

The Merchant of Venice

by William Shakespeare

*A Shakespeare In The Ruins
Study Guide*

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Introduction

The Merchant of Venice is a comedy. All the critics say so. After all, there are three marriages and no one gets killed. However, it is a strange comedy that challenges us in ways no other Shakespearean comedy does. It is a comedy that, although not often performed in Manitoba, has been one of the most frequently performed of Shakespeare's plays since its debut. Even so, young people often miss out because it is often banned in schools. In our current climate of political correctness, what we have here is a play that breaks some of the rules.

Several years ago Fringe Festival audiences in Winnipeg were treated to performances of British Columbia writer Mark Leiren-Young's one-man play, *Shylock*. In it Jon, an actor who happens to be Jewish, meets with his audience (us) in a "talk-back" session, the topic of which is his appearance as Shylock in a production of *The Merchant of Venice* which has just closed prematurely due to the surrounding controversy. According to the *Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia* (www.canadiantheatre.com/dict.pl?term=Shylock), "the play is a wondrous diatribe about art, the responsibilities of the artist, and about whether theatre exists to make people comfortable." The CTE considers the play *Shylock* "prickly...with no easy answers."

And so, too, is *The Merchant of Venice*. That's what makes it so difficult to teach and to discuss with young people. We're supposed to have all the answers, but we obviously don't.

Although there is much to discuss about justice and mercy, the boundaries of love and friendship, and Shakespeare's language, there is no escaping the anti-Semitism which winds its way throughout the play. Thinking students will ask the question: Was Shakespeare an anti-Semite? If we lead them to explore the history of his time, we discover that his characters echo the sentiment of their day in Venice. We also learn that the play's money-lender *had* to be Jewish; it was illegal for Christians to lend money and earn interest, but this was one of the few ways of earning a living for Jews in that time and place. Although Shylock is the villain, is it possible that Shakespeare, a student of human nature, learned of the terrible treatment of Venetian Jews and wanted to show this to his audiences in a way they could understand, perhaps hoping to influence some of them to sympathy for the Jews' plight? We'd like to think so.

Shakespeare In The Ruins welcomes the chance to bring you this play, with all its complexities and unanswered questions. You and your students are to be commended for taking this complex journey with us.

*How far that little candle throws his beams!
So shines a good deed in a naughty world.
[Portia—V.i.99-100]*

Pamela Lockman for Shakespeare In The Ruins, May 2007

Synopsis and Program Notes
by Debbie Patterson

Written sometime between 1596 and 1598, *The Merchant of Venice* is classified as both an early Shakespearean comedy and as one of the Bard's problem plays. It is a work in which the nature of good and evil are challenged: there are no easy answers, no characters who are all bad or all good. While *Merchant of Venice's* Italian setting and marriage plot are typical of Shakespeare's earlier comedies, the characters of Portia, a deeply flawed heroine, and the despicable yet sympathetic villain Shylock elevate this play to a new level.

In Venice, young Bassanio needs a loan of 3,000 ducats so that he can properly woo a wealthy heiress of Venice named Portia. To get the necessary funds, Bassanio entreats his friend Antonio, a merchant. Antonio's money, unfortunately, is invested in merchant ships that are at sea. To help Bassanio, Antonio arranges for a short-term loan from Shylock, a Jewish financier. Shylock has a deep-seated hatred for Antonio because of the insulting treatment that Antonio has shown him in the past. When pressed, Shylock strikes a terrible bargain: the 3,000 ducats must be repaid in three months, or Shylock will exact a pound of flesh from Antonio. The merchant agrees to this, confident in the return of his ships before the appointed date of repayment.

Shylock's cries for a pound of flesh have made him one of literature's most memorable villains, but Shylock is a complex character and Shakespeare very credibly argues that his hatred is born of the mistreatment he has suffered in a Christian society. Portia, whose brilliant declarations on mercy form the moral backbone of the play, is openly racist and anti-Semitic. In fact, her treatment of Shylock is utterly merciless. Eschewing easy answers and tidy resolutions, *Merchant of Venice* challenges us with its complexity. The villain is also the underdog; the noble heroine is also the oppressor.

Often regarded as an "anti-Semitic" play, *Merchant of Venice* poses a huge challenge to any theatre company seeking to produce it, a challenge which becomes irresistibly compelling in times of religious fanaticism. However, the dominant thematic complex in *The Merchant of Venice* is much more universal than specific religious or racial hatred; it spins around the polarity between the surface attractiveness of gold and the qualities of mercy and compassion that lie beneath the flesh. It leaves us with questions.

