COMPANIONS to SHAKESPEARE



LOVE & MONEY

IN

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

Lars Thompson

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THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

Lars Thompson
Curricular Writer

Becci Hayes
Editor

A Guide to the Study of Shakespeare's Most Modern Play

Designed for individual or group study

Sharing a rich tradition of critical insight

Exploring the relationship of money and love

with

- classroom questions and activities
- a comprehensive bibliography of references
- a rationale for the play's inclusion in courses of study

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www.thorlarson.com

ISBN 978-0-9937264-0-8

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Curricular Writer: Lars Thompson

Consulting Editor and Page Designer: Becci Hayes

Printer: Queen's University

Cover: Lars Thompson from various sources

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The writer gratefully acknowledges the following main sources:
See pages 99-101 in the reference section.

Art and Graphics: See page 100 in the reference section.

Material Recommended for Study:
See the various texts of *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Jew of Malta* in the reference section.

Material Quoted within this guide: See pages 99-101 of the reference section.

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Lars H. Thompson, 1933-
Becci Hayes, 1948-

Love & Money in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice

A guide to the study of The Merchant of Venice

includes bibliographical references

1. Prelude study of ideas and issues raised by the play
2. Act by act study of various passages of the play
3. Explanatory notes from scholars, directors and actors
4. Periodic questions and activities within each act
5. Comprehensive reflection on the entire text
6. Designed for individual or group use - Study and teaching (Secondary and Adult Education)

I. Hayes, Becci II. Love & Money: a study of The Merchant of Venice

Published by Lars Thompson (ThorStor)
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ISBN 978-0-9937264-0-8

Written, printed and bound in Canada

Love & Money

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Introduction

Tolstoy hated himself in Shakespeare, hated his own vital bearish strength, which was originally like Shakespeare's, natural and creatively a-moral. —Thomas Mann (1875-1955)

William Shakespeare evokes extreme responses: Leo Tolstoy, Russian novelist (1828-1910), came to damn him for his lack of religious coherence; John Keats, English poet (1795-1821), praised him for his intuitive capability; Goethe (1749-1832) spoke of his spiritual truth; and Thomas Mann (above) suggests that all evaluations are entangled with our personal beliefs.

Maybe Goethe is right: The more we study Shakespeare the more we may discover his inner truths. Tolstoy missed Shakespeare's poetic power, perhaps because English was not his native language. But these giants of literature are not alone in their assessment of Shakespeare's worth. Any survey among students will find a divided house. When I asked a group recently for their responses to their study of Shakespeare, there were sufficient negative responses to suggest that school study of his plays did not leave a favorable impression.

Where does the fault lie? My own love for his plays began with a viewing of Olivier's *Hamlet* in 1950. A few years later I saw Alec Guinness as Richard III at the Stratford Festival. Classroom study prepared me for those experiences, but theatrical performance lifted the plays off the page.

Geothe said, "Shakespeare gets his effect by means of the living word, and it is for this reason that one should hear him read, for then the attention is not distracted either by a too adequate or a too inadequate stage-setting." Yes, the music and images of his plays should connect with our private imaginations. We are invited to share his intuitions that often defy analysis—resist it even, though that becomes the predominant classroom method. I am reminded of what one of my sons said to me, that he liked Shakespeare's plays because "a lot was going on that he didn't understand." Keats praised Shakespeare for his ability to hide himself in his work:—"that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." The power of Shakespeare's ambiguities has drawn comments and explanations throughout the ages. Our comments reveal as much about ourselves, as about the meaning of his plays.

Sonnet 111
William Shakespeare

O, for my sake do you with Fortune chide,
The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,
That did not better for my life provide
Than public means, which public manners breeds;
Thence comes it that my name receives a brand,
And almost thence my nature is subdued
To what it works in, like the dyer's hand;
Pity me, then, and wish I were renewed,
Whilst like a willing patient I will drink
Potions of eisell 'gainst my strong infection;
No bitterness that I will bitter think,
Nor double penance to correct correction.
Pity me then, dear friend, and I assure ye,
Even that your pity is enough to cure me.

The Merchant of Venice has been banned from schools for prejudicial reasons. Unsure of its full meaning or impact, we censor the play by exclusion. How unfortunate that we avoid controversy when such a rich intuitive experience awaits us. Shakespeare offers us an opportunity to see the consequences of our blind behaviour with others, and then we put on more blindfolds.

The Merchant of Venice is a very modern play. Its ulterior meaning evolves along with us. Love finds literary expression often; money, seldom. How love and money are mated in a blind universe is, in my opinion, at the centre of this mercantile drama. As expressed by William James: "Now the blindness in human beings is the blindness with which we are all afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves."

Shakespeare confesses his limitations in his sonnet. He offers an apology for his subdued nature. No apology required. "Trust the tale, and not the teller," said D.H. Lawrence. Sound advice indeed!

—Lars Thompson, 2014

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Introduction

Money or Love

Max Plowman

There is something sinister about money. It flows around us like water in an English August; yet it is sacrosanct. It is so unstable that the bright sun of credit will melt it into thin air; but the guns of war will bring it out of the sky like rain. Yet it is as hard as rock; the irreducible minimum of social necessity; to-day a collection of figures on paper from which a puff of opinion will blow off the noughts, to-morrow a handful of hard coins where-with to build the only barrier that will stand between us and ignominy.

Money is so commonly the measure we unconsciously apply to men that he who speaks of it critically will be quickly 'sized up'. The shrewd never tell of their own. 'Put money in thy purse,' says Iago; and we take his advice, as secretly as possible. Income tax communications are strictly private, and what a man is 'worth' is divulged only at his death. Rate money higher than wisdom, and in the world of men you will pass unreproved; for money is the token of civilised self-preservation, and fear insists upon the first law of nature. So money has a permanent place in all our thoughts. Our social roots are in money; no one can be allowed to live without it. We are tied to money. It is the shore to which every human craft is anchored, and will remain anchored until mankind has learnt the greatest lesson history can teach it — how to live by a more spiritual means of exchange.

