spilled, your money, land and estate are all forfeited to the government of Venice. Also, you must cut off exactly one pound of flesh—neither more nor less by a hair's weight<sup>39</sup>—or you will die.

**COURTIERS** O wise and upright young judge!

**SHYLOCK** Is that the law?

Why did Portia ask Shylock if he had his scales ready?



<sup>39</sup>hair's weight: equal to the weight of one hair; very minute to be perceptible



**PORTIA** You shall see the act. Since you ask for justice, you shall have justice, more than you desire.

**SHYLOCK** I take this offer, then. Pay the bond thrice, and let Antonio go.

**PORTIA** Wait, Shylock. The law has yet another hold on you. According to the laws of Venice, if a foreigner seeks the life of a citizen by direct or indirect means, the person against whom he has contrived<sup>40</sup> shall seize one half of his property, while the other half goes to the state. And the offender's<sup>41</sup> life lies in the mercy of the duke only.

**SHYLOCK** Then take my life, and everything with it. Taking away my means of sustenance<sup>42</sup> is just the same as taking away my house. Similarly, you take my life when you take the means whereby I live.

**DUKE** You shall see that we have kind spirits<sup>43</sup>. I pardon your life before you even ask for it.

**PORTIA** Are you contented<sup>44</sup>, Shylock?

**SHYLOCK** I am content.

**PORTIA** Clerk, draw a deed<sup>45</sup> of gift.

*The matter is resolved with a fine charged on Shylock by the state. He also forfeits some of his money to Antonio as a penalty for plotting against his life. All ends well, with some of Antonio's ships returning and Bassanio is amazed that his wife was the young lawyer in disguise.*

**William Shakespeare** (1564–1616) was a playwright and poet whose popularity has not only survived but grown over centuries. He grew up in Stratford-upon-Avon and is known as the 'Bard of Avon'. Apart from thirty-eight plays, Shakespeare penned 154 sonnets, two narrative poems and other forms of poetry. His plays have been translated into several languages and are still performed all over the world.



## MAKING CONNECTIONS

### Quick answers

1. Answer the following questions in not more than a sentence.
  - a. How much money does Bassanio ask Shylock, and for how long?
  - b. What is the penalty that Shylock asks for in the bond?

<sup>40</sup>contrived: planned in advance    <sup>41</sup>offender: someone who breaks a public law    <sup>42</sup>sustenance: process of making someone survive  
<sup>43</sup>kind spirits: kind nature    <sup>44</sup>contented: feeling or expressing happiness or satisfaction    <sup>45</sup>draw a deed: prepare a legal document