An Interpretive Dilemma
by Kenneth Clark

Shakespeare's comedy, *The Merchant of Venice*, is more disturbing than his tragedies. Frequently we forget that it is a comedy at all as we wrestle with the characterization of Shylock, a Jewish moneylender. We must either accept a diminished Shakespeare as a man of his own age and not for all time who dramatized anti-Semitic persecution and vilification as a source of humour, or we must look more deeply into the play and the period in which it was written. Fortunately, if we do look a little further, we will discover that Shakespeare's villain is not a demon (like Christopher Marlowe's Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*) but a human being who has been insulted and literally spat upon repeatedly by his antagonist, who has been mocked and in the end humiliated by the Venetian crowds. Shylock is not a devil but a man, not a villain, but a victim.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

USURY: The term *usury* refers to the lending of money for interest which was forbidden for Christians by the Roman Catholic Church. The Second Lateran Council of 1139 excoriated the "detestable, shameful, and insatiable rapacity of moneylenders" (Burns 422). With the business needs of merchants expanding in the Medieval Period, it was Jews who were forbidden by law to enter professions and to own land who frequently went into the business of money lending because Christians weren't allowed to engage in such practises by the church, and some of the Jewish moneylenders became quite wealthy. No doubt Christian merchants who became indebted to Jewish moneylenders resented their financial success and this contributed to anti-Semitic feeling, although it never seemed to stop them from borrowing. In Elizabethan England, a limit on interest rates of 10% was enforced by law. Interestingly enough, Shakespeare's own father was twice convicted of usury for having lent money at an exorbitant rate of interest (Greenblatt 271).

PERSECUTION IN ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND: Officially there were no Jews in England in Shakespeare's time. They had been expelled after long persecution in 1290 and were not allowed back officially until the mid 17th century during the "reign" of Oliver Cromwell (Palmer 71). In fact there were Jews like the famous Dr. Rodrigo Lopez (from Portugal) whose families had officially accepted Christianity, but who may have continued to practise their religion in secret. Needless to say the number of Jews in England during Shakespeare's time is impossible to determine as "there were no Jews who openly practised their religion" (Greenblatt 258). Persecution in England was not limited to Jews. During Elizabeth I's reign Roman Catholicism was outlawed in England as well. Jesuit Priests were often hidden by families of the old faith. Frequently Roman Catholics were arrested and sometimes executed as they were suspected of conspiracy against the Protestant Queen. One of Shakespeare's relatives,

Edward Arden had been put to death for his Catholic sympathies and association with John Somerville who had made threats against the Queen (Wood 92).

THE EXECUTION OF RODERIGO LOPEZ

At the execution of the Queen's physician who had been accused of plotting to poison the Queen in 1594 in league with Roman Catholic conspirators the crowds gathered for the execution took delight in mocking and laughing at Lopez who proclaimed his innocence. We will never know whether Shakespeare witnessed this execution or whether he may have actually known Lopez personally as some critics speculate. As Stephen Greenblatt aptly puts it, "When [Shakespeare] had such strangers – Lopez or Shylock – fixed in his imagination, Shakespeare was uneasy with what he saw." (Greenblatt 280) Greenblatt in fact describes Shylock's mocker's words as "embarrassing, coarse and unpleasant" (286). The forced conversion of Shylock which seems so humiliating is exactly how Jews were treated. Shakespeare's family had been through forced conversion because of their Roman Catholic background. Those Jews or Roman Catholics who had converted to the Church of England were still outsiders and aliens in a police state that kept a close eye on them. "Shakespeare did something that Marlowe [in the Jew of Malta] and that the mocking crowd at Lopez's execution could not do; he wrote out what he imagined such a twisted man, about to be destroyed, would inwardly say: I am a Jew. 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, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as 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? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? (3.1.49-56) (Greenblatt 286-87). Shakespeare goes so far as to give the villain a voice, to make the mocking crowd of playgoers turn a bit squeamish as they cannot laugh out loud without some degree of discomfort at Shylock's predicament because he is not a devil, but an angry, vengeful and alienated man. Without a university education, with strong Roman Catholic roots, and with a father who had been twice convicted of usury, William Shakespeare may have understood his villain well enough that he could not in the end side with the mocking crowd against the outsider.

