

The Merchant of Venice

Study Notes – Scene Summaries



Act One Scenes 1 and 2: We meet Antonio, Bassanio, Portia and Nerissa p. 2

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Merchant of Venice - Study Notes Act One Scenes 1 and 2

Remember these **4 points!**

1. We are introduced to Antonio, the 'merchant' of the title and his best friend Bassanio
2. Bassanio asks to borrow money to woo a noblewoman called Portia.
3. The **casket test** set up by Portia's dead father is introduced as an important plot point.
4. The **themes of money and love**, as well as the issue of fathers and children are all introduced.

What happens in **Scene 1**?

- Antonio, a rich **merchant** with many ships at sea, is unable to say 'why I am so sad' when questioned about his low mood by friends Salarino and Solanio.
- Bassanio and his young friend Gratiano enter; Bassanio admits his past faults, but asks his friend Antonio to lend him more money to pay his debts.
- Bassanio explains that he has fallen for a **noblewoman**, Portia, and believes she feels as he does.
- Antonio has no ready money as all his riches are tied up abroad in his trading ships, but he willingly agrees to help Bassanio raise or borrow money.

What happens in **Scene 2**?

- At her house in Belmont, Portia discusses her frustrations about finding a husband with her lady-in-waiting, Nerissa.
- Portia's late father has set a test for prospective husbands which involves choosing from three caskets of gold, silver and lead in order to win her.
- Portia humorously lists her suitors (a Neapolitan prince, the County Palatine, a French lord, an English baron, a Scottish lord and the Duke of Saxony's nephew) but remembers Bassanio as being worthy of Nerissa's praise. The arrival of a suitor, the Prince of Morocco, is announced.

Key Quotes

Describing...	The quote	Scene	Line
The character of Antonio	'Forsooth, I know not why I am so sad'	1.1	1
Bassanio's friendship with Antonio	'To you, Antonio, I owe the most in money and in love'	1.1	130–131
The risks of Antonio's sea trade	'all my fortunes are at sea'	1.1	177
Portia's situation	'so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father'	1.2	23–24

Merchant of Venice - Study Notes Act One Scene 3

Remember these **4 points!**

1. We encounter the main **antagonist** of the play, Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, for the first time.
2. We find out about the roots of the hate and conflict between Shylock and Antonio.
3. The central plot point of the '**pound of flesh**' bond is introduced.
4. The key theme of **appearance vs reality** is developed.

What happens in **Scene 3**?

- The scene begins in the middle of action, with Bassanio and Shylock discussing the terms of the loan of 3,000 ducats over three months.
- Shylock expresses doubts about whether Antonio's ventures overseas are safe. Antonio and Shylock meet.
- In an aside, Shylock reveals his hate for Antonio and how he wants **revenge** for the hurt done to him and the Jewish race.
- Shylock gives an impassioned speech about how Antonio has treated him, before finally agreeing to the loan, on the conditions of the bond.

What is the **bond** all about?

- Shylock agrees to loan the money and not take any interest on it. But he proposes that the bond will be a '**merry sport**' (a sort of game or bit of fun).
- The bond states that if Antonio cannot pay back the money within the set time, Shylock can take exactly a '**pound of flesh**' from any part of Antonio's body.
- Bassanio distrusts Shylock and advises Antonio against accepting the bond. However, Antonio willingly agrees, saying that within two months he expects to receive three times as much as the loan from his businesses.

Key Quotes

Describing...	The quote	Line
Shylock's need for revenge	'If I can catch him once upon the hip,/I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.'	41-42
The prejudice faced by Shylock	'You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,/And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine'	106-107
Antonio's opinion on Shylock:	'The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.'	93
Theme of appearance v reality:	Bassanio about Shylock → 'I like not fair terms and a villain's mind.'	175

Merchant of Venice - Study Notes Act Two Scenes 1-5

Remember these **4 points!**

1. We discover more about the **casket test** as the Prince of Morocco tries to win Portia's hand.
2. Shylock's daughter Jessica plans to run off with Lorenzo, a Christian. This is the beginning of another **subplot**.
3. **Comic characters** are introduced: Shylock's servant Lancelot and his father, Old Gobbo, who both seek to leave Shylock's house.
4. The theme of **appearance/reality** is developed through Lancelot and his father, and the plots to deceive Shylock about his daughter's plans.

What happens in Act Two Scene 1 + 2

- Scene 1: The Prince of Morocco boasts to Portia of his military courage. Portia tells him that if he fails the casket test he can never marry.
- Scene 2: Shylock's servant, Lancelot, debates with himself about leaving Shylock, and decides he will. He then fools his half-blind father who asks him the way to Shylock's house. Bassanio agrees to take Lancelot into his service. He also agrees to take Gratiano to Belmont with him.

