Thinking about

The Merchant of Venice

An Interactive Study Guide

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Shylock - László Mednyánszky, 1900
Introduction – *The Merchant of Venice*

- **The Text**
- **Comedy or Tragedy?**
- **Sources**
- **Settings**
- **Anti-Semitism**
- *The Jew of Malta*, Marlowe
- **Usury**
The Merchant of Venice was most likely performed for the first time in 1596.

It was first published in the first quarto edition in 1600.

- Although there were other pirated editions, the 1600 edition is considered the most accurate and reliable.

The 1600 edition was the basis for the text published in the First Folio in 1623, which added stage directions and musical cues.

- The First Folio is a collection of 36 of Shakespeare’s plays prepared by two of his colleagues 7 years after his death.
The play is generally categorized as a comedy – a play that makes a light, optimistic comment on romantic relationships.

In Shakespeare’s time, Shylock was seen as a comic villain with exceptional dignity and depth of character.

In modern productions, Shylock is often portrayed as a tragic figure, complicating the categorization of the play as a comedy.
Like many of Shakespeare’s plays, the plot is taken from older literary works and folklore.

- The story of Shylock and the pound of flesh was taken from a 16th century Italian story, *Il Pecorone* by Giovanni Fiorentino.
- The casket plot is from *Gesta Romanorum*, a medieval collection of stories translated by Richard Robinson, and published in 1595.

Part of the plot may also have been inspired by a contemporary scandal.

- In 1594, Roderigo Lopez, the Queen’s personal doctor and a Portuguese Jew, was tried and executed for attempting to poison the Queen.
- The case inspired a wave of anti-Jewish feeling in England.

Several other plays of the period, such as Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*, featured a villainous Jew in a major role.
The Merchant of Venice – Settings

Venice
- Associated with business, commerce, the law
- The “real” world where practicalities rule
- Men are dominant
- People in Venice are greedy and vengeful.
  - Shylock insists on a pound of Antonio’s flesh as vengeance.

Belmont
- Site of Portia’s estate
- Fairy-tale world associated with music and love
- Women are dominant
- People in Belmont are characterized by kindness and generosity.
  - Portia offers her money to Bassanio to pay Antonio’s debt.
In 16th century England, Jews were a persecuted minority.

- Jews were traditionally banned from living in England, after they were expelled from the country by King Edward I in 1290.
- However, there was a small community of Spanish Jews living in England in Shakespeare’s time.
- Jews were forced to convert nominally to Christianity in order to remain in the country.

Shylock’s character is also taken from medieval literature.

- Judas is always portrayed as a stereotypical Jew with a red wig and hooked nose.
- Jews were often presented on the Elizabethan stage as comic caricatures.
Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* (1590) was a major influence on *The Merchant of Venice*.

- Barabas, the main character, is a thoroughly evil villain who is angered by a law that requires Jews to convert to Christianity or give up half their wealth.
- Barabas resorts to murder and treason and enjoys the suffering of others.
- There has been extensive debate about the play’s portrayal of Jews and how Elizabethan audiences would have viewed it.
Usury

- Today *usury* refers to lending money at excessively high interest rates.
  - In Shakespeare’s time, usury meant lending money at any rate of interest and was a controversial issue.
  - Although usury was illegal during the Middle Ages, it became legal in England in 1551.

- Laws had been based on the Christian view that usury was forbidden by the Bible.
  - However, a technicality in the Bible (Deuteronomy) allowed Jews to “lend upon usury” to a stranger.
  - Since laws kept Jews out of other professions, many took advantage of this interpretation of the law and became moneylenders.
Quizzes – *The Merchant of Venice*
1. Explain the conditions of Portia's father's will. 🌷

2. Explain the conditions of the loan Shylock makes to Bassanio. 🌷

3. Why does Bassanio need a loan? 🌷

4. What are Shylock's reasons for hating Antonio? 🌷
1. **Explain the conditions of Portia's father's will.**

   *Click anywhere to show answer.*

By the terms of her father's will, Portia is forbidden to choose freely among her many suitors.

She must accept the one who makes the right choice among three caskets: one of lead, one of silver and one of gold.
2. **Explain the conditions of the loan Shylock makes to Bassanio.** *Click anywhere to show answer.*

Shylock will lend Bassanio 3000 ducats for three months, with Antonio offering security for the loan.

Shylock offers to lend the money with no interest, but "in a merry sport," adds that if Antonio cannot fulfill the conditions of the loan, he must forfeit a pound of his own flesh.

Antonio is confident that he will be able to repay the loan, since his ships will be home a month before the money is due.
3. **Why does Bassanio need a loan?**

   *Click anywhere to show answer.*

Bassanio has been living beyond his means and is in debt, especially to Antonio.

He is hoping to make his fortune by courting and winning the hand of Portia, a rich lady whom he loves.

However, Portia is courted by many suitors, and Bassanio needs money in order to compete with his rivals.
4. **Why does Shylock hate Antonio?**

*Click anywhere to show answer.*

Shylock hates Antonio because (1) he is a Christian, (2) he spoils Shylock's moneylending business by lending money with no interest, and (3) Antonio hates "our sacred nation."

Specifically, Shylock claims that Antonio has called him a "cutthroat dog" and spit on him in public. He resents Antonio for treating him this way and then coming to him when he needs his money.