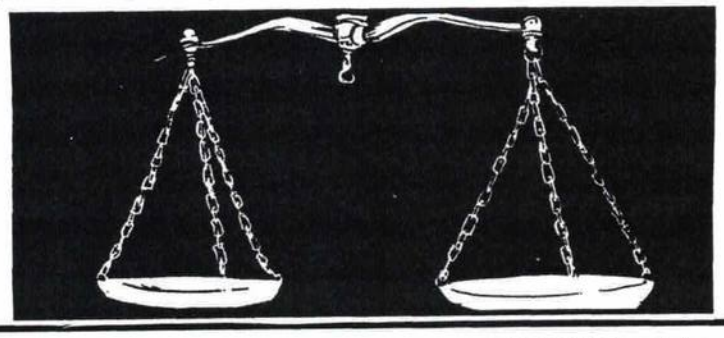
A large measure of disregard for money is one of the few things fools and wise men have in common; but they have it between them with this difference, that whereas wise men have a higher sense of value, fools have none at all. The task of the wise is to make the object of their higher esteem apparent, so that in the eyes of all men the regard for money will go by default. And this is difficult, because the object of their higher esteem is life itself, which is indefinable. The value of life we can only appreciate obliquely: the value of money is immediate and direct. So the money-bird in the hand is esteemed above the living-bird in the bush. The task of wisdom is to teach men to love and enjoy what they cannot grasp.

The arts provide us with the wise man's talisman. They proclaim consistently the higher value, and they constitute the only activity of man that does this consistently. Science does not proclaim the value of life any more than it proclaims the value of money, though pure science may be almost an art. But pure science would soon die were it not for the human sustenance constantly given to it by applied science; for knowledge is in itself, strictly speaking, valueless: to be humanly appreciable it must be made serviceable. Art, on the other hand, is directly appreciable. Its worth lies in its assertion of the value of life above all other values. Art cannot be bought, for its value is beyond money in the sense that is beyond the valuation money is capable of making. Therefore to appreciate art is to take the first step towards a world in which men will live by a more spiritual means of exchange than money. The farmer who loves to grow corn for its own sake has taken this step. Anything appreciated for its own sake destroys the money-value....

Of course the idea of living by a more spiritual means of exchange than money is highly romantic: it has never been done — at least, not successfully for any length of time. But the idea persists in spite of experience, and its persistence is prophetic. Sooner or later we shall have to translate it from the region of romance to the world of fact, or the idea will poison us. The perpetual rule of life by money will not endure.

That is really what Shakespeare was saying in *The Merchant of Venice* — his most often misinterpreted play. It is undoubtedly a romantic comedy of heart's desire, designed to throw the life-value and money-value into the strongest possible contrast.

Max Plowman, Money and 'The Merchant' in *The Merchant of Venice: A Casebook*, ed. John Wilders (Macmillan, 1969).



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Prologue

Negative Capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

—Poet John Keats in a letter to his brother in 1817

Consider Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* as his gift of a treasure chest for which you must fashion your own key to unlock the riches therein. Live with doubt and uncertainty in your quest. Many will tell you that the casket should not be opened, others that it be opened at your peril, and still others will reach 'after fact and reason' in revealing its secrets.

The following pages are offered as a prologue to the play wherein you may prepare yourself for the mystery of your own discoveries. Personally I believe that Shakespeare does not take sides. As in real life, he permits his characters to contradict themselves and be inconsistent. I believe that there are no good guys or bad guys in the play—including gals of any faith. But be ready to disagree. The previous twenty or so pages should provide a personal and an historical context for the play without destroying its ambiguity. They are meant to give you a stake in the action before the encounter, and a way to shape your own key for a rich experience.

In a recent study of the play, Audrey Birkett concludes: "The resurgence of *The Merchant* on stage, in print, and in the cinema over the last decade results from the ability of all and sundry to find meanings in the play that fit individual ideologies and expectations. With each bespoke reading comes alternate interpretations and thus, disagreements in meaning, that ultimately beg the question: is there a singular set of values or morals from which all pull in order to interpret and judge?... The lack of a clear, distinct, and definite set of questions and answers, and the ability to fit the work to any and all visions explains why the play is so popular today."

Source: Audrey Birkett, in *New Readings of "The Merchant of Venice"* (Cambridge, 2013), 39.



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Prologue

Blindness

O heavens, this is my true-begotten father who, being more than sand-blind, high-gravel-blind, knows me not. —Launcelot Gobbo, servant to Shylock

A Blind Test

Assess your sight within three categories: physical, intellectual, and moral
(shade in the area from clear to stone in each category)

clear	sand	gravel	stone
100%	50%	25%	0%

physical

intellectual

moral

Is your moral sight as good as your physical sight?
Does your intellectual sight affect your moral sight?
What factors may affect your intellectual insight?
How can our emotions inhibit our sight?
Is love blind?
Is justice blind?
Are love and justice blind for different reasons?
Is fortune blind?



Love



Fortune



Justice

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Fortune

In Belmont is a lady richly left; And she is fair, and, fairer than that word, Of wondrous virtues.
—Bassanio to Antonio, a merchant of Venice

Fortune Hunt

Rich, fair (attractive), and virtuous: If you are looking for amate of the opposite sex, in what order would you place those three features?

How would your situation affect your decision?

If you had no money, would you pursue someone who had money?

How could you impress a rich person if you were poor?

Would you borrow money in order to woo someone?

Money Matters

List ways you can acquire money.

Would you loan money?

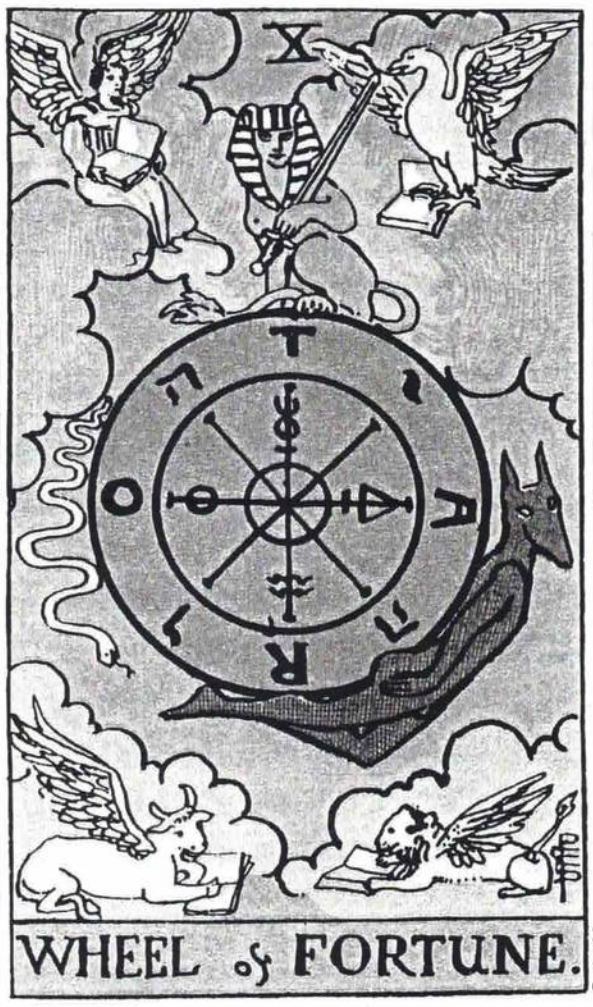
Would you charge interest?

