



# An Interpretation of Multiple Values in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

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**Abstract:** *The Merchant of Venice* is a satirical play by William Shakespeare, written during the Renaissance. The rise of humanism in this period gave rise to equality, freedom, tolerance and self-worth. However, the traditional thinking in the Medieval Ages and the reality of social development had fettered humanism and made the social values full of contradictions and conflicts. *The Merchant of Venice* is a true reflection of the society at that time under such historical background. The story involves rich and diversified social values. This paper tries to interpret the diversified values in *The Merchant of Venice* drama from several aspects such as love, friendship, money, gender and religion

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, outlook on values

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## Introduction

*The Merchant of Venice* is a money-themed story, Venice merchant Antonio proposed to the rich family daughter Portia just to help his friend Bassanio. As a result, he owed the Jewish millionaire Shylock a huge debt. He signed a contract that he would cut off a pound of flesh from his body if not timely pay overdue money. After Bassanio held the beauty, Antonio was not so lucky, His merchant ship had an accident, as a result, he failed to pay back the money owed to Shylock as scheduled. Shylock, who had hatred for Antonio, refused to pay interest and also had to execute the contract of cutting a pound of flesh. In the face of the indifference to Shylock, the clever Portia disguised herself as a lawyer to save Antonio's life and deprived Shylock of all his property at the same time. Superficially, *The Merchant of Venice* eulogizes friendship and love, and acts of generosity in money, but they throw off the cloak of righteousness. However, we can see that the characters in the play may not be as kind and noble as they claim if the cloak of righteousness is thrown off. The narrow social values of the time were inadvertently revealed in their words and actions. This is closely related to the historical development background at that time. The value thinking mode in the Middle Ages of Europe has not been really cleared up, and the ideal society of humanism has not been established, so people's value evaluation standard is also full of recognition and compromise to the secular.

## 1. Money-based love values

Love is the beginning of *The Merchant of Venice*. His family's money was wasted and he was in debt. However, the noble Bassanio fell in love with Portia, the beautiful rich heir of Belmont, but he did not have enough money to propose marriage to Portia, so he asked his friend Antonio, *The Merchant of Venice*, to lend him money. At this time, Antonio's property is all placed in the merchant ship at sea, so they decided to borrow money from Shylock, a rich Jewish merchant, which led to the development of the following story. Throughout the story, Shakespeare praises their love, but the truth is, their love is still based on money. Portia was loved by numerous princes and nobles, but the love was based not only on Portia's beauty, but also on the huge wealth left by her father. Bassanio, though already favored by Portia, still had to have considerable wealth to pursue Portia.

There is also a love affair between Shylock's daughter Jessica and Lorenzo, who, like Bassanio, is also a friend of Antonio and also has no property. Jessica wrote him a letter to elope with him, and you can see Lorenzo is very happy because Jessica promised to bring her father's jewels. As his friends Gratiano and Salarino lamented, "It's strange that he should be late." They wondered that it was unusual for Lorenzo to be late when lovers in love should be more eager to meet their lovers. Here you can see that Lorenzo is not that enthusiastic about his love with Jessica. Later, in Belmont, Jessica said that Lorenzo "stole her soul with many loyal words, without a true word." Here can be seen as the lovers playful fight, but may also imply the truth. Anyway, Antonio ended up giving half of Charlotte's fortune to Lorenzo and Jessica when Charlotte died, which will further solidify the relationship.

It can be seen that the love praised in *The Merchant of Venice* is marked with money, even Gratiano and Nerissa. Nerissa, as the personal maid of Portia, a rich girl who can readily pay out twenty times the debt of Antonio, is not a poor

girl. The love of Bassanio's general friends is the so-called love generated on the basis of money, which is also the love values of this story.

## **2. Humanistic friendship values**

Besides love, *The Merchant of Venice* is most praised for the friendship of several positive characters such as Antonio. As Bassanio's friend, Antonio did not pursue Bassanio's debt. Instead, he risked his own life to help him pursue Portia's debts. He promised Bassanio that he would use his money as he liked, that he would serve Bassanio for nothing, and that he would do everything for his friend. When Shylock, a rich Jewish merchant, insisted on the execution of the meat contract, Antonio could also accept the end of death. At the same time, Bassanio and others rushed back to Venice to save Antonio, Bassanio also said that he could pay his own flesh and blood and life for Antonio, and would never want Antonio to be hurt. Although the happy ending is achieved only with the help of Portia, it also reflects the values of friendship in the Renaissance.

The Renaissance saw the formation of a new concept of people-oriented values, known as humanism. the value system. Under this value system, more attention is paid to people's feelings, human nature and the shaping and perfection of personality, new moral standards are established, and the friendship values in line with humanistic characteristics are formed in the social relations between people. Under this value system, more attention is paid to the friendship among friends, promote the spirit of paying for friends, and take it as an honor. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio told Bassanio that it would be "the best thing" to live and write an epitaph for him when he was ready to die under the contract of cutting his flesh, which was a true embodiment of the humanistic values of friendship at that time. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio told Bassanio that it would be better to live and write an epitaph for him when he was ready to die under the contract of cutting his flesh, which was a true embodiment of the humanistic values of friendship at that time.