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*From the Play...
For Close Reading and Discussion*

*I.i.1-7. (Antonio)
In sooth I know not why I am so sad.
It wearies me, you say it wearies you.
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn.
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me
That I have much ado to know myself.*

As the play opens, Antonio doesn't know why he is so sad and this situation makes him feel like a fool.

*I.i.168-183 (Bassanio)
In Belmont is a lady richly left,
And she is fair, and, fairer than that word,
Of wondrous virtues. Sometimes from her eyes
I did receive fair speechless messages.
Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued
To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia.
Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,
For the four winds blow in from every coast
Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strond,
And many Jasons come in quest of her.
O my Antonio, had I but the means
To hold a rival place with one of them,
I have a mind presages me such thrift
That I should questionless be fortunate!*

Bassanio compares his quest for Portia to that of Jason and the Argonauts epic voyage to win the Golden Fleece.

*I.ii.1-11. (Portia)
By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is awearry
of this great world.
(Nerissa)
You would be, sweet madam, if your miseries
were in the same abundance as your good fortunes
are. And yet, for aught I see, they are as sick that*

surfeit with too much as they that starve with nothing. It is no mean happiness, therefore, to be seated in the mean. Superfluity comes sooner by white hairs, but competency lives longer.

(Portia)

Good sentences, and well pronounced.

(Nerissa)

They would be better if well followed.

Nerissa, Portia's waiting woman, scolds the fabulously wealthy Portia for complaining about being tired and bored.

I.ii.124-131 (Servingman)

... there is a forerunner come from a fifth, the Prince of Morocco, who brings word the Prince his master will be here tonight.

(Portia)

If I could bid the fifth welcome with so good heart as I can bid the other four farewell, I should be glad of his approach. If he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me.

Although weary of the string of suitors coming to win her, Portia lets on that no matter how "saintly" the Prince of Morocco is, she would not choose him because of his complexion.

I.iii.30-37. (Shylock)

May I speak with Antonio?

(Bassanio)

If it please you to dine with us.

(Shylock)

Yes, to smell pork! To eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into! I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you.

In turning down a dinner invitation, Shylock makes clear there are differences between him, a Jew, and Bassanio and Antonio, two Christians. ["prophet the Nazarite": According to the gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke, Christ drove devils out of madmen and into a herd of swine.]

I.iii.115-194 (Antonio)

Well, Shylock, shall we be beholding to you?

(Shylock)

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 suff'rance is the badge of all our tribe).

You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,

And spet upon my Jewish gabardine,

And all for use of that which is mine own.

Well then, it now appears you need my help.

Go to, then. You come to me and you say

"Shylock, we would have moneys"—you say so,

You, that did void your rheum upon my beard,

And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur

Over your threshold. Moneys is your suit.

What should I say to you? Should I not say

"Hath a dog money? Is it possible

A cur can lend three thousand ducats?" Or

Shall I bend low, and in a bondman's key,

With bated breath and whisp'ring humbleness,

Say this: "Fair sir, you spet on me on Wednesday last;

You spurned me such a day; another time

You called me 'dog'; and for these courtesies

I'll lend you thus much moneys"?

(Antonio)

I am as like to call thee so again,

To spet on thee again, to spurn thee, too.

If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not

As to thy friends, for when did friendship take

A breed for barren metal of his friend?

But lend it rather to thine enemy,

Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face

Exact the penalty.

(Shylock)

Why, look you how you storm!

I would be friends with you and have your love,

Forget the shames that you have stained me with,

Supply your present wants, and take no doit

Of usance for my moneys, and you'll not hear me!

This is kind I offer.

(Bassanio)

This were kindness!

(Shylock)

This kindness will I show.

*Go with me to a notary, seal me there
Your single bond; and in a merry sport,
If you repay me not on such a day,
In such a place, such sum or sums as are
Expressed in the condition, let the forfeit
Be nominated for an equal pound
Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
In what part of your body pleaseth me.*

(Antonio)

*Content, in faith. I'll seal to such a bond,
And say there is much kindness in the Jew.*

(Bassanio)

*You shall not seal to such a bond for me!
I'll rather dwell in my necessity.*

(Antonio)

*Why, fear not, man, I will not forfeit it!
Within these two months—that's a month before
This bond expires—I do expect return
Of thrice three times the value of this bond.*

(Shylock)

*O father Abram, what these Christians are,
Whose own hard dealing teaches them suspect
The thoughts of others! Pray you tell me this:
If he should break his day, what should I gain
By the exaction of the forfeiture?*

*A pound of man's flesh taken from a man
Is not so estimable, profitable neither,
As flesh of muttens, beefs, or goats. I say,
To buy his favour I extend this friendship.
If he will take it, so. If not, adieu;*

And for my love I pray you wrong me not.

