

## Major Characters in the Play

### Portia

Portia is the most beautifully drawn of all Shakespearean heroines and the author has devoted all the fund of his poetry and imagination in making this character very lovable. She possesses in herself all the virtues that go to make perfect womanhood. Fate has made her the heiress of countless wealth and pleasures waited round her without spoiling her or making her proud and hard-hearted towards others. Prosperity has left her generous and quick in sympathy. With what great warmth she welcomes Jessica and Lorenzo and she is equally hospitable in her reception of Antonio when she returns from the Trial Scene. She appreciates the unselfish friendship of Antonio and Bassanio and is prepared to make the utmost sacrifice to save the life of the former.

Portia has so many qualities so finely tempered together that criticism of it naturally dwells upon the harmonious fulness of her character. Most people of marked individuality have the defect of their qualities force of character easily becomes hardness; a strong sense of justice is apt on occasion to pass into severity. Conversely, kindness of heart often becomes undue indulgence. But with Portia's character *All Much Ado* and *Rosalind in As You Like It* may be classed together as characters of intellect when compared with others, they are at once distinguished by their mental superiority.

With all her mental ability, Portia is free from pedantry. She does not pose at all as one who is intellectually superior to those around her. She has too much modesty, too keen a sense of humour. She keeps the charm of an "unlessoned girl" without any of the self-consciousness and affectation that sometimes accompany cleverness.

She unites soundness of judgement with sensibility and a buoyant enthusiasm in under taking what her judgement approves :

**Portia**—Come on, Nerissa, I have work in hand  
That you know not of : we' ll see our husbands  
Before they think of us.

**Nerissa**—Shall they see us?

**Portia**—They shall, Nerissa ; but in such a habit,  
That they shall think we are accomplished  
With that we lack."

Portia has a strong sense of honour and justice; yet withal a woman's true instinct of kindness and mercy. Thus she "could teach Bassanio how to choose right" (III. 2. 10-11) and is longing that she may, but will not serve from the terms imposed by her father. And when Bassanio's choice does fall on the right casket, then, in the midst of her great joy, concern for his honour makes urge his to hasten to the help of the friend whom he has brought into such trouble. She is all sympathy and consideration she tells Bassanio—

"O love, dispatch all business, and be gone!"

In the Trial-scene, though she must see justice done, she would far rather show mercy to Shylock by inducing him to show mercy. She stoops to plead with the implacable Jew, whom every-one else in the court would deal with summarily. Knowing that she has the means to confound him, she puts forth all her eloquence in hope of touching his ear, failing once, she gives another chance

"Be merciful :

Take thrice they money; bid me tear the bond."

Failing again she presses him, for his own sake, to do at least some slight "charity"—

"Have by some surgeon....."

It were good you do so much for charity". (IV. 1. 155-9).

Not till Shylock has flung away every preferred chance does she pronounce sentence : a harsh sentence, truly, but the law of Venice—and a judge must administer the law without reference to his personal feelings. What Portia says and does in this scene represents, surely, the perfect reconciliation of justice and mercy.

There is a deep seriousness of character in her : we see it at all the great moments of the action—when she gives herself in those words of exquisite self-surrender to Bassanio (III. 2. 238—45), above all, when she reasons with Shylock and sets forth "the quality of mercy" (IV. 1. 182—200). Yet there is no austerity in this seriousness. Rather, it is relieved by a rippling vivacity of mood, a joyous brilliance of manner and speech.

Gifted with a fine sense of humour, she delights in a comic situation such as the ring-episode, where her assumption of anger (V. 189—138) illustrates her versatility. But how quickly she sees when a jest he gone far enough, how tactfully she drops it (V. 146, 247).

"Give his this;

And bid him kept it better that he other."

She has a very pretty wit, which could, at need, be unpleasant keen, as we feel when she is speaking of her suitors (1. 2) ; yet she never speaks seriously a single word of caustic satire to anyone.

