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0521618754 - The Merchant of Venice
Edited by Jonathan Morris and Robert Smith
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The Merchant of Venice

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Series Editor: Rex Gibson
Director, Shakespeare and Schools Project



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Cambridge School Shakespeare

This edition of *The Merchant of Venice* is part of the **Cambridge School Shakespeare** series. Like every other play in the series, it has been specially prepared to help all students in schools and colleges.

This *Merchant of Venice* aims to be different from other editions of the play. It invites you to bring the play to life in your classroom, hall or drama studio through enjoyable activities that will increase your understanding. Actors have created their different interpretations of the play over the centuries. Similarly, you are encouraged to make up your own mind about *The Merchant of Venice*, rather than having someone else's interpretation handed down to you.

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Although you are invited to treat *The Merchant of Venice* as a play, you don't need special dramatic or theatrical skills to do the activities. By choosing your activities, and by exploring and experimenting, you can make your own interpretations of Shakespeare's language, characters and stories. Whatever you do, remember that Shakespeare wrote his plays to be acted, watched and enjoyed.

Rex Gibson

This edition of *The Merchant of Venice* uses the text of the play established by Elizabeth Story Donno in **The New Cambridge Shakespeare**.

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Antonio (left), the Merchant of Venice, arranges to borrow money from Shylock to enable his friend Bassanio to woo Portia. Antonio agrees to forfeit a pound of his flesh if he cannot repay the loan.



But Shylock, a Jew, is despised by the Christians who seize any opportunity to torment him. Their cruel treatment of him bodes ill for Antonio.

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‘the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father’ – Portia (left), the wealthy mistress of nearby Belmont, explains to her maid, Nerissa, the restrictions placed upon her by her dead father’s will. She must marry the man who solves the riddle set by her father about three caskets of gold, silver and lead.

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Two of Portia's suitors try to work out the correct answer to the riddle set by her father. Whoever opens the casket containing Portia's portrait will win her hand in marriage. The first two suitors fail the test.

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‘Our house is hell’ – Shylock’s daughter, Jessica, loves a Christian man, Lorenzo, and plans to elope with him. She is relieved to escape from her home. Jessica’s betrayal of her father precipitates his distress and fury. He determines to enforce his ‘bond’ – a pound of Antonio’s flesh.

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'Hath not a Jew eyes?' Shylock, bitter over the loss of his daughter, and his hostile treatment by the Christians, stresses the common humanity of all men. But he also settles on a course of revenge against the financially vulnerable Antonio.



Bassanio, wary of fine but deceptive appearance, chooses the correct, lead casket and claims his reward – Portia: 'Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours / Is now converted.'

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Shylock resolves to take the financially stricken Antonio to court to pursue the full terms of the contract: 'The pound of flesh which I demand of him / Is dearly bought; 'tis mine, and I will have it.'

The court assembles to judge if Shylock can cut the pound of flesh from Antonio. All productions have to decide how to stage this tense and dramatic scene.



Portia, disguised as the legal expert Balthazar, appears at the trial to act for Antonio. She advocates the need to show mercy: 'The quality of mercy is not strained . . .'

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'You must prepare your bosom for his knife' – Shylock is triumphant, anticipating the shedding of Antonio's blood.

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‘Tarry a little . . .’ – At the last moment, Portia reveals a loophole in the contract which releases Antonio from the grip of death. Shylock leaves the court a broken man.



The final act moves back to Belmont to focus on reconciliation and harmony. Lorenzo and Jessica are joined by Bassanio and Portia, and Nerissa and her recently acquired husband, Gratiano. Antonio, alone, reflects on the events of the play.