



The Merchant of Venice (Folger Shakespeare Library)

William Shakespeare

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In *The Merchant of Venice*, the path to marriage is hazardous. To win Portia, Bassanio must pass a test prescribed by her father's will, choosing correctly among three caskets or chests. If he fails, he may never marry at all.

Bassanio and Portia also face a magnificent villain, the moneylender Shylock. In creating Shylock, Shakespeare seems to have shared in a widespread prejudice against Jews. Shylock would have been regarded as a villain because he was a Jew. Yet he gives such powerful expression to his alienation due to the hatred around him that, in many productions, he emerges as the hero.

Portia is most remembered for her disguise as a lawyer, Balthazar, especially the speech in which she urges Shylock to show mercy that "droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven."

The authoritative edition of *The Merchant of Venice* from The Folger Shakespeare Library, the trusted and widely used Shakespeare series for students and general readers, includes:

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Essay by Alexander Leggatt

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