Antonio does not deny these charges; in fact, he vows to insult and spit on him again, telling him that he is not asking for the money as a friend, but as an enemy.
The Merchant of Venice – Act II Quiz

Click the hand 🕺 for an answer.

1. Who is Launcelot Gobbo, and what is his function in the play? 🕺
2. How does Jessica betray her father in Act II? 🕺
3. Which casket does the Prince of Morocco choose and why? 🕺
4. Which casket does the Prince of Arragon choose and why? 🕺
5. What conditions must Portia's suitors agree to if they choose the wrong casket? 🕺
Launcelot Gobbo is a clown, one of Shylock's servants. He provides highly entertaining scenes of comic relief that reflect some of the main themes of the play. For example, when he tricks his old blind father into thinking he is dead, he says, "It is a wise father that knows his own child." Later in this act, this theme will relate directly to Jessica's betrayal of Shylock.
How does Jessica betray her father in Act II?

Click anywhere to show answer.

Jessica elopes with Lorenzo and takes a casket of Shylock's gold and jewels with her.

She also intends to convert to Christianity.
Which casket does the Prince of Morocco choose and what is the result?

Click anywhere to show answer.

The Prince of Morocco chooses the casket of gold.

He reasons that it would be an insult to Portia’s beauty to put her portrait anywhere but in the most valuable of the three caskets.

The gold casket contains a death’s head and a scroll telling him he has lost his suit: “All that glisters is not gold.”
4. Which casket does the Prince of Arragon choose and what is the result?

Click anywhere to show answer.

The Prince of Arragon chooses the casket of silver.

Due to his egotism, he passes over the gold casket as “too common” because many men desire it. He chooses silver because believes that he deserves to have whatever he wants.

The silver casket contains a portrait of a fool and a scroll branding him as a fool.
5. What conditions must Portia's suitors agree to if they choose the wrong casket?

Click anywhere to show answer.

If a suitor chooses the wrong casket, he must:

1. Never reveal his choice.
2. Never court another woman for the purpose of marriage.
3. Leave immediately.
1. What bad news for Antonio is revealed by Salanio and Salerio at the beginning of Act III?
2. Which casket does Bassanio choose and what is the result?
3. What request does Antonio make of Bassanio when he learns that he must default on the loan from Shylock?
4. How does Portia offer to help Bassanio’s friend?
5. What plan does Portia hatch in Act III to trick her new husband?
1. What bad news for Antonio is revealed by Salanio and Salerio at the beginning of Act III?

*Click anywhere to show answer.*

Salanio and Salerio reveal that the ship that sunk in the English Channel belonged to Antonio.

They wonder how a man as good and honest as Antonio could have such bad luck.
2. **Which casket does Bassanio choose and what is the result?** *Click anywhere to show answer.*

Bassanio chooses the lead casket.

After hearing a song containing a hint, he reasons that “the world is still deceived with ornament,” and decides against the two caskets that seem more valuable on the surface.

The casket contains Portia’s picture and the message that he has won the contest by not choosing the casket with the fairest appearance.
What request does Antonio make of Bassanio when he learns that he must default on the loan from Shylock? Click anywhere to show answer.

Since Shylock has been pressing the Duke to carry out the terms of their bond, Antonio believes he is about to die. He offers to clear all the debts between Bassanio and himself and asks to see Bassanio one more time in person before he dies.
How does Portia offer to help Bassanio’s friend?

When Portia hears about Antonio’s financial problems, she offers to use her wealth to pay double the amount of the loan or more.

After they are married, Bassanio will leave for Venice with the money to pay off his friend’s debt and save his life.
What plan does Portia hatch in Act III to trick her new husband? 

Portia plans to travel to Venice with Nerissa, unknown to their new husbands.

She has instructed Balthasar to deliver notes and men’s clothing to the dock of the ferry to Venice.

She tells Nerissa that they will appear to their husbands disguised as men and promises to explain further when they are in the coach.
The Merchant of Venice – Act IV Quiz

Click the hand 🤠 for an answer.

1. Explain how Portia prevented Shylock from killing Antonio. 🤠

2. What law does Portia invoke to punish Shylock? 🤠

3. What are the conditions of the final judgment against Shylock? 🤠

4. What does Portia request from Bassanio as payment for saving Antonio? 🤠

5. What plot do Portia and Nerissa hatch at the end of this act to trick their husbands further? 🤠
1. **Explain how Portia prevented Shylock from killing Antonio.** *Click anywhere to show answer.*

As Shylock is about to cut out Antonio's flesh, Portia (as Balthasar) warns him that the bond calls only for a pound of flesh, but "not a jot of blood."

If Shylock spills one drop of blood, or takes even a hair more or less than one pound, he will be condemned to death and all of his property will be confiscated by the state.
2. What law does Portia invoke to punish Shylock?

*Click anywhere to show answer.*

After Shylock gives up his suit, Portia (as Balthasar) informs him of a law regarding the attempted murder of a citizen by an alien.

Half of his goods must be given to the intended victim, and the other half to the state.

The offender's life lies with the mercy of the Duke.
The Duke spares Shylock's life and indicates that the forfeiture of half of his property to the state may be reduced to a fine. Antonio adds that if the Duke will be satisfied with a fine, he will keep his half of Shylock's goods in trust, to be given to Jessica and Lorenzo at the time of Shylock's death.