She has great resourcefulness and self-reliance : the plan of going to Venice to plead is hers, and we can imagine what nerve its execution needs. One might have thought

that the girl who possessed the qualities essential to the part that Portia plays must be somewhat self-assertive and even unfeminine; but we do not think so after knowing her. For each quality in her which is the index of force of character and intellect is balanced by some more specifically feminine quality : by the tenderness of a "gentle spirit" (III. 2. 163) and ardour, by modesty and tact; and the result is an exquisite equipoise. She is greatly Bassanio's superior, we cannot help feeling. One of the most beautiful things where so much is beautiful is her determination not to see this superiority,

## Antonio

The Merchant of Venice in the play is Antonio. The play is called after him because, though not himself the chief actor, he is the source and centre of the action. The battle of the bond story is fought round him. It is his generosity that starts the caskets story.

As everyone in the play speaks ill of Shylock, of everyone save Shylock speaks well of "The Merchant of Venice" Antonio. "The kindest man,

The best-conditioned and unwearied spirit

In doing courtesies,.....

Not only Bassanio, but other also praise Antonio in similar manner. Even the Duke takes "great pains" on his behalf.

Antonio's one fault is his lack of self-assertion. He is too passive. He does not want to spoil Bassanio's chances at Belmont, or cloud his happiness, Antonio keeps silence till it is too late for Bassanio to do anything.

The reason of his passivity is perhaps a strain of sadness in his nature. But a character of this type is essential for the plot. The plot requires two improbable things—that someone should sign the bond, and afterwards, seeing the terrible danger draw near, should forbear to ask aid of the friend who could at any rate have made some effort to meet the danger. The only man in the play—nay in Venice—who would do both things is Antonio, in whom friendship has become almost a passion and self-renunciation a second nature. It has often been remarked that the whole story of King Lear hinges on the utterly irrational and (per se) improbable act of the king in the first scene, but that this peculiar character makes the act credible and so rationalises the story. The character of the utterly unselfish Antonio is equally indispensable to The Merchant of Venice. Thus the improbabilities of many of the events in the play seem natural and probable because of the peculiarities of Antonio's nature.

## Bassanio

Bassanio is a young Venetian nobleman. Bassanio, at the outset does not enlist our sympathy. He has a dandy and cavalier manner and the first we hear from him is : When shall we throw a party ? He is noble by birth, a soldier by profession, and prodigal in habits. He has squandered his fortune away so that he has to borrow money from his friend in order to go to Belmont. According to Professor Quiller Couch he looks like a

predatory young man who looks upon the Belmont expedition as a business proposition. Quiller-Couch also suspects that he deliberately withholds the condition of the caskets from Antonio.

But his character is to be judged less from what he himself says or does than from the reflected picture which we get of his in the words and actions of other people. He is Antonio's chosen friend and Portia's chosen lover. Antonio loves the world only for Bassanio's sake; and for him, Portia, courted by all nations and languages, would be trembled twenty times herself. Nerissa lets us know that he is a scholar and soldier, and "he, of all the men that ever my foolish eyes looked upon, was the best deserving a fair lady." Gratiano 'must' travel with him, even at the cost of a more subdued behaviour. And Launcelot Gobbo thinks his fortune is made. when he gets into his service, poor though Bassanio was. Among his friends, he is "my lord Bassanio, 'signior Bassanio".

By subtle touches his character is saved from figuring as a sordid, mercenary adventurer. For it is Portia who has fallen in love with him, more than he with her. His love is based more on her virtues than on her beauty. Portia knows that he has no wealth, for he has told her; thus. Once he has arrived at Belmont his bearing is so noble and lover like, that he makes us quite forget his not very worthy motive that, in part at least, took him thither. He shows himself the high-born soldier and lover, careless of outward displays and contemptuous of sham, ready to "hazard" for love, and in the moment of success, he is modest with a grace of humility that equals Portia's own.

When the cup of happiness is at his lips, he bravely puts it by and rushes to Venice to save his friend. Such moments do test a man and show him for what he is and this one counts far more in the effect his character makes on us than all the gentlemanly graces of his conventional equipment. Thus he is able to pass the test of love and friendship because of the greatness of his heart. We feel that he is not an unworthy lover of fair Portia.