(Antonio)

Yes, Shylock, I will seal unto this bond.

(Shylock)

*Then meet me forthwith at the notary's.
Give him direction for this merry bond,
And I will go and purse the ducats straight,
See to my house left in the fearful guard
Of an unthrifty knave, and presently
I'll be with you.*

(Antonio)

Hie thee, gentle Jew. [Shylock exits.]

The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind.

(Bassanio)

I like not fair terms and a villain's mind.

(Antonio)

*Come on, in this there can be no dismay;
My ships come home a month before the day.*

Although they hate each other, Antonio is willing to ask Shylock for a loan in order to help his friend, Bassanio. When Shylock reminds Antonio that he has been treated terribly, Antonio replies that that will probably continue. However, he is in desperate need of this loan and does not want it to be given in friendship, but, rather, as a business agreement. Shylock, with no love for Antonio or any Christian, agrees to lend the money with a “merry bond” – a pound of Antonio’s flesh – if it cannot be repaid within the given time. Antonio agrees, certain that he’ll meet the deadline. After Shylock leaves, Antonio pays him the greatest compliment of the time: “The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind.”

II.iii.16-21 (Jessica)
*Alack, what heinous sin is it in me
To be ashamed to be my father’s child?
But though I am a daughter to his blood,
I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo,
If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian and thy loving wife.*

Jessica, Shylock’s daughter, is troubled by her feelings for her father, but is in love with Lorenzo, a Christian.

II.vi.54-59 (Lorenzo)
*Beshrew me but I love her heartily,
For she is wise, if I can judge of her,
And fair she is, if that mine eyes be true,
And true she is, as she hath proved herself.
And therefore, like herself, wise, fair, and true,
Shall she be placed in my constant soul.*

Lorenzo is in love with Jessica and takes her, along with a trunk full of money and jewels she has gathered, from her father’s home to his own.

II.viii.4-27 (Solanio)
*The villain Jew with outcries raised the Duke,
Who went with him to search Bassanio’s ship.
(Salarino)
He came too late; the ship was under sail.*

*But there the Duke was given to understand
That in a gondola were seen together
Lorenzo and his amorous Jessica.*

*Besides, Antonio certified the Duke
They were not with Bassanio in his ship.*

(Solanio)

*I never heard a passion so confused,
So strange, outrageous, and so variable
As the dog Jew did utter in the streets.
"My daughter, O my ducats, O my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter,
A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,
Of double ducats, stol'n from me by my daughter,
And jewels—two stones, two rich and precious stones—
Stol'n by my daughter! Justice! Find the girl!
She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats."*

(Salarino)

*Why, all the boys in Venice follow him,
Crying, "His stones, his daughter, and his ducats."*

(Solanio)

*Let good Antonio look he keep his day,
Or he shall pay for this.*

Through this conversation between Salarino and Solanio, we hear about Shylock's confused and anguished reaction to the news of his daughter's leaving. Not only has she taken money and jewels, but she has left him for a Christian! Solanio fears that if given the chance, Shylock will take out his anger and frustration on Antonio.

III.i.50-72

(Salarino)

*Why, I am sure if he forfeit, thou wilt not
take his flesh! What's that good for?*

(Shylock)

*To bait fish withal; if it will feed nothing else,
it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me and
hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses,
mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted
my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies—
and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not
a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimen-
sions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the
same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to
the same diseases, healed 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? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. 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.

Shylock has been gravely hurt by his daughter's leaving, and he has been mistreated many times before, only because he is a Jew. Through comparison, he shows here the sameness of all humans, as well as how he has learned revenge from Christians. But he goes further, saying that he will be a greater villain, will exact a greater revenge (e.g., the pound of flesh), than would those who have instructed him.

