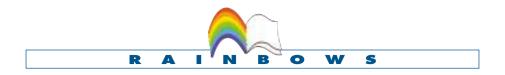# The Merchant of Venice

William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare

The Merchant of Venice

Adaptation, dossiers and activities
by Jole Pignet

The Merchant of Venice

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The Author
William Shakespeare

Between the record of his baptism on 26 April 1564 and the record of his burial on 25 April 1616, many other documents name William Shakespeare and his family because they were important members of the community in Stratford-upon-Avon.

Mary Arden, the dramatist's mother, was the daughter of a substantial landowner; about 1557 she married John Shakespeare, who was a glove-maker and trader in various farm articles. Between 1557 and 1577 John Shakespeare held important town offices: alderman[1] (entitling him to the appellation "Mr.") in 1565 and high bailiff (the town's highest political office, equivalent to mayor) in 1568. So, quite reasonably, William Shakespeare attended the local Grammar School, where Oxford graduates taught Latin, Logic, and Literature; Mathematics and the Natural Sciences were not on the curriculum.

On 27 November 1582, a marriage licence was issued[2] to William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior. The couple had a child in May 1583, twins (a boy and a girl) two years later. Not much is known about the following period nor about Shakespeare's departure from Stratford to London. It is said William Shakespeare was a schoolteacher for some time and that he was forced to leave Stratford after poaching[3] deer and rabbits on a private estate, but no evidence supports these legends.

In 1592, Robert Greene, a famous London playwright[4] and pamphleteer, attacked Shakespeare defining him an upstart crow[5], an actor who had presumed to turn playwright using other people's ideas and words. It is clear that by then Shakespeare had become prominent in the theatre and his success had created envy[6] among his fellow dramatists.
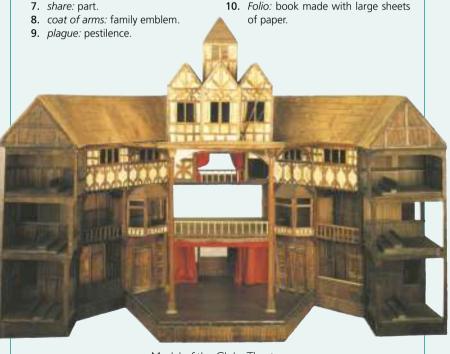
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1. *alderman:* member of the town Council.
2. *issued:* given.
3. *poaching:* killing without permission.
4. *playwright:* author of theatre plays.
5. *upstart crow:* raven (bird of prey) that has suddenly become famous.
6. *envy:* the feeling that you wish you had something that someone else has.

In 1594, Shakespeare was a member of The Chamberlain's Men, a famous acting Company which became The King's Men in 1603, on the ascent of James I to the throne. From 1599, the company acted mostly at the Globe Theatre, the profits of which Shakespeare had a share[7] in.

Shakespeare's financial success was marked by the coat of arms[8] granted to his family in 1596, and the purchase of a large house in Stratford where he retired to in 1611 and died in 1616.

Shakespeare was basically a playwright but at the beginning of his career, when theatres were closed down because of the plague[9] (1592), he wrote two narrative poems dedicated to the Earl of Southampton (*Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*) and in the course of time composed 154 sonnets.

His plays, edited by J. Heminge and H. Codell in 1623 in the first Folio[10], include **comedies** that mix laughter and strong sentiments (*The Taming of the Shrew, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Merchant of Venice, Much Ado about Nothing, As You Like It, Twelfth Night*), **tragedies** showing how dangerous inclinations can lead to ruin (*Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus*), **historical plays** about English and Roman rulers (*Henry VI, Richard II, Richard III, Julius Caesar*), and **romances** where love dissolves all contrasts (*The Winter's Tale, The Tempest*).

7. *share:* part.
8. *coat of arms:* family emblem.
9. *plague:* pestilence.
10. *Folio:* book made with large sheets of paper.

Model of the Globe Theatre

A great challenge

BEFORE READING

1 What do you know about Venice? Tick the appropriate answers.

   a. Where is Venice situated?
- ☐ In central Italy
- ☐ In southern Italy
- ☐ In north-eastern Italy

   b. What is Venice also known as?
- ☐ La Serenissima
- ☐ La Bella
- ☐ La Fiera

   c. What is typical of Venice?
- ☐ Avenues
- ☐ Canals
- ☐ Squares

   d. What is Venice famous for?
- ☐ Gondolas
- ☐ Pigeons
- ☐ Bridges

   e. Which is the heart of Venice?
- ☐ The Arsenal
- ☐ Piazza San Marco
- ☐ The Rialto

   f. What was the head of the state called in the past?
- ☐ Prince
- ☐ Doge
- ☐ Magnifico

2 Insert the correct word choosing among the following.

> Crete – East – Europe – maritime – Mediterranean –
> metals – military – spices

Venice was an important (1).............................republic. It controlled commerce from the (2)... and had important (3)... bases in the (4).................................... sea, like Cyprus and (5)................................. . Venetian merchants sent (6)... and silk to England and northern (7)... and imported (8)...................................... like gold, silver and lead.

3 Match each word in the first column with its opposite in the second.

- **a.** living ☐
- **b.** weep ☐
- **c.** departure ☐
- **d.** shut ☐
- **e.** sad ☐
- **f.** credit ☐
- **g.** lend ☐
- **h.** quickly ☐

- **1.** debt
- **2.** happy
- **3.** borrow
- **4.** slowly
- **5.** arrival
- **6.** dead
- **7.** laugh
- **8.** open

A great challenge[1]

Chapter 1 • (Act 1, Scenes I, II, III)

Belmont was a large estate[2] in the verdant[3] hills of Veneto. On it an old gentleman had built a lovely Palladian[4] villa, surrounded by a park full of trees and multicoloured flowers.