## Shylock

A Romantic Comedy—The Merchant of Venice is a romantic comedy. A happy ending for the leading characters is essential for a romantic comedy. There is general rejoicing in Act V. However, Shylock is left out of this general rejoicing. Shylock has been defeated of his bond, robbed of his ducats, deserted by his daughter. He is even compelled to give up his religion and become a Christian. Thus The Merchant of Venice is a comedy for all the other characters, but a tragedy for Shylock. Does he deserve this fate? We can answer the question by critically analysing Shylock's role in the play.

As far as can Elizabethan audience was concerned. He is a Jew, and he is a money. Leader. English Christians hated the Jews, the Elizabethan's also hated the Jewish profession of usury—the lending of money for profit.

Shylock first appears as the cautious businessman. He thinks carefully before he gives three thousand ducats to Bassanio's. His reaction to the polite invitation to dinner is unexpected in its venom. Religious differences seem to be less important than professional jealousy :

" I hate him for he is a Christian;  
But more for that in law simplicity  
He lends out mony gratis."

To some extent Shylock justifies his hostility when he describes how he has been treated by Antonio. He has been insulted, spat upon and kicked out of the way like 'a stranger cur'. We sympathise with him because of this. We have two options. We sympathise with him because of this. We have two options. We may regard Shylock as a kind man and treat his bond as a "Merry spot" only. We may be suspicious of fair terms and a villain's mind.

Launcelot says, "the Jew is the very devil in casuation." This opinion is echoed by Shylock's daughter, Jessica. She says, "Our house is hell." Jessica is 'asham'd to be. (her) father's child', although she knows that it is a heinous sin' for a daughter to have such feelings. We can understand Jessica misery. When her father gives instructions about looking up his house whilst he is away. Jessica is forbidden even to look out of the window to watch the masquers going to Bassanio's feast. Shylock is a kill-joy—and he has also killed his daughter's natural affection for him.

Shylock's grief over the loss of his daughter is equalled, perhaps even surpassed by his anger at the theft of his money. He cries,

"My daughter ! O my ducats ! O my daughter !  
Fled with a Christian ! O my Christian ducats !"

The loss of a daughter is a real cause for sorrow. Shylock earns some pity when he says, "My daughter is my flesh and my blood."

Shylock seems to gain our sympathy by his passionate out burst. "Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, liealed by the same means warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? if you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die?"

In these words Shylock appeals to our common humanity. If we give a negative reply to the questions we shall be denying our own humanity, Common humanity ignores all limitations of colour, race or creed. From this point of view we may sympathise with Shylock. But if we study Shylock's stretch further our sympathy gradually vanishes.

Continuing his speech Shylock says. ".....and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? if we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.....The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction."

So far as his revenge is concerned Shylock says he will prove himself to be superior to the Christians in revenge fulness.

During the trial Shylock loses the audience's sympathy by his words and by the action of sharpening the knife on the sole of his shoe.

The events that follow do nothing to moderate the presentation of Shylock in the

terms used by the Duke when he warns Antonio, before the trial begins, that his adversary is,

an inhuman wretch  
 Uncapable of pity, void and empty  
 From and dram of mercy.

Shylock demanded a strict observance of the law, and (in poetic justice) it is precisely this that defeats him. Gratiano exults over his down fall but all the other characters in the court speak no unnecessary words, they show no satisfaction until Shylock has left the court.

Recent criticism of 'The Merchant of Venice' emphasizes the suffering human being. However, this was, perhaps not Shakespeare's intention. Shylock is more complex than any of the other characters in the play. He is the best drawn character. We understand why he acts as he does. This makes us sympathetic towards him. This makes us gentle in our censure of Shylock. However, the truth is that Shylock's conduct merits condemnation. We can only refrain from condemning it because we know that he has suffered for being a Jew. But we must condemn his revengefulness, his inhumanity. The tragic end of Shylock does not mar the comedy because Shylock's conduct deserves condemnation. The villain is rightly punished. We agree with the Duke's estimate of his character.