III.ii.153-189

(Portia)

*You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,
Such as I am. Though for myself alone
I would not be ambitious in my wish
To wish myself much better, yet for you
I would be trebled twenty times myself,
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times
More rich, that only to stand high in your account
I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends,
Exceed account. But the full sum of me
Is sum of something, which, to term in gross,
Is an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpracticed;
Happy in this, she is not yet so old
But she may learn; happier than this,
She is not bred so dull but she can learn;
Happiest of all, is that her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours to be directed
As from her lord, her governor, her king.
Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours
Is now converted. But now I was the lord
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,
This house, these servants, and this same myself
Are yours, my lord's. I give them with this ring, [hands him ring]*

*Which, when you part from, lose, or give away,
Let it presage the ruin of your love,
And be my vantage to exclaim on you.*

(Bassanio)

*Madam, you have bereft me of all words.
Only my blood speaks to you in my veins,
And there is such confusion in my powers
As after some oration fairly spoke
By a beloved prince there doth appear
Among the buzzing pleased multitude,
Where every something being blent together
Turns to a wild of nothing, save of joy
Expressed and not expressed. But when this ring
Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence.
O, then be bold to say Bassanio's dead!*

After winning Portia by choosing the right box (the one which contains the picture of her), Bassanio and she declare their love for each other. Portia gives Bassanio her ring as a symbol of their love, and warns him never to lose it or give it away. He promises that only in death will he and the ring be separated.

III.iii.1-26

(Shylock)

*Jailer, look to him. Tell not me of mercy.
This is the fool that lent out money gratis.
Jailer, look to him.*

(Antonio)

Hear me yet, good Shylock—

(Shylock)

*I'll have my bond. Speak not against my bond.
I have sworn an oath that I will have my bond.
Thou call'dst me dog before thou hadst a cause,
But since I am a dog, beware my fangs.
The Duke shall grant me justice.—I do wonder,
Thou naughty jailer, that thou art so fond
To come abroad with him at his request.*

(Antonio)

I pray thee, hear me speak—

(Shylock)

*I'll have my bond. I will not hear thee speak.
I'll have my bond, and therefore speak no more.
I'll not be made a soft and dull-eyed fool,
To shake the head, relent, and sigh, and yield
To Christian intercessors. Follow not!*

I'll have no speaking. I will have my bond. [He exits.]

(Solanio)

It is the most impenetrable cur

That ever kept with men.

(Antonio)

Let him alone.

I'll follow him no more with bootless prayers.

He seeks my life. His reason well I know:

I oft delivered from his forfeitures

Many that have at times made moan to me.

Therefore he hates me.

Since Antonio cannot repay the loan, Shylock has him arrested and insists that he will get his bond of a pound of flesh. Antonio knows Shylock hates him, and explains to Solanio that it's because he has often paid off other people's loans so they wouldn't have to give Shylock any interest. This would cut into Shylock's profits from money-lending (for which Christians were not allowed to charge interest).

IV.i.89-104

(Duke)

How shalt thou hope for mercy, rend'ring none?

(Shylock)

What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?

You have among you many a purchased slave,

Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,

You use in abject and in slavish parts

Because you bought them. Shall I say to you

"Let them be free! Marry them to your heirs!

Why sweat they under burdens? Let their beds

Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates

Be seasoned with such viands"? You will answer

"The slaves are ours!" So do I answer you"

The pound of flesh which I demand of him

Is dearly bought; 'tis mine and I will have it.

If you deny me, fie upon your law:

There is no force in the decrees of Venice.

I stand for judgment. Answer: shall I have it?

In court, Shylock insists on taking the pound of flesh as payment, and uses the law of the land in his defence. In other words, the agreement for the bond was made according to law. Therefore, if he is not granted what's rightfully his (the pound of flesh), then the law is worthless.

IV.i.178-211

(Portia – as Balthazar)
Is your name Shylock?
(Shylock)

Shylock is my name.

(Portia)
*Of a strange nature is the suit you follow,
Yet in such rule that the Venetian law
Cannot impugn you as you do proceed.*
[To Antonio] *You stand within his danger, do you not?*

(Antonio)
Ay, so he says.
(Portia)

Do you confess the bond?

(Antonio)
I do.

(Portia)
Then must the Jew be merciful.

(Shylock)
On what compulsion must I? Tell me that.

(Portia)
*The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The thronèd monarch better than his crown.
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this scepterèd sway.
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God Himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
To mitigate the justice of thy plea,
Which, if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there.*

Disguised as Balthazar, a lawyer, Portia pleads with Shylock to be merciful, to allow Venetian law to be tempered with mercy in dealing with Antonio. If he refuses, the strict reading of the law must be against Antonio.

