

The Princess and the God: A Tale of Ancient India – Aaron Shepard

The Princess and the God: A Tale of Ancient India is a retelling of the classic Indian folktale of Princess Savitri by Aaron Shepard. Aaron Shepard is an award-winning author known for retelling folktales and traditional literature from around the world. His works include The Legend of Lightning Larry, The Sea King's Daughter, and The Baker's Dozen.

The story of Princess Savitri and Satyavan, also known as Savitri-Upakhyaana and Pativrata-Mahatmya Parva, is an episode from the Indian epic Mahabharata, found in the Vana Parva (The Book of the Forest). It is a tale of love, devotion, intelligence, and determination. The story highlights the unwavering commitment of Savitri to her husband, Satyavan, and her ability to outwit Yama, the god of death.

King Ashvapati of the Madra Kingdom desires an heir and performs penance for eighteen years to please the goddess, Savitri. The goddess blesses him with a daughter, whom he names Savitri. She grows up to be a beautiful, intelligent, and virtuous princess. Her divine presence is so overwhelming that no prince dares to seek her hand in marriage. Her father, King Ashvapati, advises her to find a husband on her own.

Savitri travels to different kingdoms and finally reaches a peaceful hermitage near a serene river. There, she meets Prince Satyavan, a noble and kind young man living in exile with his blind father, King Dyumatsena. Despite his hardships, Satyavan remains devoted to his father and leads a life of righteousness. Savitri is deeply impressed by his virtues and decides to marry him.

However, when she returns home to inform her father about her choice, the great sage Narada warns her that Satyavan is destined to die within a year. Despite the prophecy, Savitri remains firm in her decision. King Ashvapati, impressed by her determination, allows the marriage. Savitri willingly adopts the simple life of the hermitage and stays devoted to her husband.

As the fateful day approaches, Savitri fasts and prays, preparing herself for the inevitable. She insists on accompanying Satyavan to the forest, where he suddenly collapses. Yama, the God of death, appears to take Satyavan's soul. However, Savitri follows Yama and engages him in a conversation, demonstrating her devotion.

Impressed by her persistence, Yama grants her three wishes as long as she does not ask for Satyavan's life. First, she wishes for her father-in-law's sight and kingdom to be restored. Second, she asks for her father to have more children. Lastly, she requests to have many children of her own with Satyavan. Realizing that he cannot grant this wish without returning Satyavan's life, Yama, moved by her intelligence and love, releases Satyavan's soul.

Satyavan comes back to life, and all of Yama's promises are fulfilled. Dyumatsena regains his sight and kingdom, and Ashvapati is blessed with more children. Savitri and Satyavan live a long and happy life, blessed with many children.

The tale of Princess Savitri is a beautiful example of devotion, wisdom, and righteousness. It teaches that true love and faith can overcome even the greatest obstacles. Savitri's courage and intelligence make her an ideal example of strength and determination, inspiring readers with her steadfast loyalty and wisdom.

On the Love of Life-William Hazlitt

William Hazlitt is an English essayist, literary critic, and philosopher. On the Love of Life was first published in The Examiner on January 15, 1815, and was later included in his book The Round Table. In this essay, he explores the complex nature of human attachment to life.

Hazlitt examines why people hold on to life so strongly, even when it brings more suffering than happiness. He questions the common belief that our strong desire to live proves that life is full of joy. Instead, he argues that this attachment comes from our passions, ambitions, and the fear of the unknown, rather than from actual happiness.

Through a mix of philosophical thinking and practical examples, Hazlitt presents his understanding of human nature and the real reasons behind our desire to live.

Hazlitt begins by pointing out a common mistake—that our strong desire to live makes us believe that life is full of happiness. He calls this belief a "vulgar error" and argues that if happiness were the true reason for our attachment to life, then people who suffer a

lot would not want to live. However, the opposite is often true. Even those who face hardship and disappointment show a strong will to live. For example, both a young child chasing his shadow and an old man near death show the same desire to live, despite having very different experiences of happiness and suffering.

Hazlitt argues that life is valuable because it allows action and the pursuit of desires. Without life, there can be no action, and without action, the passions that define us would have no meaning. He compares this attachment to life to a losing gambler who, despite many failures, keeps playing in the hope of winning.

Hazlitt also discusses how our attachment to life is supported by hope—the belief that the future might bring something better, no matter how unlikely. He gives examples from daily life: a schoolboy waiting for holidays, a young person waiting for adulthood, and a lover waiting for marriage.

He says that the fear of death is not because of the loss of happiness but because of the fear of non-existence—the end of all passions, actions, and hope. He supports this view by quoting John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where a fallen angel says that even a painful life is better than nothingness.

Hazlitt also talks about the false idea that wealth, power, and luxury naturally lead to happiness. He uses the example of tyrants who, even with their power and riches, often live miserable lives full of fear and guilt. Yet, they rarely end their lives. This is because their attachment to life is not based on the happiness they have but on their endless desires for control and power. Hazlitt calls them "life's fools."