How does the subplot develop in Act Two Scenes 3-5

- Scene 3: Jessica gives Lancelot a letter for her lover, Lorenzo.
- Scene 4: Outside Shylock's house, Lorenzo, Gratiano, Salarino and Solanio prepare for a masque. Lancelot arrives with the letter inviting Shylock to supper with Bassanio. Lorenzo reveals Jessica is to leave her father, taking his **'gold and jewels'**.
- Scene 5: Shylock reluctantly goes to meet Bassanio and speaks critically of the **'Christian fools'** who will hold their party close to his house. He leaves his keys with Jessica and warns her to **'Lock up'** the doors.

Key Quotes

Describing...	The quote	Scene	Line
Morocco's future if he chooses the wrong casket	'if you choose wrong,/Never to speak to lady afterward/In way of marriage'	2.1	40-42
Theme of appearance vs reality	Old Gobbo to Launcelot → 'I know you not, young gentleman'	2.2	65
Jessica's relationship to Shylock	'though I am a daughter to his blood/ I am not to his manners'	2.3	17-18
Shylock's hatred for Christians	'I'll go in hate, to feed upon/The prodigal Christian.'	2.5	14-15

Merchant of Venice - Study Notes Act Two Scenes 6-9

Remember these **4 points!**

Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo adds drama and tension.

2. Further details of the casket test are revealed as two suitors, the Princes of Morocco and Arragon, try to work out the riddles
3. The theme of appearance and reality is developed through Jessica's disguise, and the way the caskets and inscriptions deceive the princes.
4. The themes of money and parental love/duty are reflected in Shylock's furious response to his daughter Jessica's disappearance.

What happens in Act Two Scenes 6 - 9?

Scene 6

- Gratiano and Salarino meet Lorenzo. Jessica, disguised as a boy, leaves Shylock's house, taking his money.
- Gratiano leaves to meet Bassanio and get the boat to Belmont.

Scene 7

- At Belmont, Morocco reads the three riddle-like inscriptions on the caskets.
- He finally opens the gold casket that is inscribed, '**Who chooseth me, shall gain what many men desire**' but is greeted with a skull. He leaves, forlorn.

Scene 8

- Salarino and Solanio report Shylock's angry discovery of Jessica's disappearance, '**o my daughter, o my ducats**'.
- They discuss reports of a Venetian ship having sunk in the English Channel and worry it might be Antonio's. They talk of his great love for Bassanio.

Scene 9

- At Belmont, Arragon rejects the lead casket, which states, '**Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath**'. He chooses silver, finds a '**fool's head**' and has to leave.
- The scene ends with the announcement that Bassanio has arrived in Belmont.

Key Quotes

Describing...	The quote	Scene	Line
The theme of love	Jessica says 'love is blind and lovers cannot see'	2.6	37-38
Theme of appearance vs reality	The gold casket states 'all that glisters is not gold'	2.7	65
Shylock comparing money and love	'oh my daughter! O my ducats!'	2.8	14
Antonio's love for Bassanio	Solanio says 'I think he only loves the world for him'.	2.8	51

Merchant of Venice - Study Notes Act Three Scenes 1-5

Remember these **4 points!**

1. Rumours about Antonio's ships sinking seem to be confirmed.
2. Shylock resists appeals for **mercy**, and makes it clear he will pursue payment of his debt from Antonio.
2. Bassanio asks to borrow money to woo a noblewoman called Portia.
3. Bassanio takes the casket test and wins Portia; Gratiano falls for Nerissa and they, too, will marry.
4. Bassanio returns to Venice to help Antonio; Portia and Nerissa also leave, in disguise. Belmont will be in the hands of Jessica and Lorenzo.

Scene 1

- Solanio and Salarino discuss tales of Antonio's lost ship. Shylock arrives and accuses them of knowing about Jessica's flight.
- Shylock gives an impassioned speech about the harm done to him by Antonio. He points out he is as human as any Christian.
- Tubal, Shylock's friend, arrives and makes him angrier with tales of Jessica's reckless spending.

Scene 2

- In Belmont, Bassanio takes the casket test, correctly choosing the lead one and revealing 'Fair Portia's counterfeit'. Portia gives him a ring as a symbol of their bond.
- A letter arrives confirming Antonio's losses and his imminent death. Bassanio leaves to help him.

Scene 3

- Shylock refuses all appeals for mercy; Antonio seems to accept that he is destined to die.

Scene 4

- Back in Belmont, Portia passes management of her house to Jessica and Lorenzo.
- Portia reveals to Nerissa they are to go to Venice disguised as young men.