Would you risk a friend's life in order to woo?

What other ways could you pursue your love object?

If you borrowed to woo, how would you spend it?

Does money influence love?



Love Circle

Why are rings associated with love?

Is a ring a perfect shape?

Does a ring, like a wall, keep things in or out?

May you give rings away?

Love Triangle

How varied can love be?

Can you love more than one person at a time?

Should you give up all your loves when you find another?

Is love happy or sad?

Is love like a wheel in motion: what goes up will also come down?

Is good love a matter of good luck?

Is Lady Fortune blind, or are we?

How may good fortune blind

Do we ever know why we are happy or sad? Does happy always have a trace of sadness?

What makes you happier: money or love?

Why can appearances fool us?

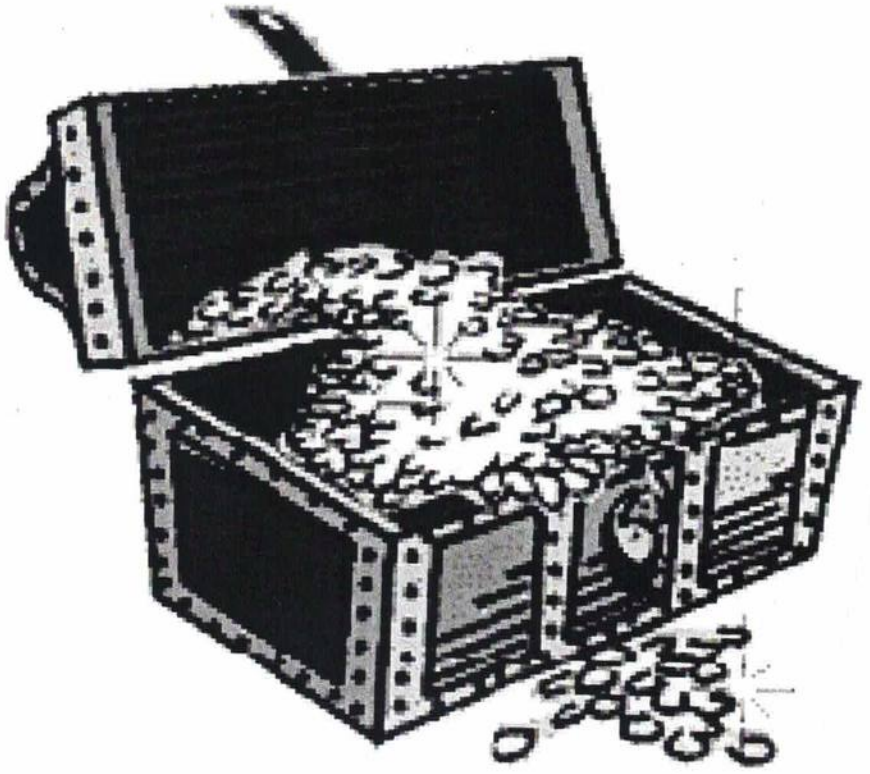
Is change the one constant in our lives?

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Choices

The lott'ry that [your father] hath devised in these three chests of gold,silver, and lead, whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you, will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly but one who shall rightly love.

—Nerissa, Portia's waiting woman



Bound

Should one be bound by the will of a parent?

Is a lottery a fair test of a person's character?

Is a lottery a sure way to ward off fortune hunters and poor suitors?

How can hot blood make choices difficult?

Are dowries necessary?

What kind of dowry can a poor man offer?

Why is gold more attractive than lead?

If you can be fooled by 'golden fleeces' (fair Portia), why not by a golden chest?

Should one be bound by the conditions of a lottery that says a loser must not woo again?

Choice

Can parents make better choices for their children's future spouses? Why or why not?

If you love rightly, you will choose rightly. Give reasons for agreeing or disagreeing.

Better *your* choice even if the wrong choice! What is your opinion?

Disobedience is a sign of growing up. Or are there better signs?

The body (DNA?) chooses better than the mind (conscious reason). Comment.

Should "the will of a living daughter [be] curbed by the will of a dead father"?

What could you do to assist someone into making the right choice? Is cheating allowed?

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Justice

My deeds upon my head! I crave the law, The penalty and forfeit of my bond. —Shylock, a moneylender

Law

How can a law be altered by interpretation?

Should a law be twisted "to do a great right"?

How important is precedent? Why?

If a law says that "all men are equal," then why are some people denied their equality?

How can the letter of a law deny its intention?

Can laws be written without ambiguity?

"The right to bear arms": why should the 'arms' of the year 2014 alter that law or right of the past?

Spirit

How does "thou shalt not" differ in spirit from "thou shalt"?

Is revenge a form of the law that advocates "an eye for an eye"? Explain.

How can the "fine print" (hidden conditions) deny the spirit of a contract?

Is usury offered in the spirit of giving or taking?

Are credit cards usurious? If not, why not?

Why was usury considered a sin in agrarian societies?

Why less so today?



Justice

Why is Justice often shown as a blind-folded woman?

Why is She often shown with sword and scales?

Is Justice blind to money?

How may money influence a just outcome?

Should the laws of a country be the same for its aliens as they are for its citizens?

If O.J. Simpson had been a poor black man, would the verdict have been the same? How did money and status affect the outcome?

Mercy

Why can mercy be seen as a king's whim: thumbs up or thumbs down?

Does mercy imply a lasting debt of gratitude?

Would you rather have mercy than justice?

Translate: "The quality of mercy is not strained."

"It blesseth him that gives and him that takes." How do these blessings differ?

Why does mercy bind a taker to him that gives?

Is mercy above the sway of kings?

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Debt

Shylock, albeit I neither lend nor borrow / By taking nor by giving of excess. / Yet to supply the ripe wants of my friend, I'll break a custom.
—Antonio, a mechant of Venice

Lend or Borrow

Do you borrow money from any source? If so, what source?

Would you borrow from a friend? Comment.

Why may it be unwise to lend money to a friend in need?

Why may it be better to give that friend money than to lend it to him/her?

If your friend is careless with money, how would that affect your attitude?

Is it likely that more money would change your friend's monetary habits? Comment.

Should giving be conditional? How could it alter your friendship?

What conditions, if any, would you put on a loan to a friend?

How would your friend's purpose for your loan influence your decision?

How would your affection for your friend influence your decision?

Why would you be less inclined to lend money to a stranger?

Would you charge interest on a loan to a friend? Or to a stranger?

How would you define a stranger?

Why are loans best between strangers?

Foreign Exchange

What is a ducat?

Are ducats still in circulation?

Are banks still on a gold standard? If not, why not?

What would 3000 ducats in 1595 be worth in American dollars today?