One of Hazlitt's most powerful examples is the story of an exile who, after years of longing, finally returns to his homeland only to feel empty and disappointed. The struggle and passion that kept him going disappear once his desire is fulfilled, leaving him with no will to live. This example shows that it is not achieving desires but chasing them that gives life meaning. When the chase ends, so does the will to live.

Hazlitt says that the more pain and struggle life demands, the more we value it. He compares life to a precious object that we protect more fiercely. Even a little happiness can make up for a lot of suffering, as shown in the poet's line: "An ounce of sweet is worth a pound of sour." Those who suffer the most often hold on to life most desperately, hoping that the future will bring the happiness they feel they deserve.

In On the Love of Life, Hazlitt offers a strong argument against the idea that our attachment to life is based on its happiness. He says that this attachment comes from our passions, ambitions, and the desire for action, as well as the fear of the unknown that comes with death. Hazlitt's essay makes us think deeply about the real nature of our attachment to life.

The Merchant of Venice – William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare is one of the greatest playwrights in English literature. The Merchant of Venice revolves around the merchant Antonio, his friend Bassanio, and the Jewish moneylender Shylock.

The trial scene takes place in a Venetian court. Antonio stands helpless as Shylock insists on claiming a pound of his flesh as per their bond. The Duke, who presides over the case, tries to persuade Shylock to show mercy, but Shylock refuses. When the Duke asks him why he is so determined to take Antonio's flesh, Shylock replies that he simply hates Antonio. He compares his hatred to a man's dislike for certain animals, just as some people cannot tolerate pigs or cats. He refuses to give any reason beyond his personal desire for revenge.

Bassanio, who is present in the courtroom, offers Shylock twice the borrowed amount, but Shylock refuses, insisting that he wants justice as per the bond. Antonio, having accepted his fate, tells his friends not to waste their efforts in pleading for him. He believes Shylock will not change his mind and prepares himself to die with dignity.

At this crucial moment, Nerissa, disguised as a clerk, enters with a letter from the renowned lawyer, Doctor Bellario. The letter states that a young lawyer named Balthazar will argue Antonio's case. Portia enters the court in disguise as Balthazar. She acknowledges that Shylock has a strong legal right to his bond. She agrees that the law must be upheld but appeals to Shylock to show mercy.

Portia then delivers one of Shakespeare's most famous speeches, beginning with, "The quality of mercy is not strained." She explains that mercy is a divine quality, greater than any law. It benefits both the giver and the receiver, making a person powerful yet humble at the same time. She urges Shylock to be merciful, saying that true justice should be balanced with kindness. However, Shylock refuses to listen and insists on taking his pound of flesh.

Portia admits that the law must be followed. She asks Antonio to prepare himself, and Shylock eagerly sharpens his knife, ready to claim his bond. The court gives Antonio a final opportunity to pay Shylock instead, but Shylock rejects it. Even when Bassanio offers ten times the borrowed amount, Shylock refuses, stating that he wants only what is lawfully his.

Antonio bids farewell to his friends, telling Bassanio not to grieve. In desperation, Bassanio declares that he would sacrifice even his own life and his wife's life to save Antonio.

Portia then cleverly turns the law against Shylock. She states that while Shylock is entitled to a pound of Antonio's flesh, the bond does not permit him to spill even a single drop of blood. She also adds that the flesh must be exactly one pound, neither more nor less. Since it is impossible to take flesh without shedding blood, Shylock's demand becomes invalid. Gratiano calls her, "A Daniel! A second Daniel!" praising her wisdom. This completely turns the case against Shylock.

Shylock realizes he is trapped and agrees to accept the money instead of Antonio's flesh. However, Portia refuses, reminding him that he had earlier rejected any compensation. Since Shylock attempted to take the life of a Venetian citizen, Portia declares that, according to Venetian law, he is now guilty of plotting against Antonio's life.

The Duke shows mercy by sparing Shylock's life, but he rules that half of Shylock's wealth must go to the state and the other half to Antonio. Antonio suggests a different punishment—he will take his share of Shylock's wealth only if Shylock converts to Christianity and leaves his remaining fortune to his daughter, Jessica, and her Christian husband, Lorenzo. Defeated and humiliated, Shylock has no choice but to accept. He leaves the court in despair, saying that he feels unwell.

After Shylock exits, the Duke pardons Antonio, and Bassanio thanks the disguised Portia (Balthazar). As a reward, Bassanio offers her the three thousand ducats meant for Shylock, but she refuses and instead asks for Antonio's gloves and Bassanio's ring. This ring was a token of love given to Bassanio by Portia, and he initially refuses to part with it. However, after Antonio insists, Bassanio sends the ring to Portia, unaware of her true identity.

The scene ends with Gratiano being sent to deliver the ring to "Balthazar," setting the stage for the humorous events in the next scene, where Portia and Nerissa later reveal their disguise.

The trial scene in The Merchant of Venice is one of the most dramatic and significant moments in the play. It highlights the themes of justice, mercy, and revenge, showing how rigid adherence to the law can lead to downfall. Shylock, who relies on the legal system to exact his revenge, is ultimately outwitted by Portia's intelligence and wit. The scene also emphasizes the idea that mercy is superior to strict justice.