## **3. Outlooks on money based on generosity and hypocritical contradiction**

A theme that runs through the Venetian merchants is money. In the eyes of Antonio and Bassanio and others, the positive figure, money is something that can be shared and given away. Antonio also practiced his own money doctrine, he never charged interest on loans. He was always generous to his friend Bassanio and was responsive to whatever is required. Bassanio holds the same idea, except that he is the beneficiary of the sharing and giving of money. On the contrary, the villain Shylock, a Jewish millionaire, likes to keep his money firmly in his hand and make use of the existing money to make loans, so as to gain more profits and increase the value of his wealth. He is described as an insatiable miser who is indomitable and narrow-minded in the story.

Shakespeare clearly had strong love and hate feelings for Antonio and Shylock. However, we can also see that, except Antonio's generosity towards wealth, his friends Bassanio and Lorenzo and others all met their own needs by taking the wealth of others. At first, Bassanio squandered Antonio's money to maintain a decent life, and then relied on Antonio to guarantee the borrowed money of Shylock to pursue his love, and then used the property of Portia obtained by love to save his friend Antonio. Lorenzo also had no qualms about owning the wealth of Jessica's father, Shylock.

Shylock, as a loan shark, is not pleasant. At the same time, he did have the dark side of human nature, such as selfishness and greed, but the wealth he obtained was indeed based on the acquisition allowed by the law at that time. He just over-protected his own wealth without occupying the wealth of others. The end of the story is that with Portia's perfect defense, Shylock who loaned three thousand dollars doesn't get his money back, he loses all his property and Antonio gets half of Shylock's property and the other half of his property. It can be seen that the generosity of Antonio and Bassanio for money is based on hypocrisy and selfishness. Compared with Shylock's straightforwardness and greediness for money, the real attitude of Antonio and others towards money is hidden under the mask of nobility and generosity

## **4. The outlooks on social gender with males as the main subjects**

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the dominant theme is the celebration of men, despite the participation of intelligent and beautiful female characters. Although the society at that time was in the Renaissance period, and the ideological concept had been more humanized than that of the middle Ages, the values of the patriarchal society had not changed, and women were still in a subordinate position. Portia's choice of husband is determined not by her personal preferences but by the will of her dead father. The suitors were asked to choose three caskets of gold, silver and lead to determine who would be Portia's husband. There is a great deal of uncertainty in choosing a box to determine a mate, and it is possible to marry the wrong person. Although Portia solves the problem with her intelligence and chooses her preferred husband, she never breaks through the bondage of male authority. When Bassanio chooses the right casket to become Portia's mate, Portia's status and wealth are far superior to Bassanio's, she still humbly claims to be an uneducated, uneducated and ill-informed woman, and

says that she will obey her husband and put Bassanio in the leading position. It is clear that women were still regarded by default as appendages of men. In contrast, men's attitude toward women is more obvious. When Facing Antonio, Bassanio even said that his wife, his life and the whole world could sacrifice to the devil to save Antonio, which shows that the wife belongs to the husband at that time, and the husband's power is above his wife. Besides, when Antonio obtained the disposal right of half of Shylock's property, the successor of Shylock's property should have been Shylock's daughter Jessica, but Antonio said that after Shylock died, he would give his property to Lorenzo. Shylock's daughter had to become Lorenzo's vassal even if she had to inherit her father's fortune.

The above profoundly reflects that in the dominance of outlooks on social gender, men have an irrefutable dominant position, while women, even though they are noble and rich, still need to obey the authority of men and attach themselves to the value system of male power

## 5. Religious values on Jewish discrimination

Humanism advocated by the Renaissance advocated freedom and equality, but it can be seen in *The Merchant of Venice* that the value of equality is the narrow sense of equality within Christianity, and the discrimination against pagans, especially Jews, has not changed at all. Shylock is a Jewish businessman. Shylock is a Jewish businessman. Antonio and others' malice towards Shylock is not only caused by Shylock's accumulation of wealth through usury, but also aroused with the discrimination against Shylock's Jewish identity. There are times in the play when Antonio and other decent people refer to Charlock as Jewish. The tone was full of sarcasm and derision towards Jews. In the story, the money-loving Shylock refused to pay interest and cut Antonio's flesh, which was largely due to Antonio's discrimination and insult to the Jewish nation and Shylock himself. Shylock once recalled Antonio's insult to him in the exchange when he borrowed money, saying that he sought interest, but he did not defend himself, because it is the characteristic of our nation to endure persecution. At that time, the mainstream of society was Christianity, and Jews were always considered as pagans and sinners who were victimized by Jesus to ostracize and persecute. Shylock's experience is very representative. The Jewish people have been treated so unjustly for a long time. On the one hand, Shakespeare pointed out the hypocrisy of Christian kindness and the injustice to Judaism through The mouth of Shylock. On the other hand, Shakespeare still obeyed Christian values in the story, praising Jessica who abandoned her father and eloped with Lorenzo as a Christian, and forcing Shylock to give up her faith and convert to Christianity when judging him. Shakespeare had some thoughts about the religious morality at that time, but it is undeniable that *The Merchant of Venice* is still showing Christian values that discriminate against Judaism.

## Conclusion

*The Merchant of Venice* was written during the Renaissance, when new capitalism coexisted with medieval exploitative capital. The parallel of humanism and religious supremacy has led to the emergence of multiple values. These values constantly collide and clash in the story, which not only reflects the state of social thought at that time, but also gives people in modern society a way to think, giving us more perspectives on problems

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