Antonio adds two other stipulations: Shylock must convert to Christianity, and he must leave the rest of his property in his will to Jessica and Lorenzo.

The Duke announces that Shylock must agree to all of these conditions, or he will recant his pardon of Shylock's life.
4. **What does Portia request from Bassanio as payment for saving Antonio?** *Click anywhere to show answer.*

When Bassanio insists that “the judge” (Portia in disguise) must take something as a token of his gratitude for saving Antonio, she asks for the ring on his finger.

He explains that the ring is a gift from his wife, and he cannot give it away.

After the judge leaves, Antonio convinces Bassanio to reverse his decision, asking him to place his love for his friend above his wife’s commandment, and Bassanio sends Gratiano to deliver the ring to the judge.
What plot do Portia and Nerissa hatch at the end of this act to trick their husbands further?

Click anywhere to show answer.

After Gratiano delivers Bassanio’s ring to Portia, Nerissa promises to extract her ring from Gratiano as he guides her to Shylock’s house.

Portia and Nerissa plan to confront their husbands with their “betrayals” in order to have some fun.
1. How do Portia and Nerissa make sport of their husbands in Act V?

2. What news does Portia have for Antonio regarding his ships?

3. What does Portia give to Jessica at the end of the play?

4. What is the dramatic purpose of Act V?
1. How do Portia and Nerissa make sport of their husbands in Act V? Click anywhere to show answer.

At Belmont, Portia and Nerissa accuse their husbands of giving away their rings to women, which is actually true, but the husbands vehemently deny it (thinking that they gave their rings to Balthasar and his clerk).

Portia warns Bassanio to keep the "doctor" away from her, since she would be as generous as Bassanio and would probably not be able to deny him anything. She adds that she might even sleep with the doctor if Bassanio leaves her alone with him.

Portia finally reveals the truth, and hands Antonio the ring to give to Bassanio. She reveals a letter from Dr. Bellario identifying her as the young doctor Balthasar and Nerissa as her clerk.
2. **What news does Portia have for Antonio regarding his ships?**  

She gives Antonio a letter saying that three of his merchant ships "are richly come to harbor," but she will not reveal the "strange accident" by which she came upon the letter.
3. **What does Portia give to Jessica at the end of the play?** *Click anywhere to show answer.*

Portia gives Jessica a deed entitling her to all of Shylock's possessions after his death.
What is the dramatic purpose of Act V?

Click anywhere to show answer.

Act V is effective dramatically, even though the main action of the play is essentially over. The ring plot is a clever twist that gives actors the opportunity for broad, as well as subtle, comedy.

The lighthearted mood of the last scene, in contrast to the trial scene in Act IV, and the fact that the ending is a celebration of romantic love, reinforces categorizing the play as a comedy.
1. In Belmont is a lady richly left;  
   Sometimes from her eyes  
   I did receive fair speechless messages.

2. I will do anything, ere I be married to a sponge.

3. Hath a dog money? Is it possible  
   A cur can lend three thousand ducats?

4. I am like to call thee so again,  
   To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.
1. In Belmont is a lady richly left;  
...Sometimes from her eyes  
I did receive fair speechless messages.

Click anywhere to show answer.

Bassanio is explaining to Antonio that he loves Portia, a lady of considerable wealth who lives in Belmont.  

He believes that she also communicated her affection for him by the way she looked at him.
2. *I will do anything, ere I be married to a sponge.*

*Click anywhere to show answer.*

Portia is discussing her suitors with Nerissa, her gentlewoman.

She is making fun of a German, the Duke of Saxony's nephew, complaining that he drinks to excess.

She jokes that she can distract him from selecting the right casket by placing a glass of wine nearby.

By comparing him to a sponge, she emphasizes his drinking habits.
3. *Hath a dog money? Is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats?*

*Click anywhere to show answer.*

When Antonio and Bassanio ask Shylock for a loan, he sarcastically reminds Antonio of his past insults.

He deeply resents the Christians who abuse him and then come to him when they need his help.
4. *I am like to call thee so again, To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.*

*Click anywhere to show answer.*

When Shylock accuses Antonio of insulting him, Antonio not only doesn't deny it, but admits that he would be likely to insult and spit on him again.
1. Our house is hell, and thou, a merry fool, 
   Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness.  

2. ...I am right loath to go. 
   There is some ill a-brewing towards my rest, 
   For I did dream of moneybags tonight.  

3. There will come a Christian by, 
   Will be worth a Jewess' eye.  

4. All that glisters is not gold...
1. *Our house is hell, and thou, a merry fool,*
*Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness.*

Click anywhere to show answer.

Shylock's daughter, Jessica, after she finds out Launcelot Gobbo is leaving her father’s employ to work for Bassanio. She expresses her unhappiness at having to live in her father's house and admits that Launcelot's comic entertainment relieved the tedium.
2. *I am right loath to go.*

*There is some ill a-brewing towards my rest,*

*For I did dream of moneybags tonight.*

*Click anywhere to show answer.*

Shylock has accepted Bassanio's dinner invitation, but only because he wants to savor the sight of the Christian foolishly spending his borrowed money.

However, he has some misgivings about leaving his house that night.