## Tubal

Tubal is a friend of Shylock—a friend with whom he discusses the plan of revenge. Tubal is ready to place himself at the service of Shylock. Shylock mentions him as "Good Tubal". Yet this 'Good Tubal', while telling Shylock of his search for his runaway daughter, torments him with the account of her extravagance in Genoa. Over-conscientious expositors say that Shylock is deceived and abandoned even by his co-religionists. Tubal's function in the play is to show Shylock's passion 'so strange, outrageous and so variable' roused by the double loss of his daughter and ducats and to prepare us for Antonio's failure to meet the bond. Shakespeare on every occasion makes his characters say what is effective, right and appropriate to the situation.

Salerio and Solanio are little more than convenient card-board figures distinguished from each other only by their different names. They are both parasites and hangers on to Antonio. They are vehement in their expressions of sympathy for Antonio's misfortunes and equally energetic in pettifoggery and worrying and worrying Shylock. They, in other respects, are but one degree more prominent than the 'Magnifices of Venice', Officers of the Court of Justice, Gaoler, Servants to Portia and other attendants', who help to fill the scene.

## Launcelot Gobbo

Launcelot Gobbo plays the part of Fool in 'The Merchant of Venice'. But he combines this with the role of servant and messenger. He is sensible enough to be useful on occasions in a menial role and clownish enough to afford diversion in a dull hour Shylock calls him

patch. ("The patch is kind enough"), i.e. the fool who wears motley. However, this is probably not true. Launcelot Gobbo is provided by Bassanio with a servant's livery, not the motley of the professional fool. As a motley wearer and professional fool he is quite third rate. His wit consists in a plepteous store of droll malapropisms. It is the sort of wit that soon becomes stale. And Launcelot overdoes it. His practical jokes and buffooneries in the scene in which his old and blind father is his victim are effective on the stage. But even as gags they are extremely poor specimens indeed. He enjoys his life at Belmont tremendously and helps Lorenzo and Jessica to while away the time with his verbal drollery.

Launcelot Gobbo begins his career as Shylock's servant. In the eyes of Shylock Launcelot Gobbo has almost every fault that a very unsatisfactory servant can have. But even Shylock has a god word for him. His comment—"The patch is kind enough", is indeed his highest praise. But Shylock disapproves of him in every other respect. He is gormandizar. He sleeps and rends apparel out. Thus he wastes his master's substance in knavish indolence.

Launcelot may be idle in his master's service but he knows how to please his master's daughter. Jessica who finds her father's house a hell commends Launcelot as a merry devil whose merry pranks divert her in hellish misery.

Launcelot is also a go-between in Jessica's secret affair with Lorenzo. He plays the part of go-between to perfection. He is of real help to Jessica and Lorenzo in their elopement. In Jessica's elopement with her Christian lover Launcelot plays a decisive part. But for his assistance the lovers would have found it difficult to elude Shylock's vigilance. Shylock must have been furious with Launcelot if he had remained in his service after the discovery of his daughter's flight.

Launcelot, however has feathered his nest in advance by joining Bassanio's service just before he takes an active part in Jessica's elopement.

Launcelot Gobbo must have been of an ease-loving and lovable temper for he is something of a universal favourite. Even Shylock has a kind word for him. Launcelot manages to rise rapidly in his new master's favour. He is allowed to accompany him to Belmont. He must have been invaluable for relieving the medium of voyage by his clowning.

Arrived at Belmont, Launcelot Gobbo is again thrown into the company of his old mistress Jessica, now happily married to Lorenzo. He enjoys his life at Belmont tremendously and helps Lorenzo and Jessica to while away the time with his verbal drollery. On the whole he plays the part of a fool in 'The Merchant of Venice'. But he combines this with the role of servant and messenger. He is sensible enough to be useful on occasions in a menial role and clownish enough to effort diversion in a dull hour.

