

# THE MERCHANT OF VENICE



*A comedy by William Shakespeare*

## Dramatic Stylistic Devices

Device	Definition	Example on The Merchant of Venice
<b>Setting</b>	The setting plays an important part in the structure of the play.	Action divided between Venice (masculine world of trade/business) and Belmont (feminine setting of courtship, music, love). Initially separate, until arrival of Bassanio, when the relationship of love and money is highlighted as characters from the one visit the other.
<b>Verse v Prose</b>	Theatrical convention at the time was that unrhymed verse written in iambic pentameter (blank verse) was spoken by high status characters. It is used for scenes of high emotional intensity. Prose was used by low status or comic characters.	Verse: Antonio, Portia, Bassanio.  Prose: Gobbo, Lancelot.
<b>Soliloquy/ Aside</b>	One character, alone on stage, sharing their inner thoughts and feelings, making an audience complicit, is a soliloquy. If other characters are present on stage, and the character still speaks directly to the audience, it is an aside.	Shylock's 'I hate him for he is a Christian' is an aside to the audience in 1.3.
<b>Rhyme</b>	Rhyming couplets emphasise key ideas, and signal an end	Jessica's 'Farewell; and if my fortune be not crost, I have a father, you a daughter, lost.' 2.5
<b>Dramatic irony</b>	Audience knows more than characters.	See ASIDE above (I hate him, for he is a Christian) the audience realises the depth of Shylock's hatred. Portia as Balthasar in the Court Scene watching Bassanio talk of his wife – the ring request.
<b>Antithesis</b>	People or things that oppose each other. It intensifies the sense of conflict: Christian v Jew; justice v mercy; love v hate; father v daughter; appearance v reality; greed v generosity.	Venice v Belmont.
<b>Hyperbole</b>	Overstatement or exaggeration	Bassanio's admiration of Portia in 3.2. Often makes allusion to classical or mythical stories, thus stressing the virtues and (impossible) perfection of the person being praised.
<b>Repetition</b>	Repetition contributes to atmosphere, creation of character, and dramatic impact.	Three of the most frequently repeated words are 'Jew/Jews' (around 70 times), 'bond' (nearly 40) and 'ring' (37) – a clear indication of the major themes of the play. Repetition is a clear feature of Shylock's speeches: to show his careful, calculating mind (1.3 'three thousand ducats'); his anguish (2.8 'My daughter! O my ducats!'); his insistence on the bond (3.3); his praise of Portia when he thinks he will get what he wants (4.1 'O wise young judge').
<b>Humour</b>	Humorous scenes often contrast with a serious scene that precedes it.	Some of the humour is witty verbal humour (Portia); rude (Gratiano) and some pure slapstick (Lancelot Gobbo). Gobbo is a minor character, often used as a messenger between characters and relaying information to the audience, but even in the comedy, there are telling moments – such as the fact that we find out through Gobbo that Bassanio is spending Antonio's money buying expensive new uniforms for his servants.
<b>Scenes:</b>	Shakespeare often uses the structural device of changing scene at a moment of great tension.	Just as the audience learn about Bassanio going to borrow money in Antonio's name, the scene switches to Belmont.
<b>Foreshadowing</b>	Giving an advance hint of what is to come later in the story.	Bassanio's financial carelessness with his estate foreshadows his financial carelessness in lending money from Shylock.
<b>Figurative language</b>	Phrases that go beyond the literal meaning to convey a message or additional meaning.	There was little use of scenery at the time, so Shakespeare describes the world of the play to the audience through the character's use of figurative language, imagery and words.
<b>Motifs</b>	Recurrent images, ideas or symbols that develop or explain themes.	Rings

## CONTEXT SPECIFIC TO MERCHANT OF VENICE

**Religion:** The heavy religious presence is evident across several parts of MOV - reflective of society across Europe that was deeply religious, predominantly Catholic or Protestant. Several characters demonstrate their commitment to Christian values, such as Antonio, Bassanio and Portia. Shylock, the Jew, is portrayed as the antagonist. The traits that he is crafted to demonstrate such as being greedy, cold and selfish, were common stereotypes associated with Jews in Shakespeare's time. This has led critics to label the play as being anti-Semitic.

