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# The Merchant of Venice

**William Shakespeare** · *c. 1596—97 (published 1600) · original English text*

A merchant borrows on a bond of flesh to fund his friend's courtship, and the lender, long injured, will have the bond when the ships fail. At Belmont three caskets test who will give and hazard all. The play is about mercy, justice, covenant, and friendship. It is also about a hatred that the city has fed, and a judgment that is not only mercy.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

## When a lawful bond demands a pound of flesh, can mercy season justice without becoming another kind of victory?

*"The quality of mercy is not strain'd, / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven / Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest, / It blesseth him that gives and him that takes."*

**Portia** · Act IV, Scene I

Portia tells the court that mercy is an attribute of God himself, and that in the course of justice none of us should see salvation. Shylock will have the bond. She then holds him to its letter: no jot of blood. The friend is saved; the lender is broken and forced to terms. The speech stands; the ending is harder than the speech alone.

KEY CHARACTERS

**Antonio**
*The merchant, melancholy, generous to his friend, and bound in flesh*

**Bassanio**
*The friend and suitor who will give and hazard, and who is not always careful of what he has vowed*

**Portia**
*Heiress of Belmont, bound by the caskets, then the disguised voice of mercy and of the law's letter*

**Shylock**
*A moneylender long insulted; he will have the bond, and he is broken by its letter*

**Jessica**
*Shylock's daughter, who flees his house and takes his gold*

**Lorenzo**
*Jessica's Christian lover, waiting at Belmont with music*

**Nerissa**
*Portia's waiting-gentlewoman, the clerk in the court, and a wife with a ring of her own*

**Gratiano**
*A loud friend, Nerissa's husband, whose wit is sharper than his mercy*

**The Duke of Venice**
*The court's prince, who asks for mercy and then grants a narrowed mercy of his own*

MERCY, AND A GOOD DEED'S BEAM

> *"But mercy is above this sceptred sway, / It is enthroned in the hearts of kings, / It is an attribute to God himself;"*
> **Portia** · Act IV, Scene I

> *"How far that little candle throws his beams! / So shines a good deed in a naughty world."*
> **Portia** · Act V, Scene I

**Grades 9–12**
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01
### The Bond
ACT I
*A friend's venture, and a bond sealed in flesh.*

- Bassanio needs means to woo Portia; Antonio's wealth is at sea, but he will borrow for his friend
- Shylock agrees to lend three thousand ducats for three months, the forfeit a pound of Antonio's flesh
- Antonio signs, treating the merry bond as a jest; the hatred under it is not a jest
- At Belmont, Portia is bound by her father's will: suitors must choose among gold, silver, and lead

02
### Give and Hazard
ACTS II—III, BELMONT
*The caskets sort those who want the surface from the man who will risk all.*

- Morocco chooses gold, "what many men desire," and finds a skull: all that glisters is not gold
- Arragon chooses silver and is likewise dismissed
- The leaden casket says, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath"
- Bassanio hazards, chooses lead, and finds Portia's picture; they are promised to each other just as bad news comes from Venice

> *"Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath."*
> **The leaden casket** · Act II, Scene VII

03
### The Failed Ships
ACT III, VENICE
*The bond comes due, and a man's injuries speak in a terrible tense.*

- Antonio's ships are reported lost; Shylock will not now take money in place of the forfeit
- He names the injuries done him, and the common flesh he shares with those who have despised him
- He also names revenge, learned, he says, by Christian example
- Portia and Nerissa leave Belmont in a lawyer's and a clerk's disguise to stand in the court

> *"Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?"*
> **Shylock** · Act III, Scene I

04
### The Court of Venice
ACT IV, SCENE I
*Mercy is preached, the bond is held to the letter, and the lender falls.*

- The Duke and Portia (as Balthazar) both urge Shylock to be merciful; he stands upon the bond
- Portia grants the pound of flesh, then stops the knife: the bond gives no jot of blood
- To shed blood, or take more or less than a pound, is now a crime against Venice
- Shylock's life and goods are placed at the Duke's mercy; the terms include his estate and a forced conversion

> *"The quality of mercy is not strain'd, / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven / Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest, / It blesseth him that gives and him that takes."*
> **Portia** · Act IV, Scene I

05
### The Candle at Belmont
ACT V
*Night, music, and a joke about rings, after a day of judgment.*

- Lorenzo and Jessica wait at Belmont; a candle's beam is said to shine like a good deed in a naughty world
- Portia and Nerissa return, and the husbands cannot produce the rings they swore to keep
- The disguise is confessed, and the marriages are mended in laughter
- News comes that some of Antonio's ships are not lost; the comic close does not unwrite the court

> *"How far that little candle throws his beams! / So shines a good deed in a naughty world."*
> **Portia** · Act V, Scene I

Mercy | Justice | Covenant and Bond | Friendship | Risk and Trust | A Good Deed

## What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The play is virtue-framed around mercy, justice, covenant, and friendship. It also contains a hatred the city has fed. Do not skip Shylock's injuries, and do not treat his bond as a joke.
2. "Hath not a Jew eyes?" is a plea for common humanity, and it turns toward revenge in the same speech. Read the whole speech, not a motto pulled from it.
3. Portia's mercy speech is the moral high point, and the judgment that follows is legal and severe. Both belong to the play.
4. The leaden casket's "give and hazard all" is the play's other law: love and friendship cost something.
5. Jessica's flight and the forced conversion are part of the ending's cost. The candle at Belmont does not cancel the court.
6. The Hosted wording is "strain'd" and "glisters," not later tidyings.

**Quotations** are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #1515, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-merchant-of-venice/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.