Conspicuously, how should a Venetian suitor spend that kind of money in 1595?

What could that Venetian buy comparable to a stretch limo and a tailored tuxedo?

Why does conspicuous spending attract an entourage of followers?

Does the suitor need his entourage? Why?

What is money?

Can ewes and rams be tendered as gold and silver? What other tallies could be used?

Is money the root of all evil? Comment.



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Lovers

But love is blind, and lovers cannot see / The pretty follies that themselves commit.—Jessica to her lover Lorenzo

Style of Loving

What style of lover are you?

The authors (Lasswell and Lobsenz) of *Styles of Loving* suggest six styles: Best Friend, Romantic, Logical, Game Playing, Unselfish, or Possessive. Pick one category for yourself.

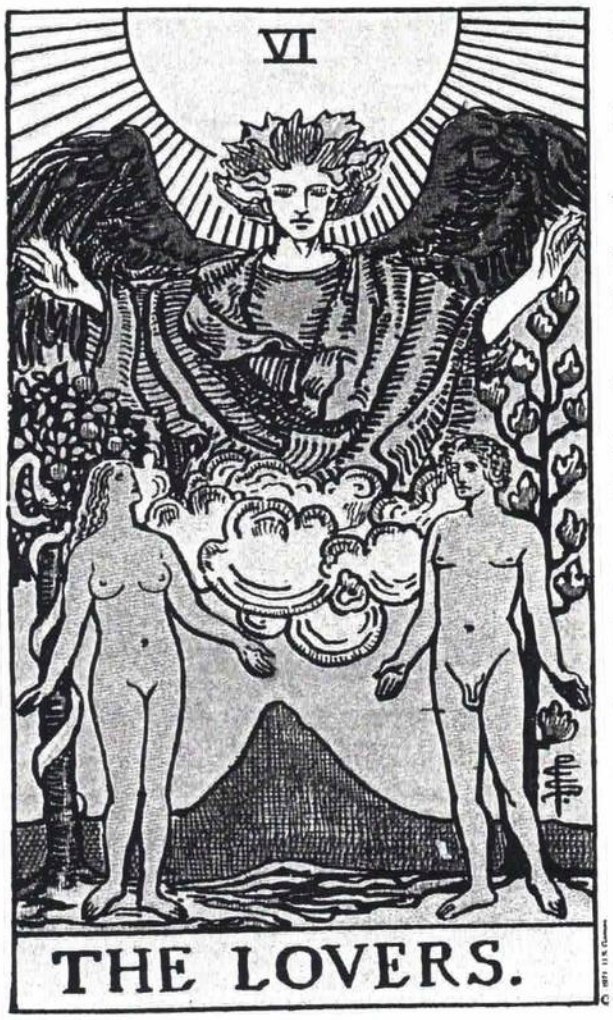
Do you believe in "love at first sight"? If so, you may be Romantic.

If you get upset when things aren't going right in your relationship, could you be Possessive?

"The best kind of love grows out of a long friendship." What category may that fit?

"I can get over love affairs pretty easily and quickly." Why may that describe a Game Player?

"It is best to love someone with a similar background." The authors say that may indicate a Logical Lover. Do you agree? Disagree? Why?



"Whatever I own is my lover's to use as he/she chooses." How Unselfish can any lover be?

In fairness to the authors, this is a very small sample from their true/false "Love Scale Questionnaire": one from each category. Later, apply these categories to Shakespeare's lovers.

Shakespeare's Lovers

Explain your responses to the following:

Could you love someone who stole from her/his-father? And sold his treasure for a monkey?

Or who belonged to a different culture or faith?

Or who belonged to a different race?

Or of the same gender?

Is 'love' too general a word?

What other words would be more appropriate for a bond between people?

Why do we feel more charity for those within our tribe than those without?

Does the exclusion of aliens make our tribal bonds stronger?

Why do we often give our aliens our dirty work to do? Or do we?

Is usury a form of dirty work?

Is using other people's bodies and minds for personal gain a form of usury?

How may marriage become a usurious contract?

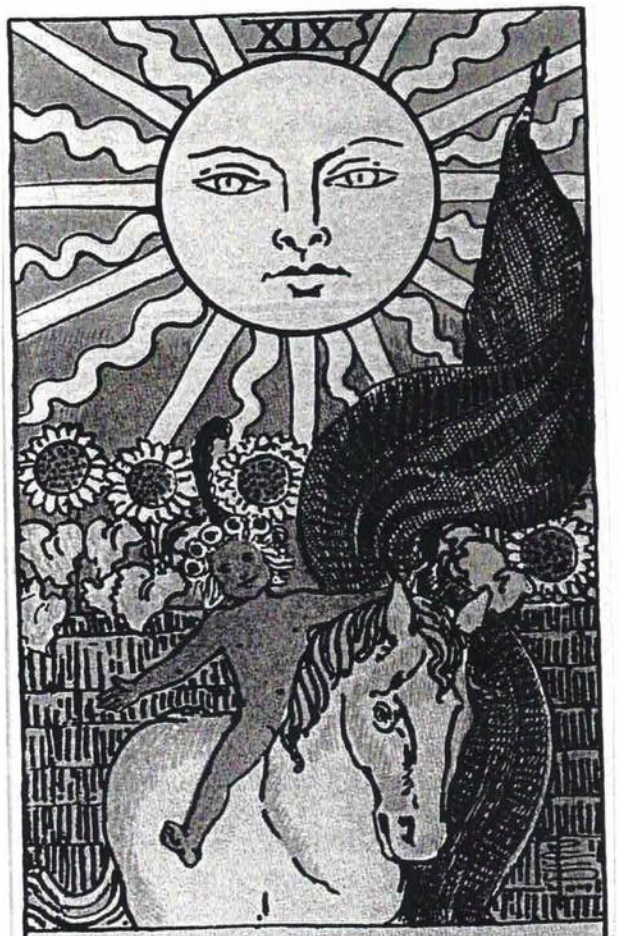
Is our industrial society founded upon a usurious paradigm? Explain.

Is a "pound of flesh" an apt image for our times?

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Harmony

Such harmony is in immortal souls, / But whilst this muddy vesture of decay / Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it. —Lorenzo to Jessica



What would make a better symbol for constancy and harmony, the sun or the moon? Why?

Do you like music? Is your musical taste appreciated by your friends? Do you appreciate their tastes?

Do you trust people who hate music? Explain.

Are music haters "fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils"? What are they fit for?

Google the names Cressida, Thisbe, and Dido
Were they or their lovers true or inconstant?

Who are more faithful lovers: men or women?

Are we both deaf and blind to ourselves and others?

How can we learn to see and hear more clearly?

What is this "muddy vesture of decay"? Should it be blamed for not hearing the music of the spheres?