Thus we see that Launcelot Gobbo plays some useful part in the play. He connects the Bond story with the casket story, throws Shylock's character into bolder relief and acts as a go-between to Lorenzo and Jessica verity comments Launcelot's is the Gratiano of the lower social sphere. The useful part he plays is made up of small things. With his garrulous quaintness he gives some relief to the serious interest, and that is his chief function. But he also helps to associate the two main stories by exchanging Shylock's service for Bassanio's. He enables us to know something more of Shylock in his home

and of the condition amid which Jessica has grown up. And he furthers the Lorenzo-Jessica story by acting as the lovers' messenger. In each of these little ways Launcelot's part is helpful to the play.

Commenting on his character verity says, "His character speaks for itself. He is a very merry, amusing, affectionate fellow; evidently a good son (II, 2, 59, 60), though with midsy he disclaims the credit jestingly; most good-bumoured, perhaps partly because to pleased with himself and quite boyish in his ways and wit. His wit indeed, on which he evidently plumes himself, has scarcely emerged from the elementary stage of practical jokes (II. 2. 74, 75, note) and clumsy puns (III. 5. 25–40), but he has a keen natural sense of fun. He has picked up from his various masters fine words which he mispronounces and misapplies, and tricks his talk out in odd shreds and patches of learning and Latin (II.2 51, 56, 57), to impress simple people. An original stage-direction (II, 2) describes Launcelot as "the Clown", and the description indicates his main part as a "funy fellow". But it would be absurd to compare him with the clowns of Shakespeare's later comedies."

## Lorenzo

Lorenzo is a poet with a great deal of the dreamer and artist about him. He has an artist's soul intensely alive to delight in natural beauty and music. This is well exemplified in his speech in the fifth Act : "How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank", etc. His artistic and refined nature draws him to Jessica whose outer beauty is the index of artistic sensibility within. He seems a most suitable lover for a girl of Jessica's type. His is a typical Italian love and joy without a thought of the past or the future recking nothing of Shylock's displeasure which will make his beloved dowerless. He is for the most part of a dreamy inactive nature, as may be seen in the amused tolerance of Launcelot's word-fencing.

He has a saving sense of humour as may be seen in the banker with which he prefers to meet Jessica's enthusiasm on the subject of Portia, which in reality he shares :

Even such a husband

Hast thou of me as she is for a wife.

He does not seem a very practical sort of person if one may judge by the description of the lover's extravagance at Genoa : and like his wife, he is not troubled much with moral scruples. He consents to the robbery of Shylock. But he loves Jessica sincerely and idealises her, whatever may have been his first intentions in courting her. The suggestion of the incidents of the elopement seems to be that Lorenzo meant at first no more than trifling with the pretty Jewess and that he rose to the occasion as he found and appreciated Jessica's higher tone and attraction. We must regard Lorenzo as a man of worth and honourable character, for Portia, a judge of character, selects him at first sight as the person to whom to commit her household in her absence.

## Gratiano

Finally, Lorenzo is the half-scholar the half-poet with a touch of pedantry about him. His discourse to the little Jessica on "the music of the spheres" and on the powers of music smacks of pedantry.



Among the minor characters of the play, 'The Merchant of Venice'. Gratiano occupies a very important place and makes significant contribution to make the play successful.

Gratiano is a constant companion of Bassanio. He is a big talker and Bassanio tells, not with much truth and definitely with some undignifiedness, that he is the greatest talker of non-sense in entire Venice and that there are two grains (of wisdom) in his two bushels of wheat (talk). But Gratiano is a merry fellow and has a very positive outlook on life. He lays a great store by mirth and cheerfulness. He preaches (and he practises it himself) to Antonio the desirability and advisability of mirth and laughter in life. Although Gratiano is a minor character he does a lot to enliven the atmosphere in the play. He is one of the permanent and familiar social types without whom no company is complete.

Gratiano's spirits run wild in familiar company and Bassanio cautions him to be restrained during Bassanio's Belmont visit and Gratiano responds to the call admirably and conducts himself with decorum and grace. It appears that Gratiano is non-serious and rude but he is actually a man of wit and wisdom and conceals a very sober mind and behind his exuberance.