**Jews in Britain:** At the time Shakespeare was writing, Jews had been banished for around 300 years. Shakespeare's audience would have had little knowledge about people of Jewish faith beyond prejudice and rumour. A few Jews had come to England working as merchants in Tudor times, but they were often Portuguese 'Conversos' who had converted. Lopez, Queen Elizabeth's surgeon was a 'Converso' and was hanged for treason in 1594. The crowd mocked and jeered him when he claimed to love Elizabeth as much as he loved Jesus. It is likely that the Elizabethan audience would have not questioned the cruel treatment of Shylock as we would today.

**Jews and 16th century Venice:** The original audience of MOV would not know the geography of Italy, but they would have known that Venice was a wealthy trading city of businessmen and money, an important trading post at the crossroads of Europe. Jews were not allowed to own land, but in 1516, they were allowed to create a settlement (and pay rent) in Ghetto Nuova – a small dirty island that became the world's first ghetto. They were permitted to leave during the day, but locked in at night. Out of the ghetto, they had to wear distinguishing clothing. In addition to this, they faced hostility from Christian citizens, because of their 'otherness.'

**Usury/moneylending:** By Shakespeare's time, the word 'Jew' had come to be applied to hard-hearted, unscrupulous moneylenders, even if the people referred to were not Jewish. In Venice, the Jews were only allowed to work in pawn shops, act as moneylenders, work the Hebrew printing press, trade in textiles or practice medicine. Venetian banking laws kept their interest rates low and made life difficult for many. Jews were disliked as they practised usury, often because this was one of the few professions open to them. There was a long Christian tradition against this.

**Representation of Shylock since Shakespeare's time:** The tradition of playing Shylock sympathetically began in the first half of the 19th century: previously the role had been played 'by a comedian as a repulsive clown or, alternatively, as a monster of unrelieved evil.' 19th century productions often cut Act 5 completely, and ended with Shylock's defeat, acknowledging him as the main character. In the 20th century, the treatment of Jews by the Nazis under Hitler accelerated theatrical attempts to show the full complexity of the character (the Nazis even used Shakespeare as part of their anti-Semitic propaganda). Modern productions are careful not to portray Shylock as a racist caricature, and take pains to show the sources of his thirst for vengeance.

**Venice:** Venice was famous as an important Mediterranean trading centre for goods from the Far East. Silks, spices, jewels and other expensive items were bought and sold there - including slaves. It had the reputation of being full of fashion, culture and sophistication. It would have been a very exotic location for an Elizabethan audience. Because of Venice's position as a centre for trade, it was full of people of many different nationalities, religions and races. The Christian leaders were keen to suppress the activities of the Jews, and so created one of the first Jewish ghettos, forcing the Jews to live in a particular area. Yet the Jewish community continued to flourish in spite of the prejudice shown against them. The Elizabethans had romantic and exotic ideas about Venice. Belmont, Portia's home, is an imaginary setting. We know that it is two days' sail away from Venice. It seems a beautiful, rich country estate.

**Renaissance thought on relationships:** The Renaissance brought with it a revival of Ancient Greek thought about the types of love. Plato deemed that 'Philia' or love between brothers/ men was the highest form of love and far exceeded in importance 'Eros' or love between man and woman.

**Patronage:** was also an important part of Renaissance culture, so the relationship of undying devotion with money and support between Bassanio and Antonio would not have surprised the Elizabethan audience. Yet, Shakespeare had composed many sonnets (traditional love poems) to an unnamed younger man 'G.H.', allegedly of higher status. Perhaps this creeps into the portrayal of the love between Bassanio and Antonio? Michael Radford's film portrays this love as homo-erotic, but there is not sufficient evidence in the text.

**The courtly lover:** Playing the courtly lover was very popular in the Renaissance and involved the pose of a tortured lover who experienced unrequited love. He would praise and idealise his beloved. Famous Renaissance lovers included Petrarch's Laura and Dante's Beatrice. Bassanio sometimes indulges in this, e.g.. 'As I am, I live upon the rack' before he chooses the casket and perhaps in the way he praises Portia excessively after he wins her.

## CONTEXT MORE GENERAL TO MOST SHAKESPEARE PLAYS

**Source:** As with many of Shakespeare's play, the basic plot outline is borrowed from pre-existing texts. The forfeit of a merchant's deadly bond was a common tale in England in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

**Shakespeare's time:** Shakespeare wrote his plays at the time of two monarchs: Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. The MOV was written fairly early in Shakespeare's career, during the relatively optimistic years of Queen Elizabeth I: this is when Shakespeare wrote the majority of his comedies, before the darker tragedies that he created during the reign of James I such as "Macbeth"

**Love and marriage:** Marriage was seen as property transaction: wealthy women would be much sought after as a means of ensuring financial stability for the sons of noble families. It is in keeping with the times for Portia to be viewed as a commodity, however unromantic this might appear to a modern audience. Lorenzo seems a romantic lover, but mirrors Bassanio as marriage makes him rich. Portia submits in a conventional Elizabethan way to her husband, calling him 'king.'