What is hypocrisy?

Why is it possible for us to spout the best lines and behave contrary to our words?

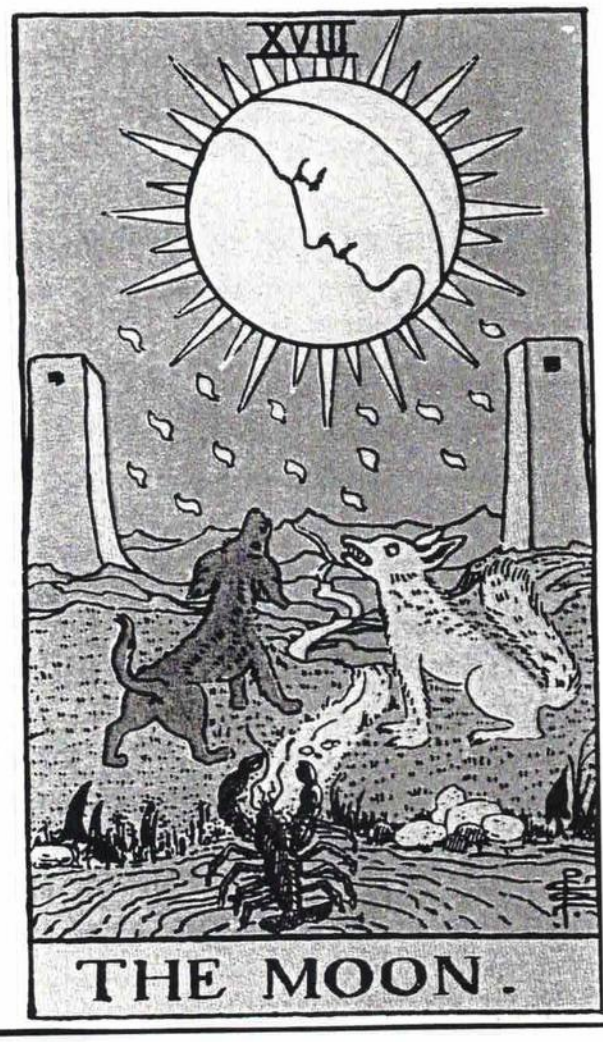
Are we fooled more by words than by behaviour?

If our actions betray our words, are we hypocrites?

"Hypocrisy is homage paid by vice to virtue." Explain.

If the text says to love my neighbour as myself, then who is my neighbour?

Is harmony possible in "a naughty world"?



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Appearance

So may the outward shows be least themselves; / The world is still deceived with ornament. —Bassanio

Tell an incident in which you once were fooled by appearances.

How did your incident get resolved?

How did that experience change the way you behaved in other similar situations?

"Fool me once shame on you; fool me twice shame on me." Explain.

A con artist seldom succeeds with an honest person. What protects an honest person?

If you have never been deceived, explain how you have avoided deception so far.

In the movie *The Sting*, a primary con artist was 'outstung' by other cons. What makes a con artist gullible?

Why is a fool easily parted from his money?

Is it a wise father that knows his own child?

"The first service a child does his father is to make him foolish." What does the father gain from that service?

"Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath." If you have nothing, would this be a good gamble?

"Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves." How would your self-esteem govern your choice?

"Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire." How would an alchemist respond?

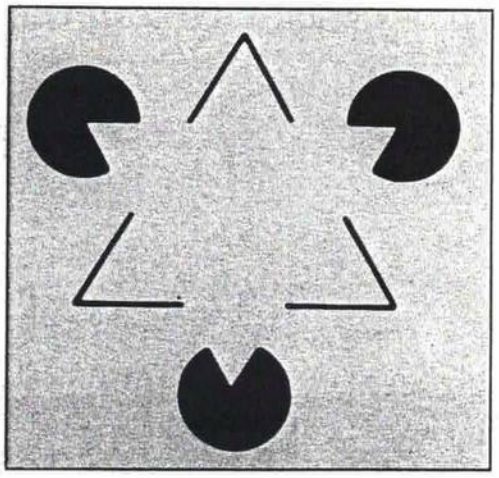
What fools you more: image or text?

Trompe-l'oeil

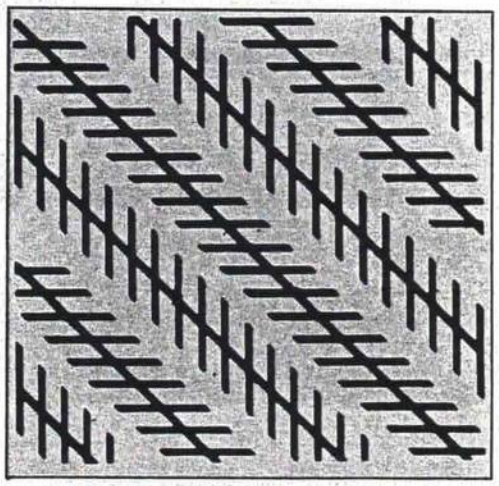
Is seeing enough for believing?

Test your sight on the puzzles below:

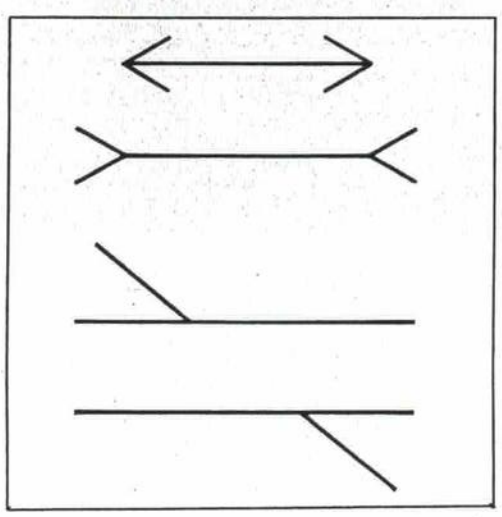
The illusory contour, right, forms an opaque triangle that exists only in the mind.



Diagonal lines in Zöllner's illusion seem to converge, but they are really parallel.



The Müller-Lyer arrows, top, and the Poggendorf illusion trick eye and brain.



Source: *The Eye: Window to the World* (Torstar Books, 1984), 135.

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Prejudice

A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go. / Let all of his complexion choose me so. —Portia, an heiress

If someone said to you,"Mislike me not for my complexion," how would you respond?

Is 'complexion' more colour than character?

If "complexion" means "temperament" would your response be different?