His dream of moneybags seems to foreshadow the loss of his gold and jewels when Jessica elopes with Lorenzo and steals some of his money.
3. *There will come a Christian by,*  
*Will be worth a Jewess' eye.*

*Click anywhere to show answer.*

When Launcelot delivers Bassanio's dinner invitation to Shylock, he also delivers this cryptic message to Jessica. Jessica understands its meaning: Lorenzo received her message and has promised to meet her so they can elope.
4. **All that glisters is not gold...**

Click anywhere to show answer.

The Prince of Morocco selects the gold casket, reasoning that it would be an insult to Portia's beauty to put her portrait in any but the most valuable of the three caskets.

However, the gold casket contains a death's head and a scroll telling him he has lost his suit.

This quote is the first line of the scroll.

It reminds him that a flashy appearance is not necessarily evidence of inner worth.
1. But since I am a dog, beware my fangs.

2. We'll see our husbands before they think of us.

3. You that choose not by the view,
   Chance as fair, and choose as true!

4. ...Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
   Let it presage the ruin of your love.

5. The paper as the body of my friend,
   And every word in it a gaping wound
   Issuing lifeblood.

6. I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.
After Antonio's ships were lost, Shylock has him arrested immediately for forfeiture of the bond.

When Antonio pleads with him for a hearing, Shylock refuses to listen, recalling that Antonio has called him a dog ("a cur").

Now Antonio must fear Shylock's vengeful fangs.
2. **We'll see our husbands before they think of us.**

*Click anywhere to show answer.*

Portia explains her plan to Nerissa.

They will disguise themselves as men, Balthasar and his servant, and go to the court in Venice to help Antonio.

Portia means that their husbands, Bassanio and Gratiano, will see their wives, but will not recognize them.
You that choose not by the view, 
Chance as fair, and choose as true!

This is the beginning of the scroll in the lead casket, 
Bassanio's choice.

It announces that he has made the correct choice and may claim Portia as his wife.

The scroll commends Bassanio for not relying solely on outward appearances.
4. *Which when you part from, lose, or give away,*
   *Let it presage the ruin of your love.*

*Click anywhere to show answer.*

After Bassanio selects the right casket, Portia gives him a ring as a symbol of their love.

She warns him that if he ever parts with the ring, it will mean the end of their love.

The subplot involving the rings is dramatically useful.

After the climax of the casket plot and the resolution of the trial of Antonio, Shakespeare needed something to keep the audience's attention focused on the lovers.
5. *The paper as the body of my friend,*
*And every word in it a gaping wound*
*Issuing lifeblood.*  
*Click anywhere to show answer.*

Bassanio has just received a letter from Antonio explaining that all his ships were lost, and he is at Shylock's mercy.

He explains to Portia why he is in debt to his friend.

The "gaping wound" image emphasizes the strength of his friendship with Antonio and also refers to the terms of the loan from Shylock, a pound of Antonio's flesh if he doesn't pay up.
6. *I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.*

When Tubal visits Shylock, he tells him that a merchant showed him a ring that he traded Jessica for a monkey.

In an emotional statement, he admits that the ring, given to him by his wife (Leah), has great sentimental value.

The image he uses, "a wilderness of monkeys," is an example of Shakespeare's brilliant use of imagery.
1. Thou shalt have justice, more than thou desir'st.

2. The quality of mercy is nor strained.
   It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.

3. By my soul there is no power in the tongue of man to alter me.

4. ...life itself, my wife, and all the world
   Are not with me esteemed above thy life.
1. **Thou shalt have justice, more than thou desir'st.**

*Click anywhere to show answer.*

Portia says this to Shylock as she warns him that the bond calls for a pound of flesh, but not a drop of blood.

If he spills any Christian blood, he will die and all of his property will be confiscated by the state of Venice.
2. *The quality of mercy is nor strained.*

*It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.*

Click anywhere to show answer.

These are the first lines of Portia's famous "mercy speech."

It is a response to Shylock's request for an explanation as to why he should be merciful. It is an eloquent appeal to show mercy for mercy's sake.

She describes it as a quality that is "enthroned in the hearts" of the most powerful monarchs, and even "an attribute to God himself."

Shylock is unmoved by her words and demands the terms of his bond, a pound of Antonio's flesh.
3. *By my soul there is no power in the tongue of man to alter me.*

*Click anywhere to show answer.*

After Portia (as Balthasar) looks over the terms of the bond, she notices that Antonio has offered three times the amount of the loan and again asks Shylock to be merciful and destroy the bond.

This quote is Shylock's irrevocable response.
As Shylock prepares to cut out Antonio's flesh, Antonio asks to be commended to Bassanio's new wife, who can judge for herself Antonio's devotion to his friend.

In this response, Bassanio emotionally offers to sacrifice his life, his wife, and all the world in order to deliver Antonio from this fate.

Portia comically responds that his wife would not thank him for that, if she were near enough to hear his words.
1. Give order to my servants that they take
   No note at all of our being absent hence;
   Nor you, Lorenzo; Jessica, nor you. 🍃

2. By yonder moon I swear you do me wrong;
   In faith, I gave it to the judge's clerk...
   🍃

3. I had it of him. Pardon me, Bassanio,
   For by this ring the doctor lay with me. 🍃

4. Let us go in;
   And charge us there upon inter'gatories,
   And we will answer all things faithfully. 🍃
1. *Give order to my servants that they take*
   *No note at all of our being absent hence;*
   *Nor you, Lorenzo; Jessica, nor you.*

*Click anywhere to show answer.*

Before Bassanio and Gratiano arrive in Belmont, Portia instructs Lorenzo, Jessica and her servants not to reveal that she and Nerissa have been away from Belmont.