**WOMEN in Elizabethan times:** Nobility generally had arranged marriages in Elizabethan times. Women could not go to school, but noble women had private tutors - Queen Elizabeth set a trend amongst noble families of well-educated daughters. Perhaps, Shakespeare had Queen Elizabeth in mind when he created Portia: She was a woman in a man's world and like many of Shakespeare's female characters, actually proves to be more intelligent and resourceful than the males! You could even see the rings episode in 5.1 as an echo of the trial scene, where Portia traps Bassanio with her determination to exploit the fact he has not fulfilled his bond to her.

**Patriarchal Society:** Women were considered inferior to men in Elizabethan England, despite a powerful female on the throne defending her country against threats from the Spanish Armada and even courtiers within the English court. This patriarchal society was also the case in much of Europe including Italy. Women belonged to their fathers (or their brothers if their fathers had died) and then their husbands. Portia would have been expected to obey the commands of her father. Shakespeare crafts Portia to go against many expected traits of women at the time (passive and submissive), she is autonomous and creative.

## MAIN CHARACTERS - SOME KEY QUOTATIONS :

### ANTONIO – loving and loyal friend, but still prejudiced!

**Tragic** “I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano A stage where every man must play his part And mine a sad one”(1:1)

**Generous** - “My purse, my person, my extremest means/ Lie all unlocked to your occasions.”(1:1)

**Prejudiced** “I am as like to call thee so again,/ To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too./ If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not/ As to thy friends, for when did friendship take/ A breed of barren metal of his friend?”

**Patient/Loving** “I do oppose/ My patience to his fury, and am armed /To suffer with a quietness of spirit...”(4.1)

**Christ-like at the trial scene** “I am armed and well prepared. /Give me your hand, Bassanio. Fare you well. / Grieve not that I am fall’n to this for you.” (4.1)

**Resigned** “I am a tainted weather of the flock.” (a neutered sick sheep that is going to be slaughtered).

**Loyal and in love: Solanio describes A’s feelings for B:** ‘I think he loves the world for him’ (Act 2:8)

**Merciful** He lessens Shylock’s sentence as long as he promises to give half of his inheritance to Lorenzo: “The gentleman who lately stole his daughter”(4.1)

**Acting as Bassanio’s surety at end of play:** “I dare be bound again, /My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord/ Will never more break faith advisedly.”(5.1)

### BASSANIO – popular, handsome, but perhaps a cad?

**Indebted/ spendthrift** - “.....my chief care/Is to come fairly off from the great debt.” (1:1) “To you, Antonio,/ I owe the most in money and in love.” (1:1)

**Money- orientated:** “In Belmont is a lady **richly left**,/And she is fair/Nor is the wide world ignorant of her **worth**/...her sunny locks/Hang on her temples like a golden fleece.”(1:1)

**Loyal and a good friend?** “You shall not seal to such a bond for me!/ I’ll rather dwell in my necessity.” (1.3).

**On false appearances** of the lead casket, but perhaps implicitly Shakespeare suggests stuff about him: “So may outward shows be least themselves.”

**Praising Portia’s excessively (suggests he is assuming the pose of the courtly lover:** “What demi-god/ Hath come so near creation?”; “The substance of my praise doth wrong this shadow/ In underprizing it.”

**Honest – after he has won her, Bassanio tells Portia his true financial worth:** “When I told you/ My state was nothing...I was worth than nothing; for indeed,/ I have engaged myself to a dear friend,/ Engaged my friend to his mere enemy.”

**Loyal to Portia** “When this ring/ Parts from this finger, then life parts from hence.”

**Loving to his friend over his wife** “I am married to a wife.../But life itself, my wife, and all the world,/ Are not esteemed above thy life.../I would lose all, ay sacrifice all/ Here to this devil to save you.”

### PORTIA – the true hero / heroine of the play?

**Obedient** “So is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father.”(1:2)

**In love with Bassanio and dutiful as a fiancé/wife:** “Her lord, her governor, her king./ Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours/ Is now converted.”