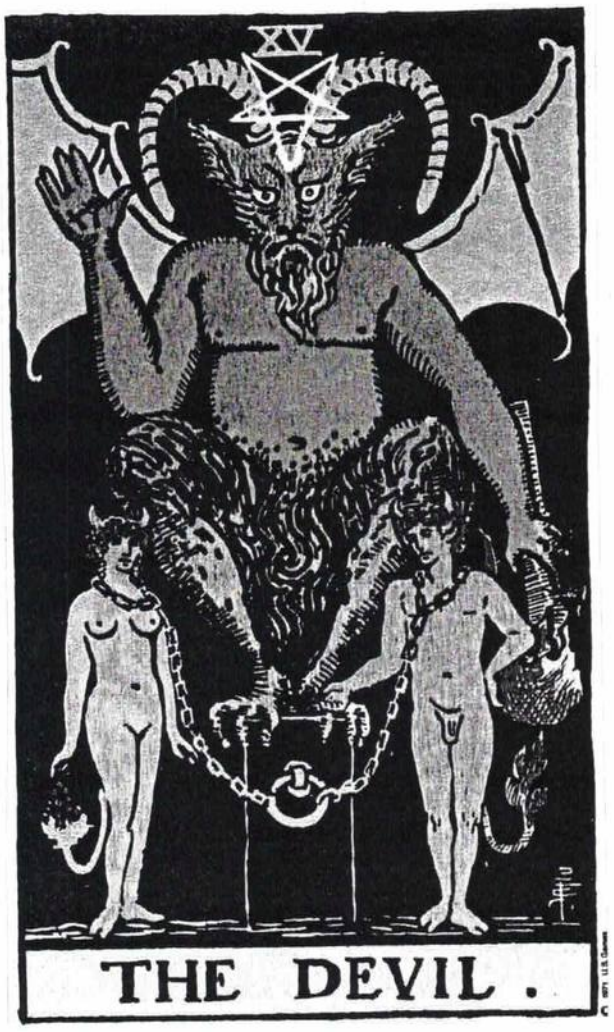
Is prejudice more often expressed against external features than against internal ones?

My friend likes his two black neighbours, but hates "niggers": Is he prejudiced?

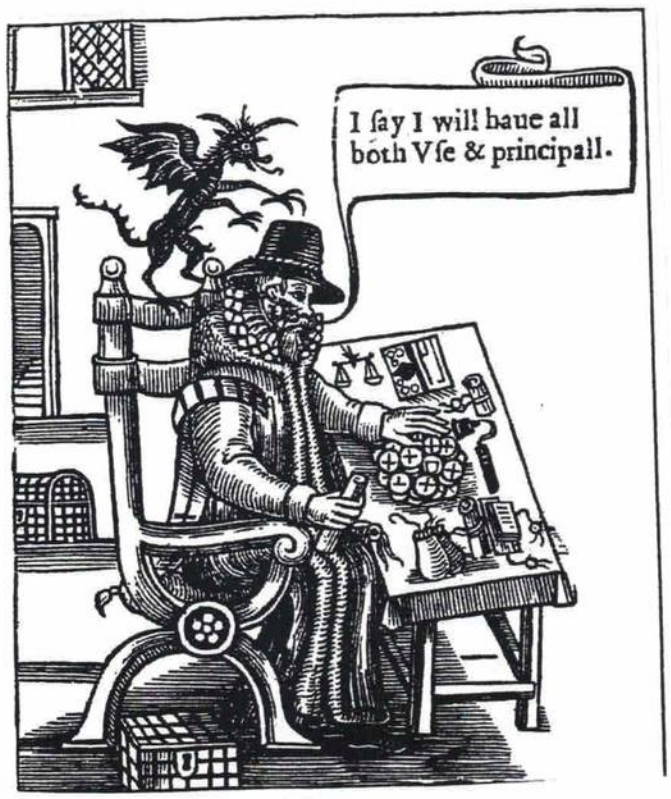
What is a stereotype?

Why are stereotypes popular in comedy: e.g., the foolish father in *The Simpsons*?

How does emotional distance change the stereotype? Does comedy increase distance?



What professions or jobs have become targets for economic satire? Are bankers banksters?



Find synonyms for the following words: sad, merciful, careful, thrifty, prodigal, miserly, generous, foolish, affection, and revenge.

How can generosity become prodigality and thrifty become cheap?

Why can we love a person who is generous with his/her money, and hate one who is not?

"The fiend is at mine elbow and tempts me." Why is it convenient to externalize the devil?

"I should stay with the Jew my master who is a kind of devil." Why is it easy to turn a boss into a devil?

How did the devil become the grand icon for evil and the grand scapegoat for our failures?

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Evil

How far that little candle throws his beams! / So shines a good deed in a naughty world. —Portia

Does the word 'naughty' still mean 'evil'?

What changes the meaning of words?

Why do we find euphemisms for our bad or evil behaviour?

"You that did void your rheum upon my beard." Is this an evil deed?

"I am as like ... to spit on thee again." Is that a good response?

"In sooth I know not why I am so sad." Why is it difficult to remain happy in an evil world?

"By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world." Have you ever felt this type of weariness? What caused it?

"Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself!" What light do these words bring?

"He presently become a Christian." Is a forced conversion another good deed?

"In such a night / Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew." Can you justify her act—the act of a trusted daughter?

"One of them showed me a ring that he had of your daughter for a monkey." How can a friend torture you with good news/bad news?

"For if the Jew do cut but deep enough, I'll pay it instantly with all my heart." Is there no greater love for a friend than that?

"I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all / Here to this devil, to deliver you." Never make an offer you cannot keep! Is this one of them?

Why is the idea of human sacrifice so common in religious and heroic tales? Is it the ultimate good deed?

But if Abraham offers Isaac, and God offers Christ, who is asked to pay the price?

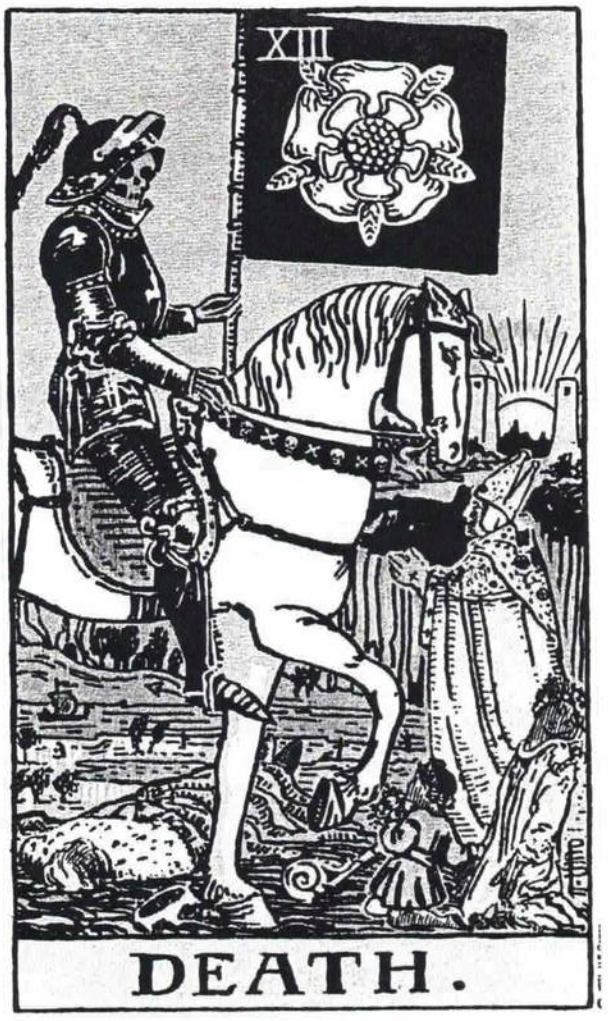
"If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge." Why is revenge 'unfeedable'?