IV.i.319-325

(Portia)

*This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood.
The words expressly are "a pound of flesh."
Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh,
But in the cutting of it, if thou dost shed
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
Are by the laws of Venice confiscate
Unto the state of Venice.*

IV.i. 338-346

(Portia)

*Therefore prepare thee to cut off the flesh.
Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more
But just a pound of flesh. If thou tak'st more
Or less than a just pound, be it but so much
As makes it light or heavy in the substance
Or the division of the twentieth part
Of one poor scruple—nay, if the scale do turn
But in the estimation of a hair,
Thou diest, and all thy goods are confiscate.*

Portia comes up with a way out for Antonio: she will allow Shylock to take his pound of flesh, but it must be exact and no drop of blood must be shed. Shylock is then found guilty of plotting the death of a Venetian; he is subject to the penalty of execution and of forfeiting his estate. The Duke and Antonio show mercy, and Shylock agrees to the terms, defeated.

V.i.192-197

(Gratiano)

*My Lord Bassanio gave his ring away
Unto the judge that begged it, and indeed
Deserved it, too. And then the boy, his clerk,
That took some pains in writing, he begged mine,
And neither man nor master would take aught
But the two rings.*

V.i.208-218

(Bassanio)

*Sweet Portia,
If you did know to whom I gave the ring,
If you did know for whom I gave the ring,
And would conceive for what I gave the ring,
And how unwillingly I left the ring,
When naught would be accepted but the ring,
You would abate the strength of your displeasure.*

(Portia)

*If you had known the virtue of the ring,
Or half her worthiness that gave the ring,
Or your own honor to contain the ring,
You would not then have parted with the ring.*

Portia “discovers” her ring missing and Bassanio tries to explain why he broke his promise and gave it away to the lawyer, Balthazar. Portia pretends ignorance for a while. In the end she tells the truth and shares the news, not only of Antonio’s ships returning safely, but also of Lorenzo and Jessica’s inheritance.

V.i.316-329

(Portia)

*It is almost morning,
And yet I am sure you are not satisfied
Of these events at full. Let us go in,
And charge us there upon inter’gatories,
And we will answer all things faithfully.*

(Gratiano)

*Let it be so. The first inter’gatory
That my Nerissa shall be sworn on is
Whether till the next night she had rather stay
Or go to bed now, being two hours to day.
But were the day come, I should wish it dark
Till I were couching with the doctor’s clerk.
Well, while I live, I’ll fear no other thing
So sore as keeping safe Nerissa’s ring.*

Portia promises to answer any questions they might have. However, all Gratiano wants to know is whether or not Nerissa is ready for bed, and he promises to ever after keep her ring safe.

Some things to think about before the show...

What would you do to help a friend?

What would you do – or what would you give up – to escape a cruel parent?

What does it mean to be a member of a minority group?

What if you were the only one who could do or supply something that lots of people want – but they don't like you and they treat you badly?

Which comes first: people mistreat you so you mistreat them/take advantage of them/become cruel – OR – you're already cruel and taking advantage of others, so people dislike you more – PLUS – you're a member of a minority group that people already mistrust and dislike...

Define these terms:

- prejudice
- justice
- fairness
- love
- humanity/to be human
- mercy

The following citations from several critical sources are worthy of discussion. You may want to come back to some of them after you have seen the play.

"The Merchant of Venice ... [is] about the application of ethical principles... 'Mercy is higher than justice.'" (Nuttall 255).

*"If Shakespeare had been writing in the 1960s, say, he would have called this play *The Capitalist*" (Nuttall 255).*

"Antonio, with real charity, gives up his claim on half of Shylock's goods. But there are strings attached. Shylock must turn Christian. Is this also charity? Many in—most of—the original audience would have thought it was. Yet Shylock is being forced to deny his inmost essence, his Jewishness, and to abandon an ethical principle on which he has just staked his life. There is a dark symmetry to all this. Shylock wanted to tear out the heart of a Christian, and now, at another level, the Christian court wants to tear out the heart of Shylock, his Jewish faith" (Nuttall 261).

"The Merchant of Venice is Shakespeare's most Marxist play—economics determines consciousness—and, at the same time, it is his most Christian. Portia's moving argument for the utter transcendence of

justice by mercy is not dislodged or even threatened by Shylock's counter-ethnic. He remains a figure of darkness, she of light" (Nuttall 262).