At the time of our story, Belmont was famous not only in the entire region but even across the Alps and the Mediterranean sea. Portia, in fact, the only daughter of the old gentleman, was a rich heiress[5] and a beautiful girl of rare virtues. So many suitors[6] visited Belmont to win her hand.

"Ah, Nerissa, I'm very sad," Portia complained one morning, while walking through the park with her lady-in-waiting. "I can't choose the man I like and I can't refuse the man I dislike! I am a living daughter conditioned by the will of a dead father!"

"Don't say so, my sweet lady," replied Nerissa comfortingly. "Your father was a virtuous man and before dying, he was inspired by God to take a wise[7] decision."

Portia's father had, in fact, thought of a lottery for his daughter's suitors: each of them had to choose from three caskets[8] – one made of gold, one of silver and one of lead[9]. One casket contained a portrait of Portia. Only the suitor who selected this casket would become Portia's husband.

"Don't worry," Nerissa went on, "the man who truly loves you will understand your father's meaning and choose the right metal."

"Let's pray you're right!" answered Portia, embracing Nerissa. Then she asked the girl how many suitors were still at Belmont

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1. *challenge:* confrontation.
2. *estate:* land property, domain.
3. *verdant:* fresh and green (of grass, plants, fields, etc.).
4. *Palladian:* in the neo-classical style of architect Andrea Palladio (1508-1580).
5. *heiress:* (here) woman who succeeds another in the possession of property.
6. *suitor:* a man who courts a girl to marry her.
7. *wise:* prudent and judicious.
8. *casket:* decorated box with locks.
9. *lead:* heavy grey metal.

waiting for the lottery and jokingly made her comments on each of them.

"The Neapolitan Prince? Oh, dear me! He can only speak of his horse and how fast he rides! I would soon become a horse as well!" and she started neighing like a horse while Nerissa laughed heartily.

Portia couldn't stand[10] the Count Palatine because he never laughed and would surely become a weeping[11] philosopher in his old age; she was sure that if she married the French Lord, Monsieur Le Bon, she would marry twenty different husbands. And much better not to marry either the young German Duke because he drank like a fish or the English Lord because he spoke only English.

Nerissa enjoyed herself listening to Portia's comments.

"Don't worry," she said, "they've let me know that they don't accept the terms of the lottery, it's too risky!"

"I'm glad of it," replied Portia, her large blue eyes serious again, "I don't like any of them and wish them a good journey back home."

They walked in silence for a moment. They made an evident contrast: they were both medium height, but Portia was a slim blonde, while Nerissa was a fully curved brunette. After a while, Nerissa asked,

"Do you remember, my Lady, the Marquis of Montferrat? He visited Belmont when your dear father was still alive. There was a young Venetian with him, a poet and soldier…"

Blushing[12], Portia interrupted her.

"Well, I remember him well… his name was Bassanio…"

"Who would make a good husband for you!" Nerissa exclaimed.
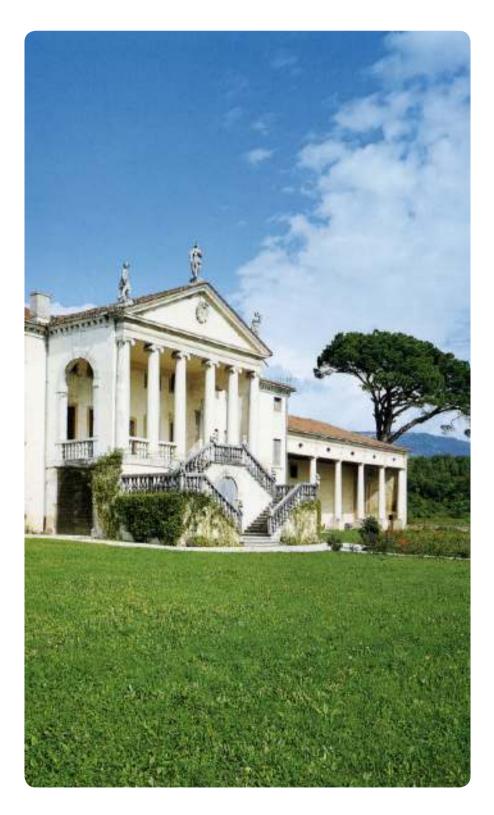
Just then a servant arrived announcing the departure of the old suitors and the arrival of a new one for the evening, the Prince of Morocco.

"O, no!" cried Portia. "When we shut the gate upon one suitor, another knocks at the door."

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10. *stand:* bear, tolerate.
11. *weep:* emit tears, cry.
12. *blushing:* turning red in the face.

Belmont was a large estate in the verdant hills of Veneto… a lovely Palladian Villa…

Riva degli Schiavoni (L. Carlevarijs, 1663-1730)

Some miles away, in Venice, Antonio was walking with his two friends Salerio and Solanio along the Riva degli Schiavoni[13]. A thin tall man in his forties, he inspired confidence with his calm but determined attitude. For a moment his grey eyes followed the flight of a seabird and looked at the sea in the distance, then he sighed,

"I don't know why I am so sad. I don't know where I caught this illness, I only know it makes me feel so miserable that I'm not myself!"

"Of course, your mind is on the sea, where your ships are sailing full of goods!" said Salerio and Solanio went on,

"If I had invested all my money in my ships, I would feel anxious, too. I would pick a piece of grass every five minutes to know the direction of the wind!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Salerio, "I know why Antonio is so sad! He imagines dangerous rocks in the sea, his ship damaged, her spices dispersed on the water and the precious silks from India dancing on the waves!"

Antonio explained that fortunately he had not invested all his money in one ship only.

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13. *Riva degli Schiavoni:*

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