Can others save us from our sins? How can we take ownership?

What ray of light have you shone upon this 'naughty world'?

What is the "blight man was born for"?

How are death and evil intertwined?



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Avarice

The old proverb is very well parted between my master Shylock and you, sir: you have "the grace of God," sir, and he hath "enough." —Lancelet, servant upon leaving Shylock's service

The Sin of Avarice

R.H. Tawney

"He who has enough to satisfy his wants," wrote a [theologian] of the fourteenth century, "and nevertheless ceaselessly labors to acquire riches, either in order to obtain a higher social position, or that subsequently he may have enough to live without labor, or that his sons may become men of wealth and importance—all such are incited by a damnable avarice, sensuality, or pride." Two and half centuries later, in the midst of a revolution in the economic and spiritual environment, Luther, in even more unmeasured language, was to say the same. The essence of the argument was that payment may properly be demanded by the craftsmen who make the goods, or by the merchants who transport them, for both labor in their vocation and serve the common need. The unpardonable sin is that of the speculator or the middleman, who snatches private gain by the exploitation of public necessities....

If such ideas were to be more than generalities, they required to be translated into terms of the particular transactions by which trade is conducted and property acquired. Their practical expression was the body of economic casuistry, in which the best-known elements are the teaching with regard to the just price and the prohibition of usury. These doctrines sprang as much from the popular consciousness of the plain facts of the economic situation as from the theorists who expounded them. The innumerable fables of the usurer who was prematurely carried to hell, or whose money turned to withered leaves in his strong box, or who... "about the year 1240," on entering a church to be married, was crushed by a stone figure falling from the porch, which proved by the grace of God to be a carving of another usurer and his money-bags being carried off by the devil, are more illuminating than the refinements of lawyers.

The economic background of it all was very simple. The medieval consumer is like a traveller condemned to spend his life at a station hotel. He occupies a tied house and is at the mercy of the local baker and brewer. Monopoly is inevitable. Indeed, a great part of medieval industry is a system of organized monopolies, endowed with a public status, which must be watched with jealous eyes to see that they do not abuse their powers. It is a society of small masters and peasant farmers. Wages are not a burning question, for except in the great industrial centers of Italy and Flanders, the permanent wage-earning class is small. Usury is, as it is today in similar circumstances. For loans are made largely for consumption, not for production. The farmer whose harvest fails or whose beasts die, or the artisan who loses money, must have credit, seed-corn, cattle, raw materials, and his distress is the money-lender's opportunity. Naturally, there is a passionate popular sentiment against the engrosser who holds a town to ransom, the monopolist who brings the livings of many into the hands of one, the money-lender who takes advantage of his neighbor's necessities to get a lien on their land and foreclose ."The usurer would not loan to men these goods, but if he hoped winning, that he loves more than charity. Many other sins be more than this usury, but for this men curse and hate it more than other sin."

Source: R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (Harcourt Brace, 1926), 36-39.

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The love of money is the root of all evil. —a Biblical epistle

Love and Usury

W.H. Auden

The question of the immorality or morality of usury was a sixteenth-century issue on which both the theologians and the secular authorities were divided. Though the majority of medieval theologians had condemned usury, there had been from the beginning, divergence of opinion as to the correct interpretation of Deuteronomy xxiii. 19-20:

'Thou shalt not lend upon usury to thy brother; usury of money, usury of victuals, usury of any thing that is lent upon usury: Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury' and Leviticus xxv. 35-7 which proscribe the taking of usury, not only from a fellow Jew, but also from the stranger living in their midst and under their protection.

Some Christian theologians had interpreted this to mean that, since the Christians had replaced the Jews as God's Chosen, they were entitled to exact usury from non-Christians.

'Who is your brother? He is your sharer in nature, coheir in grace, every people, which, first, is in the faith, then under the Roman Law. Who, then, is the stranger? the foes of God's people, From him, demand usury whom you rightly desire to harm, against whom weapons are lawfully carried. Upon him usury is legally imposed. Where there is the right of war, there also is the right of usury.'...

On the Jewish side, talmudic scholars had some interesting interpretations. Rashi held that the Jewish debtor is forbidden to pay interest to a fellow Jew, but he may pay interest to a Gentile. Maimonides, who was anxious to prevent Jews from being tempted into idolatry by associating with Gentiles, held that a Jew might borrow at usury from a Gentile, but should not make loans to one, on the ground that debtors are generally anxious to avoid their creditors , but creditors are obliged to seek the company of debtors.



Una vecchia usuraia
Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652)

Had Shakespeare wished to show Shylock the usurer in the most unfavourable light possible, he could have placed him in a medieval agricultural society, where men become debtors through misfortunes, like a bad harvest or sickness for which they are not responsible, but he places him in a mercantile society, where the role played by money is a very different one.

When Antonio says: "*I neither lend nor borrow / By taking or giving of excess*" he does not mean that, if he goes into partnership with another merchant contributing, say, a thousand ducats to their venture, and their venture makes a profit, he only asks for a thousand ducats back. He is a merchant and the Aristotelian argument that money is barren and cannot breed money, which he advances to Shylock, is invalid in his own case.... »

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I would be friends with you and have your love. —creditor to debtor

Love and Usury (continued)

As a society, Venice is more efficient and successful than Henry IV's England. Its citizens are better off, more secure and nicer mannered. Politically speaking, therefore, one may say that a mercantile society, as a feudal society represents an advance upon a tribal society. But every step forward brings with it its own dangers and evils, for the more advanced a social organization, the greater the moral demands it makes upon its members and the greater degree of guilt which they incur if they fail to meet these demands. The members of a society with a primitive self-sufficient economy can think of those outside it as others, not brothers, with a good conscience, because they can get along by themselves. But, first, money and, then, machinery have created a world in which, irrespective of our cultural traditions and our religious or political convictions, we are all mutually dependent. This demands that we accept all other human beings on earth as brothers, not only in law, but also in our hearts. Our temptation, of course, is to do just the opposite, not to return to tribal loyalties—that is impossible—but, each of us, to regard everybody else on earth not even as an enemy, but as a faceless algebraical cipher.