Portia wants to reveal their charade at a time of her own choosing, for maximum shock effect on Bassanio.
2. **By yonder moon I swear you do me wrong;**
   **In faith, I gave it to the judge's clerk...**

*Click anywhere to show answer.*

Gratiano is defending himself to Nerissa when she demands to see the ring she gave him.

At this point, he does not realize that the judge’s clerk was Nerissa in disguise.
3. *I had it of him. Pardon me, Bassanio,*
*For by this ring the doctor lay with me.*

*Click anywhere to show answer.*

After Portia produces the ring, she can't resist another jab at Bassanio, saying that she got the ring when "the doctor lay with me."

At this point, she has not yet admitted that she and the doctor are the same person, which is the meaning of her comment to Bassanio.
4. *Let us go in;*
   *And charge us there upon inter'gatories,*
   *And we will answer all things faithfully.*

*Click anywhere to show answer.*

At the end of the play, Portia acknowledges that Bassanio and Gratiano still probably have questions about the events that have transpired.

She promises to answer all their questions truthfully.
Characters – *The Merchant of Venice*

- Antonio
- Bassanio
- Portia
- Shylock
- Jessica
- Gratiano
- Launcelot Gobbo
- Minor Characters
Antonio is the title character of the play.

- Although Shylock is often thought of as the main character, Antonio is actually the “merchant” of Venice.
- Antonio’s love for his friend Bassanio causes him to sign Shylock’s contract and set up the most interesting conflict in the play.

Antonio’s famous opening line is mysterious:

- *In sooth, I know not why I am so sad.* (I, 1)
- No reason is given in the play for his melancholy.
- Is Shakespeare suggesting that the quest for material wealth is doomed to sadness and frustration. Is this also true of Shylock?
Antonio also possesses an incorrigible dislike of Jews, having kicked and spit on Shylock in the past.

- Is this a “normal” view of Christian anti-Semitism for the time period, or is Shakespeare suggesting a darker meaning that makes the audience uneasy about Antonio’s intolerance?

- Antonio is beloved of his friends and ultimately proves merciful to Shylock, although he requires him to convert to Christianity.

- In the end, Antonio learns to achieve happiness by risking all his material wealth for the sake of friendship.
Bassanio

- A gentleman of Venice, and a kinsman and friend of Antonio.
- Bassanio is a key figure in both main plots:
  - Bassanio, a suitor of Portia, must select the correct casket to win her hand.
  - Bassanio’s need for cash in order to compete with Portia’s other suitors sets up the loan from Shylock to Antonio.
- An unsuccessful businessman, Bassanio proves himself a successful suitor, correctly identifying the casket that contains Portia’s portrait.
- After the trial scene, Bassanio is encouraged to give up Portia’s ring, setting up the final subplot in Act V.
One of the most resourceful heroines in Shakespeare’s mature romantic comedies.

- She is bound by the lottery set forth in her father’s will, but is determined to marry Bassanio, while being tactful to her other suitors.

- In the court scene, Portia saves Antonio’s life by finding a technicality in the bond.

- Portia also sets in motion the “ring plot” at the end of the play to embarrass Bassanio and Gratiano, but is careful not to take the prank too far.
Although Portia delivers one of the most famous speeches in the play on the quality of mercy, she displays cruelty to Shylock when she awards half of his estate to the state and the other half to Antonio, as the Venetian whose life he threatened.

Critics who are sympathetic to Shylock sometimes see Portia as an example of Christian prejudice and cruelty.
As the play’s antagonist, Shylock can be interpreted a number of different ways:

- A greedy and bloodthirsty moneylender
- A clownish Jewish stereotype
- A tragic figure who is persecuted by a backwards society

Shylock is despised as a moneylender, or usurer, but this was the only occupation a Jew could have in medieval Venetian society.

Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree as Shylock
Charles Buchel (1895–1935)
In his most famous speech (III, 1), Shylock argues that Jews have all the same human qualities as Christians:

- *I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?*
- *If you prick us, do we not bleed?*
- *If you tickle us, do we not laugh?*
- *If you poison us, do we not die?*
- *...and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?* (III, 1)

Shylock hates Antonio for cutting into his business—Antonio lends money at no interest, depriving Shylock of profit.
Shylock is accustomed to being bullied and ridiculed by Christians:

- *Signior Antonio, many a time and oft
  In the Rialto you have rated me
  About my moneys and my usances:
  Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
  For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.* (I, 3)

- Shylock says he has learned how to be vengeful from the Christians who have been vengeful to him.

  *If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.* (III, 1)
Because Shylock is both reviled as a moneylender and pitied as a persecuted Jew, he is the most compelling and complex character in the play.

While Elizabethan audiences probably viewed him as a comic character, most modern audiences are sympathetic to him because of the cruelty he has endured at the hands of Christians.

His character alone adds tragic overtones to a play that would otherwise be classified as a comedy.

Charles Macklin as Shylock, Covent Garden, London, 1767-68, by Johann Zoffany
At the end of the play, Shylock is broken and humiliated.
- He is forced to convert to Christianity, give half of his possessions to Antonio and pay a fine.
- He loses everything that’s important to him: his daughter, his money and his religion.