Scene 5

- Jessica, Lancelot and Lorenzo talk humorously about parenthood, and about Jessica's conversion to Christianity.

Key Quotes

Describing...	The quote	Scene	Line
Shylock's struggle with prejudice	'Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?'	3.1	52-53
Shylock's anger with Jessica for stealing from him and marrying a Christian	'I would my daughter were dead at my foot'	3.1	79
Portia marrying Bassanio and sharing her riches	'myself, and what is mine, to you and yours'	3.2	177
Antonio's losses	'my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel'	3.2	23-4

Merchant of Venice - Study Notes Act Four Scene 1 and 2

Remember these **4 points!**

1. The act mostly consists of one long scene that forms the **dramatic climax** of the play.
2. All the major characters are **brought into focus** as the plot nears its end and the themes of **money, love, appearance vs reality** intertwine.
3. The court-room setting and speeches indicate a change of mood and tone.
4. Portia's powerful speech about **mercy** is the **emotional heart** of the scene.

What happens in **The Trial Scene (Act 4 Scene 1)**?

The duke tells Antonio that Shylock is **unwilling** to show mercy.

Bassanio offers to pay double the amount he owes to Shylock, but Shylock refuses and prepares to take his bond.

Nerissa arrives in disguise bearing a letter stating that Balthazar (in fact, Portia) will take the lawyer Dr Bellario's place.

Portia/Balthazar argues strongly about **the importance of mercy**, but when Shylock is unmoved, she acknowledges his right to take his '**pound of flesh**'.

Antonio bares his chest ready for the fatal cut. Suddenly Portia insists no blood must be spilled and explains that if it is, all Shylock's land and goods will pass to the state.

Shylock is defeated and requests the money, but Portia now tells him that for seeking the life of a Christian he faces **execution**.

The duke pardons him, but Antonio makes him promise to **convert to Christianity** and leave half his estate to Lorenzo and Jessica.

Shylock's words as he leaves, '**I am not well**', show he is now a broken man.

Portia asks Bassanio for his ring in payment for her service.

Scene 2: Gratiano gives the ring to Portia; Nerissa says she is going to try the same **trick** on Gratiano to get her engagement ring back. This launches the ring subplot

Key Quotes

Describing...	The quote	Line
Portia asking Shylock to show forgiveness	'The quality of mercy is not strain'd,/It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven'	182-183
Bassanio's love for Antonio	'life itself, my wife, and all the world,/Are not with me esteem'd above thy life'	282-283
Theme of appearance v reality:	Gratiano about Portia → 'an upright judge! A learned judge!'	175

Merchant of Venice - Study Notes Act Five Scene 1

Remember these **4 points!**

1. The final elements of the plot, including the **ring subplot**, are resolved.
2. Further news is revealed regarding the successful return of some of Antonio's ships.
3. The mood is enhanced by music, and **lyrical dialogue** between Jessica and Lorenzo.
4. The themes of **love, money and appearance and reality** are revisited.

- Lorenzo and Jessica, who are waiting at Belmont, talk about classical lovers who were together on 'such a night' as this one.
- Stephano brings news of Portia's return and Lancelot reports that Bassanio is also on his way to Belmont.
- Lorenzo requests music, although Jessica states she is 'never merry' when she hears 'sweet music'.
- Portia and Nerissa arrive first, and instruct the servants and Lorenzo and Jessica not to reveal to Bassanio and Gratiano that they have been absent.
- Bassanio, Gratiano and Antonio arrive.
- Portia pretends to be meeting Antonio for the first time.
- Gratiano and Nerissa argue over the ring given to the clerk (Nerissa) of the lawyer (Balthazar/Portia).
- Portia has fun reprimanding Gratiano for giving the ring away; Bassanio is forced to admit he has done the same.
- The trick is revealed as the ring that Portia then gives to Antonio to hand to Bassanio is the original.
- Portia presents a letter from her cousin Dr Bellario which explains her role of lawyer. She also reveals that three of Antonio's ships have safely returned.
- Nerissa breaks the final piece of news – that Lorenzo and Jessica will inherit all Shylock's possessions on his death.

Key Quotes

Describing...	The quote	Line
The theme of money vs love	'In such a night/Did Jessica steal from a wealthy Jew/And with an unthrift love did run from Venice'.	14-16
Theme of appearance vs reality	Portia to Gratiano → 'You give your wife too unkind a cause of grief;/And 'twere to me, I should be mad at it.'	175-176
Jealousy between Portia, Bassanio and Antonio	Antonio says 'I am the unhappy subject of these quarrels'	254