**Loving (after B’s debt is revealed):** “Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear.”

**Generous:** “Pay him six thousand, and deface the bond.”

**Wise and eloquent** “The quality of mercy is not strained,/It droppeth a the gentle rain from heaven.” (4.1);

**Appeals to Shylock’s self-interest:** “ Here’s thrice the money offered thee.”(4.1) **and finally Shylock’s humanity:** “Have by some surgeon...To stop his wounds, lest he do bleed to death.” **However, this fails – she reverses the judgement on him becoming**

**vengeful:** “Though shalt have justice more than thou desirest / He shall have merely justice and his bond.”(4.1)

**Clever:** “And for love, I’ll take this ring from you.” (4:1) “For, by this ring, the doctor lay with me.” (5:1)

**Prejudiced . After Moroco’s failure:** “Let all of his complexion choose me so.” (2:7)

### SHYLOCK – victim or villain?

**Prejudiced/villainous:** “I hate him for he is a Christian/ But more, for that in low simplicity/He lends out money gratis, and brings down/ The rate of usance with us here in Venice.” “If I can catch him once upon the hip,/I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.” “yet I’ll go in hate, to feed upon/The prodigal Christian./Lock up my doors...”

**A victim:** “You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,/And spit upon my Jewish gabardine,/And all for use of that which is mine own”; “Hath a dog money? Is it possible/ A cur can lend here thousand ducats?”; “I say my daughter is my flesh and blood.” “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?” “If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?” After the judgement: “You take my life when you do take the means whereby I live.” (4.1)

**Vengeful and villainous:** “It will feed my revenge...” “The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.” “I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear/ I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.” “Tell me not of mercy.” (3:3); “Thou call’dst me dog before thou hadst a cause,/But since I am a dog, beware my fangs.” (3.3) “I’ll have no speaking, I will have my bond.” (3:3) “If you deny me, fie upon your law:/There is no force in the decrees of Venice. /I stand for judgement. Answer: shall I have it?” (4.1); “My deeds upon my head! I crave the law,/ The penalty and forfeit of my bond.”(4.1)

**JESSICA –Oppressed or a disobedient and spendthrift ‘shrew’?:** “Our house is hell.” **Ashamed** “Alack, what heinous sin it is in me/ To be ashamed to be my father’s child!/For though I am a daughter to his blood/ I am not to his manners.” **In love:** “Love is blind and lovers cannot see/ The pretty follies that they themselves commit.” **Treacherous and a thief** “Here, catch this casket; it is worth the pains.” “I will...gild myself/ With more ducats.” (2:6) **Independent** “I have a father, you a daughter, lost.” **Desiring to change faith:** “I shall end this strife,/Become a Christian and thy loving wife.” **Spendthrift – gave away Leah, her deceased mother’s ring** “for a monkey,” **spent** “fourscore ducats at a sitting!” **Loving Lorenzo, yet also warning him in Act 5.1:** “In such a night/ Medea gathered enchanted herbs/ That did renew old Aeson.”

### Some of the more minor characters

**LORENZO** is in love with Jessica, a friend of Gratiano and Bassanio.

**MOROCCO** failed suitor who realises - “All that glisters is not gold.”

**DUKE** the Judge at the trial who shows prejudice vs Shylock: “A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch.”(4.1) “We all expect a gentle answer, Jew.” (4.1) Mercy towards Shylock: “That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit, /I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it.”

**SALANIO-** On Shylock: “...the dog Jew did utter in the streets: ‘My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!’”

**SALERIO** On Antonio: “A kinder gentleman treads not the earth.”

**GRATIANO** as described by Bassanio: “Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing.”; Thou art too wild, too rude and bold of voice” (2.3) Parallel to Bassanio: “You saw the mistress, I beheld the maid.”

Hating Shylock at the trial scene: “O, be though damned, inexecrable dog!” Unmerciful to Shylock after the judgement: “Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself.”

**NERISSA** loyal friend and confidante to Portia, she is also witty and clever

**Misunderstanding / confusion / deception / disguise:** humour is derived from characters’ shrouded perception of reality and dramatic irony.

Feature of a Comedy

**Playful language:** puns, quips and vibrant figurative language are written into the play to demonstrate wit.

**Happy ending:** normally involving a marriage.

**Underlying critique:** Shakespeare ridicules some of the issues in Elizabethan society: such as class, love and honour.