

The Merchant of Venice

Characters (in order of appearance)

Antonio: The title character, Antonio is a wealthy but sad older merchant who claims never to have borrowed money but is willing to lend to friends, especially Bassanio, without benefit of interest.

Salerio and Solanio: Friends of Antonio and Bassanio, minor characters almost indistinguishable from each other who comment on the action and who inform the audience about the action that has occurred offstage.

Bassanio: A young man with expensive tastes and rich friends who borrows money from Antonio in order to court the rich, intelligent, and beautiful Portia.

Gratiano: Bassanio's friend with a bawdy and clownish demeanor. Accompanies Bassanio to Belmont to court Portia and falls in love with Portia's servant Nerissa.

Lorenzo: Bassanio's friend who falls in love with Shylock's daughter Jessica.

Portia: Widely pursued noblewoman who is as intelligent as she is rich and beautiful. Her father's will demands that her husband be selected through a test involving three caskets: one of gold, one of silver, and one of lead. Portia's mind allows her to find loopholes in legal matters, thus rescuing her new husband's friend from his bond.

Nerissa: Portia's handmaid who falls in love with Gratiano, Bassanio's friend.

Shylock: The Jewish merchant of Venice who lends Antonio the money on his friend Bassanio's behalf. Clever and quick, Shylock is all at once a dark humorist, a moral absolutist, a religious bigot, an ogre, and, surprisingly, a sentimentalist. He serves as both the villain and the most tragic figure of the play.

Prince of Morocco: Portia's suitor and the only Black character in all of Shakespeare outside of Othello. Like Othello, he embodies many of the stereotypical Elizabethan perceptions of Moors: violent and sexual. He wrongly chooses the silver casket.

Launcelot Gobbo: Shylock's comic servant who leaves Shylock's service to serve Bassanio.

Old Gobbo: Launcelot's blind father who has not encountered his son in years.

Jessica: Shylock's daughter, who escapes from her father's house in order to marry Lorenzo. She converts to Christianity in order to further assimilate into the Christian society of Venice.

Prince of Aragon: One of Portia's suitors who greedily chooses the golden casket.

Tubal: Shylock's friend, the only other Jew in the play, who functions as a news bearer of Jessica's escape and of her consequent behavior.

Balthazar and Stephano: Servants to Portia.

The Duke of Venice: The reigning official of Venice who presides over the court where Shylock intends to collect on his bond.