

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE • THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

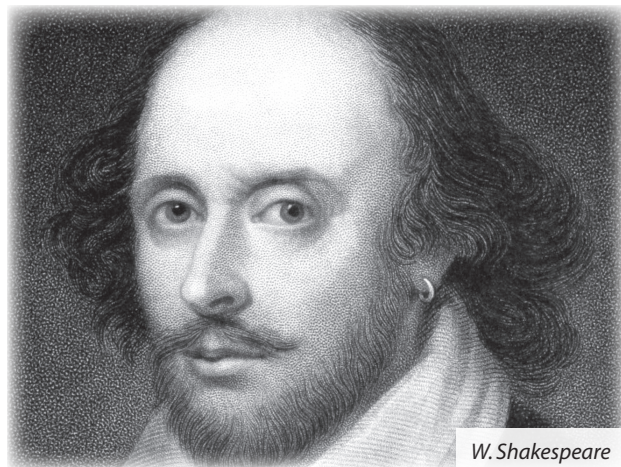
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

William Shakespeare was an English poet, playwright, and actor. He was born on 26 April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon. His father was a successful local businessman and his mother was the daughter of a landowner. Relatively prosperous, it is likely the family paid for William's education: he attended King Edward VI Grammar School in Stratford from the age of 7 and left school and formal education when he was fourteen. There is no evidence he attended university.

At the age of 18 Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years older than him, and they had three children: Susanna, and twins Hamnet and Judith. After his marriage, information about his life becomes very scarce, but he is thought to have spent most of his time in London, writing and performing in his plays. Between 1585 and 1592, he began a successful career in London as an actor, writer, and share-owner of a playing company called the *Lord Chamberlain's Men*, later known as the *King's Men*.

Around 1613, at the age of 49, he retired to Stratford, where he died three years later. Few records of Shakespeare's private life survive. He died on 23 April 1616, at the age of 52.

Shakespeare is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's most pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called England's *national poet* and nicknamed *the Bard of Avon*. He wrote 38 plays, 154 sonnets and two long narrative poems. His plays have been



W. Shakespeare



translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright.

Shakespeare produced most of his known work between 1589 and 1613. His early plays were mainly comedies, then he wrote principally tragedies until about 1608, including *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, considered some of the finest works in the English language. In his last phase, he wrote tragicomedies – neither a comedy nor a tragedy but with features of both – such as *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline*.

ABOUT THE PLAY

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

Bassanio, needing money to be a suitor to Portia, asks his friend Antonio, a wealthy merchant, for a loan, but Antonio's wealth is invested in shipments that are currently out at sea. So, Antonio asks Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, to loan him the money to give to Bassanio. Shylock agrees to lend the money, on condition that if Antonio does not pay it back by an appointed time, Shylock may cut a pound of flesh from him.

Meanwhile, in Belmont, Portia is unhappy with her suitors. Her father **has decreed** that she must marry the man who chooses from three caskets, the one containing her picture. Fortunately for Portia, both the Prince of Morocco and Arragon fail, being seduced by the external glamour of the two incorrect caskets, while Bassanio, to Portia's delight, chooses the right one. Gratiano, Bassanio's best friend, falls in love with Nerissa, Portia's **lady-in-waiting** and the couples decide on a future double wedding. In Venice, Solanio and Salerio hear that some of Antonio's ships are lost, and Shylock promises to **redeem** his bond. Bassanio quickly



Lynn Collins as Portia
in *The Merchant of Venice* (2004)

returns to Venice with money from Portia to repay the loan, but Shylock refuses to listen to Antonio's pleas.

Portia and Nerissa travel to Venice disguised as a **lawyer** called Balthasar and his clerk, to defend Antonio against Shylock. Before the court, Shylock rejects Bassanio's money again and 'Balthasar' agrees that Shylock must take his bond, but only if the pound of flesh is exactly **excised** and no blood is spilt. Realising this cannot be done, Shylock tries to leave, but because he has tried to take Antonio's life, his goods are confiscated, and his life falls into Antonio's hands. Antonio lets him live if he agrees to become a Christian and give his possessions, when he dies, as a **dowry** to Lorenzo and Jessica, Shylock's daughter, who ran away from home to marry a Christian. Shylock agrees, and leaves.

Antonio learns that his ships are safe and the couples prepare for their marriage.



