

The Merchant of Venice

William Shakespeare

A Before Reading

- 1 Shakespeare is believed to be the greatest English writer of all time. What do you know about him? Write your ideas in the table.

When he lived:	
Where he lived:	
His family:	
His plays:	eg 'Hamlet'...

Now read 'A Note About The Author' at the beginning of the book and compare your ideas.

- 2 *The Merchant of Venice* is about Antonio (the 'merchant of Venice' who has made money through trade) and Shylock (a Jewish money-lender who lends money to Bassanio so that he can get married). Which of the following words do you think you will find in the story? Check any words which you do not know in your Macmillan Dictionary.

owe love Christian sea computer ship America flesh cargo
court President holiday borrow bankrupt train debt pizza

As you start reading the story, look out for the words.

- 3 By the end of the story, each of the women in these pictures is in love with one of the men shown below. Can you guess who falls in love with who?



Portia (The Lady of Belmont)



Nerissa (looks after Portia)



Jessica (daughter of Shylock)



Bassanio, a Lord of Venice



The Prince of Arragon



The Prince of Morocco



Gratiano, a friend of Bassanio



Lorenzo, a Christian man of Venice

As you start reading, check to see if you guessed correctly.

B While Reading

- 4 a There are many important choices made by the characters in the play. As you read, number the choices below in the order that they happen in the story (1=first, 8=last) and say what the main result of each choice is.

Choice	Order (1-8)	Result(s)
Bassanio chooses the lead chest.		
Bassanio and Gratiano choose to give their rings to the lawyer/clerk.		
Morocco chooses the gold chest.		
Antonio chooses to help Bassanio by agreeing to the 'pound of flesh' bond.		
Arragon chooses the silver chest.		
Portia chooses to go to the court disguised as a lawyer.		
Shylock chooses to accept the duke's judgment.		
Jessica chooses to run away.		

- b *We can use our heads to decide what we should do, but our hearts always win.* (Portia, p16)

Do you follow your head or your heart when you have to make an important choice? Write a paragraph about an important choice you have made in your life. Explain what you chose to do, the reasons for your choice and the result(s) of it. Say also if it was a good or bad choice.

- 5 Jessica sends a letter to Lorenzo explaining how they can run away together. Lorenzo describes the letter:

She has told me how I can go and get her from her father's house so that we can run away together. She has told me how much money she has. And she says that she has a boy-servant's suit, ready to disguise herself in. (p39)

Write the letter that Jessica sent to Lorenzo.

Dear Lorenzo,...

C After Reading

- 6 a Some people think the play is anti-Semitic because Shylock is seen by the other characters as an 'evil' Jew. Others think Shakespeare was trying to show that anti-Semitism was bad and to make us feel sorry for Shylock. In your opinion, is the play anti-Semitic? If so, why? If not, why not? Write a paragraph explaining your view.
- b What is/are the main religion(s) in your own country? If there is more than one religion, is there understanding and acceptance between the different groups? Do you think that young people should learn about different religions at school?

- 7 Friendship and romantic love are important themes in the play. Portia tells Bassanio:

For you, I wish I could be sixty times better, a thousand times more fair, ten thousand times richer. I wish I had more qualities, more beauty, more money and more friends, to make myself better in your eyes. (p65)

Which qualities do you think are most important in (a) a friend and (b) a husband/wife/partner? Tick the three from the list which you think are most important for each. You can also add any other important qualities that aren't on the list.

Quality	(a) In a friend?	(b) In a husband/wife/partner?
Beauty		
Money		
Many friends/a wide social circle		
Sense of humour		
Honesty		
Education		
Intelligence		
Similar interests		
Other (Which?)		

When you have decided, write a paragraph explaining your choices.

- 8 Imagine you are a director making a new film version of *The Merchant of Venice* set in the 21st century. What changes would you make to tell the same story in the modern day, in a modern way?

Example: *Portia could find her husband through a reality television competition, Antonio could lose his money in a stock market crash.*

Plan your film. Give details of:

- where the story takes place
- the characters and what they do
- the music you would like to use
- the actors who would star in the film
- the aspects of the story you would change to make it more modern.