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## THE AUTHOR



William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, on 23 April 1564. His father, John Shakespeare, was a successful tradesman, and his mother, Mary Arden, came from a rich family. Although we do not know much about Shakespeare's early life, many people believe that he went to the King Edward VI Grammar School in Stratford and studied Latin grammar and literature. When he was 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway. They had three children: Susanna, Hamnet and Judith.

Shakespeare later moved to London and became an actor and a writer. He wrote many plays and poems between 1586 and 1616. His most famous plays include *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare's plays had many different characters, and each character had a strong and interesting personality. He wrote about greed, selfishness, revenge, kindness and love. Shakespeare's plays were very popular when he was alive, and today they are even more popular. Actors still perform Shakespeare's works, and there are many films based on his plays. Shakespeare also added many words to the English language, which we still use today, such as "critical," "leapfrog" and "majestic".

Shakespeare died on 23 April 1616. He was 52 years old. Today, we remember him as one of the greatest writers in history.



## BACKGROUND

Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* in 1596-7, when he was thirty-two years old. He had already written some of his most famous plays, including *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

*The Merchant of Venice* is one of Shakespeare's best-loved plays. It has been translated into many languages and is a favourite choice of theatre companies throughout the world. There have also been many film versions of this play, including an Indian version (1941), a French version (1953) and a Maori (New Zealand) version (2002). The most recent English-language film version was made in 2004, starring Al Pacino as Shylock.

One particular expression from *The Merchant of Venice* is still used in English today. If you owe someone money, for example, and they want you to pay them back a lot more than you borrowed, you can say: "Oh, you really want your *pound of flesh*!" The *pound of flesh* means the extra money that you have to pay.

### A City on the Water

The city of Venice was on the north-east coast of Italy. There was no other city like it in the world. It was built on hundreds of small islands which were joined by bridges over the canals. Because of this, the main method of transport was by boat. People could walk along the narrow streets, and on the paths along the canals, but for a longer journey, they had to travel by boat. When Lorenzo and his friends helped Jessica escape from her father's house (page 13), they probably went by boat, as they had heavy boxes to carry.

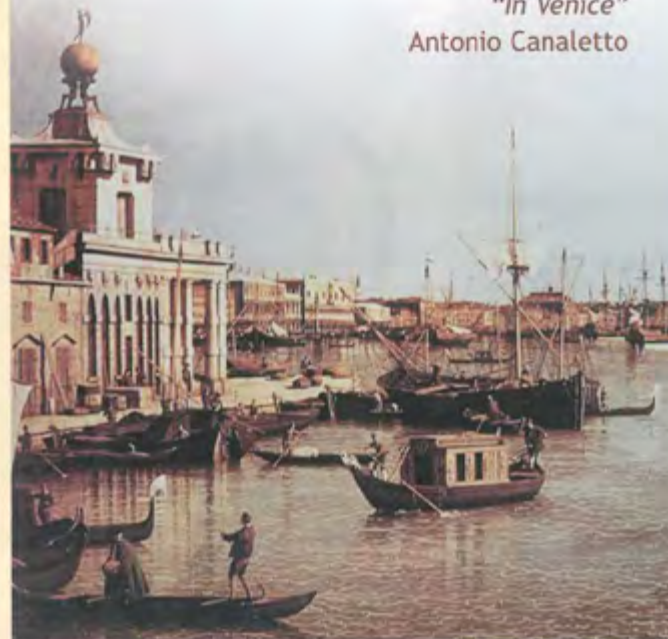
### A City of Merchants and Moneylenders

In Shakespeare's time, Venice was a very wealthy sea port. There were many merchants like Antonio, who made their money by sending ships all over the world. The ships carried goods that were bought and sold in different countries. The sea was a dangerous place, and ships were often wrecked or attacked by pirates. Merchants, and other people, often needed to borrow money from moneylenders like Shylock. Moneylenders had to make a living, so they charged people interest.

## THE PLOT

*The Merchant of Venice* tells a number of stories which are all connected. There is the love story of Bassanio and Portia: Bassanio loves Portia, but he needs to borrow money so that he can travel to Belmont and ask her to marry him. There is the story of the friendship between Antonio and Bassanio: Antonio wants to help Bassanio find the money he needs, but the cost is very high. Then there is the story of two old enemies, Shylock and Antonio: Antonio decides to ask Shylock for help, but Shylock sees his chance to take a terrible revenge.

"In Venice"  
Antonio Canaletto



# THE CHARACTERS



## ANTONIO

Antonio is a rich merchant. He makes his money by trade -buying and selling things in other countries. He is a good man and always tries to help people. However, this can get him into serious trouble.