Is the sentence against Shylock fair?

Does the outcome of the trial confirm the philosophy expressed by Portia in her famous speech--that true justice must be measured with mercy? Does Shylock receive mercy?

Does the audience rejoice in Shylock’s defeat, or do we pity his downfall?
Daughter of Shylock, in love with Lorenzo

Although Jessica is Jewish, her behavior towards her father reinforces the anti-Semitic attitudes of Shakespeare’s England.

- Jessica describes life in her father’s house as “hell.” (II, 3)
- She betrays her father by rejecting her faith and eloping with a Christian, Lorenzo.
- In the trial, she is awarded all of Shylock’s possessions after his death, half of which will be held in trust by Antonio.
Shakespeare’s audience probably would have sympathized with Jessica for stealing from her father.

- Gratiano compliments her as a “good Christian,” after learning that she has stolen from Shylock.

- When Shylock discovers that she callously sold a ring given to him by his dead wife for a pet monkey, it prompts one of his most beautiful images:
  
  I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor: I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys. (III, 1)
A friend of Bassanio’s who accompanies him to Belmont.

Gratiano is Shylock’s most vocal and insulting critic during the trial.

- *O, be thou damn’d, inexecrable dog!*
  ...*for thy desires*
  *Are wolvish, bloody, starved and ravenous.* (IV, 1)

- *Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself:*
  *And yet, thy wealth being forfeit to the state,*
  *Thou hast not left the value of a cord;*
  *Therefore thou must be hang'd at the state's charge.* (IV, 1)

While Bassanio courts Portia, Gratiano falls in love with and eventually weds Portia’s lady-in-waiting, Nerissa.
Launcelot Gobbo

- Shylock’s servant, and then Bassanio’s servant.
  - A comical, clownish figure adept at puns.
  - Delivers a comic soliloquy in II, 2, in which he tries to decide whether or not to run away from his master.
  - He decides to follow the devil's advice and leaves Shylock’s employ to work for Bassanio.

- Launcelot's tricks his blind father with confusing directions to Shylock's house.
  - Further tricks his father by telling him that his son Launcelot is dead.
Minor Characters - 1

- **Nerissa**
  - Portia’s lady-in-waiting and confidante
  - Clever, self-confident, and flirtatious
  - She marries Gratiano and escorts Portia on Portia’s trip to Venice by disguising herself as her law clerk.

- **Lorenzo**
  - Friend of Bassanio and Antonio
  - In love with Shylock’s daughter, Jessica
  - He schemes to help Jessica escape from her father’s house, and he eventually elopes with her to Belmont.
Minor Characters - 2

- **Prince of Morocco**
  - A Moorish prince, suitor of Portia
  - Certain that the caskets reflect Portia’s beauty and importance, he picks the gold casket, which contains a scroll telling him that “All that glisters is not gold.” (II, 7)

- **Prince of Arragon**
  - An arrogant Spanish nobleman, another of Portia’s suitors
  - He picks the silver casket, which contains a portrait of a blinking idiot, and a poem condemning him as a fool. (II, 9)

- **Duke of Venice**
  - The ruler of Venice, who presides over Antonio’s trial
  - Unable to circumvent the law, he cannot help Antonio during the trial.
Minor Characters - 3

- **Tubal**
  - A Jew in Venice, and one of Shylock’s friends

- **Salanio and Salerio**
  - Venetian gentlemen, friends to Antonio, Bassanio, and Lorenzo
  - Salerio escorts the newlyweds, Jessica and Lorenzo, to Belmont and returns with Bassanio and Gratiano for Antonio’s trial.

- **Old Gobbo**
  - Launcelot’s father, also a servant in Venice

- **Balthasar**
  - Portia’s servant, whom she dispatches to get men’s clothes and papers from Doctor Bellario
  - Balthasar is also the phony name Portia uses when she poses as a doctor of law in the trial scene.
Themes – *The Merchant of Venice*

- Anti-Semitism
- Deceptive Appearances
- Love
- Loyalty and Friendship
- Mercy vs. Revenge
- Wealth
Elizabethan society was anti-Semitic.
- Jews were expelled from England in 1250 and were not permitted to return until 1657.
- On stage, Jews were usually characterized as evil, deceptive and greedy.
- Jews were also forced to live in a ghetto protected by Christians, supposedly for their own safety.

Jews were usually depicted on stage in bright red wigs and hooked noses.
- An example is Christopher Marlowe’s play, *The Jew of Malta*, which features a Jewish villain named Barabas.
- *The Merchant of Venice* was sometimes known as *The Jew of Venice*, suggesting that it was seen as similar to *The Jew of Malta*. 
One interpretation of the play is that Shakespeare intended to contrast the mercy of the Christian characters with the vengefulness of Shylock.

The conflict between Portia and Shylock in the trial scene can also be seen as the conflict between the vengeful, exacting God of the Old Testament, whose priority is Justice (Shylock) and the merciful God of the New Testament (Portia).

From a Christian point of view, Shylock’s conversion to Christianity at the end of the play is a “happy ending”—his soul is saved and he can now enter heaven.
Modern audiences, however, often see the play as a plea for tolerance, with Shylock as the sympathetic character.

- This interpretation faults Portia as a “false judge” who has no right to sentence Shylock at all.
- Shylock’s anger does not come from some inherent “Jewishness,” but from years of abuse.