Al Pacino as Shylock
in *The Merchant of Venice* (2004)

THE TEXT

THE THREE CASSETS

Before his death, Portia's father set up a test involving three symbolic caskets to find out who would be the worthiest suitor. Portia's suitors must choose one of three caskets: gold, silver, or lead. One of the caskets contains a portrait of Portia, the others don't. If the suitor chooses the casket containing Portia's picture, he has won the right to marry her. But none has succeeded so far. Attached to the caskets, there are inscriptions: the inscription on the leaden casket does not sound as **enticing** as the others because it requires the chooser to risk everything he has. The inscriptions on the gold and silver caskets are different; they tell the chooser that he will gain something by choosing them, but the inscriptions have double meanings. The gold casket is a symbol of **greed** and of materialistic and **shallow** people who value surface over substance. Silver, while still precious, is not quite as luxurious as gold. The silver casket symbolises a more cautious greed. These are the people who make compromises in trying to fulfil their dreams. The lead casket ends up being the right choice. It is **plain** on the outside, but it holds an inner treasure. It represents Portia herself, who may one day grow old and plain, but who is beautiful and valuable on the inside. The inscription on the lead casket also says "Who chooses me must give and hazard all he has", which is the same as in marriage.

to acknowledge: *riconoscere*
brothel: *bordello*
ceruse: *cerussa, mistura a base di piombo*
to debase: *svalutare*
to decree: *decretare, stabilire*
den: *tana, covo*

dowry: *dote*
enticing: *attraente, allettante*
to excise: *asportare*
flesh: *carne*
greed: *avidità*
lady-in-waiting: *dama di compagnia*
lawyer: *avvocato*

loan: *prestito*
moneylender: *usuraio*
plain: *semplice*
playwright: *drammaturgo*
pre-eminent: *eminente*
to redeem: *riscattare*
shallow: *superficiale*
shrewd: *scaltro, avveduto*

smallpox: *vaiolo*
suitor: *spasimante, pretendente*
to tackle: *affrontare, contrastare*
trickster: *truffatore*
vagranacy: *vagabondaggio*

Morocco

The first, of gold, which this inscription bears,
'Who chooseth me shall gain what many men
desire;'

The second, silver, which this promise carries,
'Who chooseth me shall get as much as he
deserves;'

This third, dull lead, with warning all as blunt,
'Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he
hath.'

How shall I know if I do choose the right?

Act II, Scene VII

Questo primo, d'oro, porta questa iscrizione,
"Chi sceglie me, otterrà ciò che desiderano
molti,"

Il secondo, d'argento, reca questa promessa,
"Chi sceglie me, avrà quanto si merita,"

Questo terzo, d'ottuso piombo, ha un avviso
altrettanto cupo,

"Chi sceglie me, dovrà dare e azzardare tutto
quello che ha."

Come saprò se scelgo quello giusto?



Bassanio

So may the outward shows be least themselves:
The world is still deceived with ornament.
In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt,
But, being seasoned with a gracious voice,
Obscures the show of evil? In religion,
What damned error, but some sober brow
Will bless it and approve it with a text,
Hiding the grossness with fair ornament?
(...)

Therefore, thou gaudy gold,
Hard food for Midas, I will none of thee;
Nor none of thee, thou pale and common
drudge
'Tween man and man: but thou, thou meagre
lead,
Which rather threatenest than dost promise
aught,
Thy paleness moves me more than eloquence;
And here choose I; joy be the consequence!

Act III, Scene II

Così possono le apparenze rivelarsi false.
Il mondo si fa sempre ingannare dagli ornamenti.
Nella legge, quale arringa per quanto corrotta
e guasta,
insaporita da una voce aggraziata,
non nasconde la sua apparenza di male?
Nella religione,
quale dannato errore non può una fronte
austera
benedire e comprovare con una citazione,
celando la grossolanità con un bell'ornamento?
(...)

Perciò, tu, oro sfarzoso,
duro cibo per Mida, non fai per me;
e neanche tu, pallido e volgare mezzano
tra uomo e uomo: ma tu, misero piombo,
che non prometti nulla e, piuttosto, minacci,
il tuo pallore mi muove più dell'eloquenza,
e qui io scelgo – la mia gioia ne sia la
conseguenza!

COMPREHENSION

1 Answer the questions.

1. What school did Shakespeare attend?
2. What is the nickname given to Shakespeare?
3. Where did he spend most of his life and what was his job?
4. What is a tragicomedy?
5. Why does Bassanio ask Antonio for a loan?
6. Why does Antonio have to ask Shylock for the loan?
7. In case Antonio does not pay Shylock back in due time, what will Shylock do?
8. How can Portia solve the dispute between Antonio and Shylock before the court?

ANALYSIS

2 Answer the questions.

1. 'Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.' What does the final "th" of the verbs "choose" and "have" stand for in modern English?
2. Bassanio criticises man's behaviour in law and religion. In your own words, what does he say?
3. Why do you think Bassanio chooses the lead casket?