He possesses ready wit which shows to advantage in the Court Scene. He provides light humour and entertainment in an otherwise tense situation. He also provides in his speech and action a contrast to Antonio's melancholy.

Thus we can infer that Gratiano's role is significant for the development of the plot and for sustaining the interest and spirit of the audience (or readers). Thus he occupies by right an important place among the minor characters of the play.

Verity writes about Gratiano—

Gratiano is one of the permanent and familiar social types.

We can scarce hope to meet a Portia or an Antonio; but Gratiano is the genial, humorous being without whom no company is complete. His mission in life is to be cheerful, sometimes rather boisterous spirits, and amuse; and he plays his part excellently. To cleverness he lays no claim, and there is, like enough, a large amount of "nothing" in the "infinite deal" (I. I. 114) he talks. Nevertheless, he hits off shrewd pieces of sense, for which the more solemn friends to whom he is a diverting contrast hardly give him sufficient credit. He has seen something of the world, but is too good-hearted to have been made by experience the least bit a cynic : witness his sympathy with Antonio. He can suit himself, as he says (II. 2. 176—83), and as we see from his restrained bearing before Portia, to his surroundings and tactfully "allay his skipping spirit" (II.2. 173). He is well matched with Nerissa, his equal in fluency and something more than his equal in smart wit."

## Nerissa

Nerissa is not a waiting maid in the modern sense, but a confidential companion such as a great lady in Portia's lonely position would naturally have in attendance. One likes Nerissa, apart from her own pleasing qualities, for her devotion to Portia, whom she will not leave if Bassanio's choice falls out amiss.

She resembles Portia in a sense of humour and enjoyment of a comic situation, enters into her plans with zest and 'backs her up' cleverly. As befits "the maid" she pays her "mistress" the compliment of imitation of her manners and tone.

- (i) As a companion to Portia, she throws the latter's character into bolder relief.
- (ii) She represents the lighter aspect of her mistress's life.
- (iii) She serves to make the frivolity and disguise of Portia more significant.
- (iv) She is the mainspring of the Ring Episode.

Mrs. Jameson thus describes her—

"Nerissa is a good specimen of a common genus of characters. She is a clever, confidential, waiting woman who has caught a little of her lady's elegance and in romance; she affects to be lively and sententious, falls in love, and makes her favour conditional on the fortune of the caskets, and sport, numics her mistress with, good emphasis and discretion. Nerissa and the gay talkative Gratiano are as well matched as the incomparable Portia and her magnificent and captivating lover."

## Jessica

Jessica receives possibly a little more attention than Nerissa. She is Shakespeare's own creation, and has no counterpart in the old tales. It was necessary to create her to give a glimpse of Shylock's home and domestic life, for a man is not fully known till we have seen this. Possibly Shakespeare felt that the sudden disasters and shocks of the trial scene would be too sharp a punishment for the Jew, and would create sympathy for him, which Shakespeare did not want.

So we are shown early in the play that even Shylock's daughter cannot endure him or his home any longer. We are shown first Launcelot and then Jessica running away from him, and they are made to say :

"Our house is hell"

This makes us feel that Shylock's disasters are deserved. Still many people feel that Jessica was lacking in moral principles; she deserted the losing camp for that of the victor. She was lacking in filial feeling. She is callous enough to say to Lorenzo, 'I will' make fast the doors and guild myself with some more ducats, and be with you straight. "Shylock has enforced in his house so much thrift on her that as soon as she is out of his control, a reaction sets in and she gives herself up to extravagance; in a light-hearted manner suited to youth that has known freedom for the first time, she gives away her mother's ring for a monkey. She might have repented of this later on, but that is outside the play. She is untutored and unexperienced, but she can take her part beautifully in a duel with Lorenzo and can wistfully remember classical stories of tragic and romantic love in moonlight. She is so sensitive in a way that music makes her unhappy in mood. Her dramatic function is to serve as a foil to Shylock.