Although Shylock is condemned for greed and dishonesty, the Christian characters can also be seen as hypocritical.

- Bassanio initially seeks Portia’s hand in marriage so he can pay his debts.
- Although Portia delivers a moving speech on the subject of mercy, her judgment against Shylock can be seen as cruel and barbaric.
- Is Shakespeare subtly criticizing his characters’ prejudices?
Regardless of Shakespeare’s intentions, the play has been used by anti-Semites throughout its history.

The Nazis used Shylock’s character for their own propaganda.
  - Shortly after Kristallnacht in 1938, *The Merchant of Venice* was broadcast for propagandistic purposes over the German airwaves.
  - Productions of the play followed in Lübeck (1938), Berlin (1940), and elsewhere within the Nazi Territory.

Is a sympathetic reading of Shylock entirely due to changing attitudes among readers, or did Shakespeare intend this reading?

Shylock’s language is not that of a comic, one-dimensional villain. Is it possible that Shakespeare’s talent as a writer caused him to create a more complex character than he originally intended?
The theme of deceptive appearances is emphasized by the riddle of the three caskets.

Portia’s first two suitors choose incorrectly because they rely on false appearances.

- Certain that “he will gain what many men desire,” the Prince of Morocco picks the gold casket, which contains a scroll telling him that “All that glisters is not gold.” (II, 7)
- Assuming that he “shall get as much as he deserves,” the Prince of Arragon picks the silver casket, and is branded as a fool. (II, 9)

Bassanio chooses correctly because he recognizes the difference between outward appearances and inner worth:

- So may the outward shows be least themselves: The world is still deceived with ornament. (III, 2)
Ironically, Bassanio originally requests the loan from Antonio so he can woo Portia as a rich man of good reputation, when in reality he is deeply in debt.

- Bassanio must use a false appearance to impress Portia.

Shylock initially pretends to have altruistic motives in helping Bassanio, but in reality is planning his revenge against his enemy, Antonio.

Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves as men (a Doctor of Law and her clerk) in the trial scene.

- The men of Venice are deceived into obeying the judgment of a female from Belmont.
- Bassanio and Gratiano are both deceived by the disguise, and Bassanio is tricked into giving up Portia’s ring to “Balthasar.”
The central romantic relationship in the play is between Bassanio and Portia.

Their marriage is paralleled by two other pairs of lovers:
- Shylock’s daughter, Jessica, elopes with the Christian, Lorenzo.
- Portia’s servant, Nerissa, marries Bassanio’s companion, Gratiano.

Love is seen as related to economic and legal concerns:
- Bassanio borrows money from Antonio to woo the wealthy Portia, so he can get out of debt.
- Portia is bound by the terms of her father’s riddle and must marry the man who picks the correct casket.

As is often the case in Shakespearean comedies, the play ends with multiple marriages (Portia and Bassanio, Nerissa and Gratiano, and Jessica and Lorenzo).
Antonio's mysterious depression in the opening line and complete devotion to Bassanio has led some critics to theorize that he is in love with Bassanio.

In this interpretation, Antonio is depressed because Bassanio is coming to an age where he will soon marry a woman.

Some critics have inferred that Bassanio returns Antonio's affections, in spite of his obligation to marry:

- *But life itself, my wife, and all the world*
- *Are not with me esteemed above thy life;*
- *I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all*
- *Here to this devil, to deliver you.* (Bassanio: IV, i)

Other critics, however, regard Antonio’s homosexual attraction to Bassanio as questionable, insisting that their friendship is entirely platonic.
In the end, Bassanio (the Christian) wins both love and wealth when he marries Portia.

- Shylock (the Jew) loses his daughter’s love, his religion, and all his possessions.

Ultimately, Antonio is rewarded with wealth (his ships finally come in), but he is alone at the end of the play.

- If the critics who believe he is in love with Bassanio at the beginning of the play are right, he achieves wealth, but loses love.

Do the winners and losers at the end of the play have more to do with the religious prejudices of Shakespeare’s time, or the actions of the characters themselves over the course of the play?
The theme of loyalty is shown through three sets of characters:

**Antonio and Bassanio**

- Antonio loans Bassanio a large sum of money on his word that he will repay it.
- Bassanio returns Antonio’s loyalty when he rushes home from Belmont to save Antonio from his debt to Shylock.
- Bassanio is willing to give up everything to save Antonio:
  
  *But life itself, my wife, and all the world, Are not with me esteem'd above thy life.* (IV, 1)

- Bassanio ultimately gives up the ring he received from Portia and promised never to remove.
- The sacrifice of a symbol of love for his wife is the ultimate symbol of loyalty to his friend.
Loyalty and Friendship - 2

- **Bassanio and Portia**
  - Bassanio’s act of loyalty to his friend Antonio results in an act of disloyalty to his wife when he gives up the ring he promised never to remove.
  - This act, however, is seen as part of Portia’s lighthearted deception, and serves to further the plot in Act V, rather than condemn Bassanio as a disloyal husband.

- **Jessica and Shylock**
  - The subplot focusing on Jessica’s love for a Christian is central to the overall theme of the play.
  - Jessica not only rejects her religion by marrying a Christian and converting to Christianity, but she also steals money from Shylock.
  - Salanio tells of Shylock’s reaction, comically revealing his priorities:
    - *My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!*  
    - *Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!*  
    - *Justice! the law! my ducats, and my daughter!* (II, 8)
The central action of the play, Shylock’s attempt to take revenge on Antonio, focuses on the relationships between justice, mercy and revenge.