"Like all English people of his age, Shakespeare was brought up in an anti-Semitic culture and must have imbibed such tales as a child. His subsequent experience of Jews may have been somewhat different, but in the plays he sometimes reflects the prevailing view, using the word 'Jew' s an oath or in jokes that suggest the deprecating attitude to them that was part of normal Christian speech. The play puts Machiavellian and anti-Semitic politics in the mouths of some characters and elsewhere engages the audience's sympathies for Jews ('does not a Jew bleed?'). And although his new play was in no way designed to comment on the Jewish 'question', it still touches on critical issues such as conversion to Christianity. The result is, to us, an extremely uncomfortable mix of romance and racism, in which the quality of mercy is decidedly strained" (Wood 205).

"...Why [does] the character of Shylock the Jew take over the comedy in which he appears? For almost everyone thinks that the merchant of Venice of the play's title is Shylock. Even when you realize that the merchant is not the Jew, even when you know that the title is referring to the Christian Antonio, you still instinctively make the mistake. And it is not exactly a mistake: the Jew is at the play's center. *The Merchant of Venice* has a host of characters who compete for the audience's attention: a handsome, impecunious young man in search of a wealthy wife; a melancholy, rich merchant who is hopelessly in love with the young man; women—three of them, no less—who dress themselves as men; a mischievous clown; an irrepressible sidekick; an exotic Moroccan; an absurd Spaniard. The list could be extended. But it is the Jewish villain everyone remembers, and not simply as villain. Shylock seems to have a stronger claim to attention, quite simply more life, than anyone else" (Greenblatt 257-258).

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

Nuttall, A.D. *Shakespeare the Thinker*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

Wood, Michael. *Shakespeare*. New York: Perseus/Basic Books, 2003.

After the Play...

Reflect on the experience of the theatre production. Was it what you expected? Were the characters as you imagined they would be? What are some

of the changes you noticed between the performance and the text you read? Why do you think the director might have made these changes? If you had a chance to act in this production, which character(s) would you have liked to play? Why? If you were directing, would you have done anything differently?

Check out these links:

1. <http://www.folger.edu/eduLesPlanDtl.cfm?lpid=682>

“Bad guys don't always wear black hats: Is there more than one villain in *The Merchant of Venice*?” This is a terrific lesson plan from **Louise Mann** who teaches Theater and English at Martinsburg High School in Martinsburg, West Virginia.

2. <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/7221/kempe.htm>

Interesting descriptions of historical stage Shylocks.

3. <http://www.engl.uvic.ca/Faculty/MBHomePage/engl366c/merchant3.html>

A number of political actions taken in the years before *The Merchant of Venice* illuminate official attitudes of the time towards such things as the status of Jews and the legality of lending money at interest. Here you'll find some examples.

4. <http://www.folger.edu/eduLesPlanDtl.cfm?lpid=629>

This lesson plan is based specifically on Act IV Scene 1. The authors are Sue Biondo-Hench, who teaches at Carlisle Senior High School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and Janet Field-Pickering, Head of Education at the Folger.

5. http://absoluteshakespeare.com/guides/merchant_of_venice/characters/merchant_of_venice_characters_essay.htm

This Characters Analysis features noted Shakespeare scholar William Hazlitt's famous critical essay about the characters of *The Merchant of Venice*.

6. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/merchant/tg_merchant.html#before

This PBS study guide offers synopsis as well as activities.

7. http://www.dartmouth.edu/~engl24/study_questions/merchant/questions.html

If you're reading the entire play, these study questions will take you through every act and scene.

8. <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/7221/jewishhistory.htm>

This page with links offers a history of Jews in England.

9. <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/7221/introduction.htm>

These pages address a question that invariably arises in discussions of *The Merchant of Venice*: a question of anti-semitism. Specifically, these pages investigate whether there are anti-semitic elements in *The Merchant of Venice* and, more specifically, whether Shylock is the embodiment or expression of some anti-semitic attitude that is pervasive in Elizabethan society.

10. <http://www.folger.edu/eduLesPlanDtl.cfm?lpid=689>

“Visualizing Shylock” – Another good lesson plan from the Folger, this by teacher Lisa Rampton Halverson of Edgewood High School in Ellettsville, Indiana.