FURTHER ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

3 Read the text and fill in the gaps with the given words

absorbed • beheaded • being • irony • layers • moderate • muscle • necks • passed • poisonous
• popular • powder • religious • scarred • victories



The Elizabethan Era and the Use of Lead in Cosmetics

Elizabeth I, "Good Queen Bess," (1) away on March 24, 1603. She was the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. Her mother was (2) two and a half years after her birth and she was declared illegitimate and deprived of the title of princess. The great (3) is that Elizabeth I proved to be one of England's best monarchs. She was more (4) than her father, she was a **shrewd** diplomat and presided over one of the greatest (5) in English history, the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. Her reign is known as the Elizabethan Era, a high point in English history, with great works (6) written by William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe and exploration led by Sir Francis Drake. It was a period of relative (7) tolerance: Elizabeth's motto was *video et taceo* (I see and say nothing).

At 29, she contracted **smallpox**, which left her skin (8) and dependent on cosmetics. Here is where trouble starts.

One of the most (9) cosmetics of the upper classes was Venetian **ceruse**, which women used to whiten their faces, (10), and chests. It was made by



mixing vinegar with lead, which created an opaque (11) that gives the wearer a milky, porcelain white complexion. The big problem with ceruse was that it is (12) through the skin and caused lead poisoning, hair loss, (13) paralysis, and a slowly deteriorating mental condition. It also corroded the skin, leaving it unattractive; so, thicker and thicker (14) had to be applied over time, but prolonged use of ceruse caused death. Amazingly, ceruse, while highly (15) , remained popular for about 300 years despite its side effects. Finally, in 1634 it was classified as a poison.

Adapted from: [//www.medicalbag.com/what-killed-em/queen-elizabeth-i/article/486648/](http://www.medicalbag.com/what-killed-em/queen-elizabeth-i/article/486648/)

4 Read the above text again and complete the sentences.

1. Elizabeth I died on....
2. When her mother was beheaded, Elizabeth was...
3. During Elizabeth's reign one of the greatest victories in English history took place: ...
4. The most important playwrights of the time were...
5. During the Elizabethan Era, explorations were led by...
6. Elizabeth's motto was...
7. Venetian ceruse was...
8. Lead poisoning led to...
9. In spite of its dangerous effects, ceruse remained popular for...

5 Read the text and choose the correct option.

Some Aspects of Elizabethan England

Elizabethan England often shows images of the Royal Court with splendid costumes, (1) *meals/ banquets/receptions* and extravagant entertainment, but for many people, life was very different. During the 16th Century the population rose (2) *adequately/energetically/dramatically* and this meant that an increasing number of people were unable to support (3) *themselves/theirselves/themself*. As the standard of living dropped, the problem of **vagrancy** worsened and this was to have (4) *reactions/ reverberations/repercussions* for the country as a whole. Elizabeth's government set about **tackling** this problem and introduced a series of Acts which **acknowledged** that the (5) *care/annoyance/burden* of the poor was now the community's

responsibility, and that each citizen had to play his part. In this respect, the Poor Laws were (6) *tolerant/progressive/continuous* for their time, and established a framework which lasted for many years. But what was everyday life like for the poor, and what impact did their (7) *existence/presence/absence* have on the towns and villages?

There were several reasons for this increase in poverty. During the reign of Elizabeth I, the population rose from three to four million people. This increase was primarily due to a rise in fertility and a falling death rate and (8) *meant/promised/represented*, in simple terms, that the country's resources now had to be shared by a greater number of people.

Added to this was the problem of rising prices. In the last years of his reign, Henry VIII had **debased** the coinage, which meant that the (9) *proportion/dimension/magnitude* of gold and silver in the coins was reduced. In 1560 Elizabeth's government took (10) *accomplishments/operations/steps* to remedy this by replacing all debased coins with new ones, thus restoring the country's currency to its proper levels. This move served to combat the problem of inflation in the early years of her (11) *dynasty/reign/empire*.

Many people flocked to London, which was by now the biggest city in Europe with between 130.000 and 150.000 inhabitants. It was a colourful metropolis and contained the best and worst of city life. The streets were filled with alehouses, gambling **dens** and **brothels**, and the public was (12) *entertained/delighted/comforted* by street performers, playhouses, and spectacles such as bear baiting. London was filthy but intriguing, lively but dangerous. And, in addition to its own poor, the city acted as a magnet for beggars, thieves and **tricksters** from across the country.

Adapted from: [//www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/tudors/poverty_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/tudors/poverty_01.shtml)

6 Discuss.

Portia is the romantic heroine of *The Merchant of Venice*. To save Antonio's life, she disguises herself as a man. Surf the net, find the reasons why she needs to do so to solve the difficult situation and her role in the play. Then share, compare and discuss your ideas with your classmates.