- In the trial scene, both the Duke and Portia acknowledge that Shylock has the law on his side, but they expect him to show mercy.
- In her famous “mercy speech,” Portia argues that mercy is an attribute of God himself.
- Although the Christians claim to show mercy at the end of the trial by sparing Shylock’s life, he asks to be killed.
- Forced to give up his religion and possessions, Shylock has nothing left to live for.

Is the final judgment against Shylock an example of Christian mercy, or is Shakespeare mocking the Christians as hypocritical?
Although Elizabethans probably would have seen Shylock as both comic and despicable, his motives for revenge are validated in the play.

- Antonio has spit on him and insulted him, and vows that he will do so again, even after Shylock lends him the money for Bassanio.
- Shylock says he has learned how to hate from the Christians who hate him, and he vows to improve on their techniques.
- *The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.* (III, 1)
Wealth can be seen as a motivating factor for almost all the actions in the play.

- Bassanio places his friend’s life in danger because he needs his financial resources to woo Portia.
- Shylock uses his wealth to bring his enemy, Antonio, to his knees.
- Portia is victimized by her wealth; her father has established her as a prize to be won by the cleverest suitor.
- Although Portia is won by the suitor who loves her, Bassanio’s initial motivation in wooing her was to solve his financial problems.

Antonio uses his wealth as a way of showing affection to his friends and exerting power over his enemies.

- Shylock hates Antonio, among other reasons, because he undercuts the moneylender’s business by loaning money at low or no interest.
The most severe punishment against Shylock is the loss of his wealth.

When Jessica marries a Christian and steals his money, he is at least as concerned with the loss of his ducats, as he is with the loss of his daughter.

*My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!*

*Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!* (II, 8)

The final judgment against Shylock requires him to forfeit half of his possessions to Antonio and half to the state.

To Shylock, the loss of his wealth is the equivalent of death:

*Nay, take my life and all; pardon not that:*

*You take my house when you do take the prop*

*That doth sustain my house; you take my life*

*When you do take the means whereby I live.* (IV, 1)
The Merchant of Venice on YouTube

A live Internet connection is required to view these videos. Videos may become temporarily or permanently unavailable, at the discretion of YouTube.

- I, 3 & IV, 1: Film clip from Great Scenes from Shakespeare
- II, 7: The Prince of Morocco makes his choice (St. Louis Shakespeare)
- Interview with Richard Rose, Director of The Merchant of Venice
- The Merchant of Venice (Stagecraft Theatre Production)
- Interview with Shishir Kurup on The Merchant of Venice
- The Merchant of Venice (Film d'Art Italiana, 1910) – Silent Film
- The Merchant of Venice, 1974 (Laurence Olivier as Shylock)
- The Merchant of Venice, 2004 Trailer (Al Pacino as Shylock)
- The Merchant of Venice: Tragedy or Comedy?
Film Clip – I, 3 and IV, 1

From the *Great Scenes of Shakespeare* series. Produced by Seaboume Enterprises, Ltd.
II, 7: The Prince of Morocco makes his choice

St. Louis Shakespeare, 2009
Interview with Richard Rose

Director of *Merchant of Venice*
Stratford Festival, 2007
The Merchant of Venice
(Stagecraft Theatre Production)
Interview with Shishir Kurup

Founding member of the Cornerstone Theatre Company. Toured the U.S. with Cornerstone, moving into communities where no theatre had existed, helping local people start community theatre companies.
Film d'Art Italiana, 1910 (silent)

From the *Silent Shakespeare* collection

YouTube Videos  Next  Back  Main Menu
The Merchant of Venice, 1974

Laurence Olivier as Shylock
The Merchant of Venice, 2004 Trailer

Al Pacino as Shylock, Jeremy Irons as Antonio
The Merchant of Venice: Tragedy or Comedy?

Undergraduate Project, Roger Enderby

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Click here to view this video on YouTube.
1. Is *The Merchant of Venice* a comedy or a tragedy? Keep in mind that almost all of Shakespeare’s comedies end in marriages. To what extent does the character of Shylock determine the classification of the play as comic or tragic?

2. Analyze the character of Shylock. Did Shakespeare intend to make him a villain, or a sympathetic victim, or both? Discuss the ways an Elizabethan audience and a modern audience might view him differently.

3. Compare and contrast the two settings in the play—Venice and Belmont. Which characters are associated with each? How do these locations influence the action in key scenes, such as the casket scenes and the trial scene?

4. Discuss the relationship between love and money in *The Merchant of Venice*. 
The Merchant of Venice – Essay Topics 2

5. Analyze the dramatic structure of the play. Identify the main plot, at least two subplots, and the turning point of the action. Why do some critics regard Act V as anti-climactic?

6. Is The Merchant of Venice an anti-Semitic play? If so, which characters are anti-Semitic? Has this view of the play changed over time? Why or why not?

7. Analyze Shylock’s relationship with his daughter. Does Shakespeare intend the audience to be sympathetic to Jessica or Shylock? How does their relationship echo other themes in the play?

8. Analyze the use of the word “bond” in the play. Search the text for all occurrences and discuss multiple meanings, as well as its relevance to any of the play’s major themes.