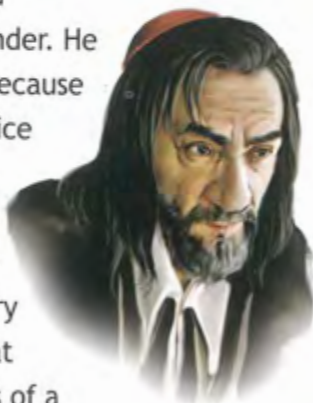
## BASSANIO

Bassanio is Antonio's best friend, and he is the romantic hero of this story. He wants to marry Portia, and he asks Antonio to help him win her love. Bassanio is a loyal friend, but he is young, and likes to spend a lot of money.



## SHYLOCK

Shylock is a rich and successful moneylender. He has a difficult life because many people in Venice have no respect for moneylenders. Shylock is very fond of money. He is angry because people treat him badly. He thinks of a clever and terrible plan to hurt Antonio.



## PORTIA

Portia is the heroine of the story. She is a rich and beautiful woman, and she is also very clever. She loves Bassanio very much, and when he is in trouble, she will do everything she can to help him and his friend.



## NERISSA

Nerissa is Portia's maid, and they are also good friends.

Nerissa listens to Portia's problems and always gives her sensible advice.

She is very understanding and has a good sense of humour.

## GRATIANO

Gratiano is one of Bassanio's best friends. He admires Bassanio very much and likes to do everything Bassanio does. He is completely loyal to Bassanio, and is always ready to help him.



## LORENZO

Lorenzo is one of Bassanio and Antonio's friends. He is in love with Shylock's daughter, Jessica, and they decide to run away together and get married. Shylock is very angry when he finds out.



## JESSICA

Jessica is Shylock's daughter. She is unhappy because she hates living with her father. She does not want to be his daughter because she thinks he is mean and unkind. Jessica runs away with

Lorenzo, and takes some of Shylock's money and jewels with her, which makes her father very upset.



## SALARINO AND SALANIO

Salarino and Salanio are Antonio's friends. They are very fond of Antonio, and they try to cheer him up when he is worried about his ships. They become very worried when they hear about a ship sinking at sea because they believe that Antonio will lose all of his money.



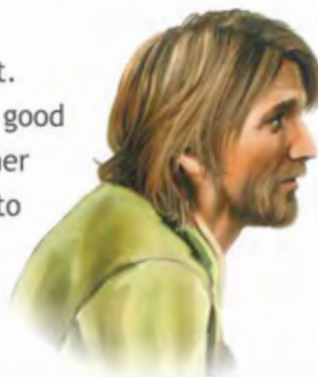
## THE DUKE OF VENICE

The Duke of Venice is the ruler of the city where Antonio and Shylock live, and he is the judge in the court case between Antonio and Shylock. He is very wise. The Duke must decide what to do when Antonio cannot pay Shylock, but it is a very difficult situation.



## LAUNCELOT

Launcelot is Shylock's servant. He is a kind man, and he is a good friend to Jessica. He makes her laugh, and he also helps her to escape from Shylock's house and run away with Lorenzo.





## • 1. A Good Friend •

A merchant called Antonio lived in Venice. He had plenty of money, but he was not a very happy person. He was very kind, however, and many people turned to him for help when they were in trouble. He was always willing to lend people money when they needed it. People were happy to borrow money from Antonio because he never charged them interest. The people of Venice liked and respected Antonio, but his best friend of all was Bassanio. Bassanio was younger than Antonio and came from a good family. He did not have much money, but he had expensive tastes. Antonio was always happy to lend Bassanio money whenever he needed it. Bassanio had borrowed a lot of money from his friend over the years, but Antonio did not mind. Anything Bassanio wanted, Antonio would give him.

The only person that Antonio did not get on with was Shylock, the moneylender. Shylock's job was to lend people money, and he charged them interest because he had to make a profit. People did not like paying interest, so they often borrowed money from Antonio, instead of Shylock. Naturally, this made Shylock angry. Antonio thought that it was wrong to charge interest. They did not like each other at all. Whenever they met, they argued.

One morning, Antonio was walking by the canal when he met his friend Bassanio.



"Antonio, my friend, I must ask for your help again," Bassanio said.

"Of course," replied Antonio. "You know I will help in any way I can."

"I know I have borrowed a lot of money already," Bassanio said. "But now I have a plan. If it succeeds, I will be able to pay you all I owe."

Antonio smiled. He knew his friend had met a beautiful woman.

"Please tell me all about your plan," he said.

"In Belmont, there is a very wealthy lady," Bassanio said. "Her name is Portia. She is beautiful, and I know she loves me."

"But do you love her, too?" Antonio asked.

"Oh yes, I do. I want to marry her," Bassanio replied. "That is why I need to borrow money. I want to go to Belmont to propose. When we marry, I will be very rich. I will pay you back everything I owe."

"Oh Bassanio, I am not worried about that," Antonio said sadly. "But at this moment I have no money to give. All the ships I own are at sea, and I have no money until they return."

"Oh, I see. Of course, I understand," Bassanio said.

He tried to smile because he did not want his friend to see how sad he was.

"But I want to help you, and I will," said Antonio, more cheerfully. "You can use my name to borrow from a moneylender. Let us go and see what we can find."