Source: W.H. Auden, *Four Centuries of Shakespearean Criticism* (Avon, 1965), 240-251.

Moral Demands

1. Whom do you trust most: family, friends, or faceless ciphers? Why?
2. Is the need to exclude others from our circle deeply rooted in human nature? How deep?
3. Do we need scapegoats and villains? Why?
4. A Biblical passage declares that "the wages of sin is death." Does this mean the death of one's soul? Comment.
5. What are the seven deadly sins?
6. Why do some people believe that avarice is the worst sin of the seven?
7. The artist Ribera depicts an old lady as a usurer. Who were the main money-lenders in Europe in the sixteenth-century?
8. Why did "strangers" become usuers?
9. Why did kings need money-lenders?
10. Who are more enslaved by usury, creditors or debtors? Describe their enslavements.
11. How does a mercantile society differ from an agrarian one?
12. Why would a mercantile society be forced to modify its view of usury?



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But my chief care / Is to come fairly off from the great debts / Wherein my time, something too prodigal, / have left me gaged. —Bassanio to his indebted friend Antonio

The Inferno

Canto VII

Here, too, I saw a nation of lost souls,
far more than were above: they strained their chests
against enormous weights, and with mad howls

rolled them at one another. Then in haste
they rolled them back, one party shouting out:
"Why do you hoard?" and the other: "Why do you waste?"

So back around the ring they puff and blow,
each faction to its course, until they reach
opposite sides, and screaming as they go

the madmen turn and start their weights again
to crash against the maniacs. And I
watching, felt my heart contract with pain.

"Master," I said, "what people can these be?
And all those tonsured ones there on our left—
is it possible they all were of the clergy?"

And he: "In the first life beneath the sun
they were so skewed and squinteyed in their minds
their misering or extravagance mocked all reason.

The voice of each clamors its own excess
when lust meets lust at the two points of the circle
where opposite guilts meet in their wretchedness.

These tonsure wraiths of greed were priests indeed,
and popes and cardinals, for it is in these
the weed of avarice sows its rankest seed."

And I to him: "Master, among this crew
surely I should be able to make out
the fallen image of some soul I knew."

And he to me: "This is a lost ambition.
In their sordid lives they labored to be blind,
And now their souls have dimmed past recognition.



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He rails /... on me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift / Which he calls "interest." —Shylock

All their eternity is to butt and bray:
one crew will stand tight-fisted, the other stripped
of its very hair at the bar of Judgment Day.

Hoarding and squandering wasted all their light
and brought them screaming to this brawl of wraiths.
You need no words of mine to grasp their plight.

Now may you see the fleeting vanity
of the goods of Fortune for which men tear down
all that they are, to build a mockery.

Not all the gold that is or ever was
under the sky could buy for one of these
exhausted souls the fraction of a pause."

"Master," I said, "tell me—now that you touch
on this Dame Fortune—what *is* she, that she holds
the good things of the world within her clutch?"

And he to me: "O credulous mankind,
is there one error that has wooed and lost you?
Now listen, and strike error from your mind:

That king whose perfect wisdom transcends all,
made the heavens and posted angels on them
to guide the eternal light that it might fall

from every sphere to every sphere the same.
He made earth's splendors by a like decree,
and posted as their minister this high Dame,

the Lady of Permutations. All earth's gear
she changes from nation to nation, from house to house,
in changeless change through every turning year.

No mortal power may stay her spinning wheel.
The nations rise and fall by her decree.
None may foresee where she will set her heel.

—Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) *The Divine* Comedy

Source: Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, rendered into English verse by John Ciardi (Norton, 1977).

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It is enacted in the laws of Venice, / If it be proved against an alien / That by direct or indirect attempts / He seeks the life of any citizen, / The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive »

Expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290

It is one thing to say that Jews were expelled from England; it is quite another to answer the host of questions that follow hard upon such a statement. How many were expelled? Where did they go? Why were they expelled? Who was responsible for the decision? What were the consequences of the Expulsion, not just for those exiled, but for those who banished them? And, finally how have historical accounts of the Expulsion changed over time, and how have these in turn transformed the meaning of the event? Satisfying answers to most of these questions are not easily found or widely available, either in the work of Anglo-Jewish or traditional British historians....

The decline of England's medieval Jewish community was not a sudden event. The climax of Expulsion has eclipsed the harrowing events of the previous century: the York Massacre, mass arrests, financial ruin, conversions, emigration, and over three hundred executions preceded this final blow. The fate of individual exiles has also been subsumed within a larger story of how one group of people ridded itself of another. In painting a picture of England emptying itself of large numbers of Jews, a number of accounts that circulated in early modern England wildly inflated the scale of the Expulsion....

Medieval English chroniclers were apparently less interested in—and therefore prove less helpful about—where the exiled Jews went. Surviving documents indicate that 1,335 of the poorer ones paid fourpence for passage to France, and no doubt many of the wealthier ones went to France or other European countries as well. A much repeated story, verified by court records and especially popular among sixteenth-century historians, describe how English sailors duped Jewish refugees into drowning in the Thames....

There has also been difference of opinion over the date of the Expulsion. Medieval English chroniclers are unanimous in placing the date in the year 1290. A somewhat different account appears in the work of early modern Jewish historians on the continent, who record that the Expulsion took place in 1260 (one of them even dates it as early as 1242). As for the actual day the Expulsion order was given, a tradition emerged in Jewish histories, revived in this century, that the decree fell on the ninth day of the month of Av, the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem and a day of mourning in the Jewish calendar.

Historical explanations for why the Expulsion took place have changed considerably over time. The earliest attempts by contemporary medieval chroniclers offer a dizzying array of reasons, helpfully summarized by Barnett Abrams:

> In one chronicle the Expulsion is represented as a concession to the prayer of the Pope; in another, as a result of the efforts of Queen Eleanor; in a third, as a measure of summary punishment against the blasphemy of the Jews, taken to give satisfaction to the English clergy; in a fourth as an answer to the complaints made by the magnates of the continued prevalence of usury; in a fifth as an act of conformity to public opinion; in a sixth, as a reform suggested by the King's independent general enquiry onto the administration of the kingdom during his absence and his discovery, through the complaints of the Council, of the "deceits" of the Jews.

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Aliens

Shall seize one half his goods; the other half / Comes to privy coffers of the state, / And the offender's life lies in the mercy / Of the Duke only, 'gainst all other voice. —Portia as Balthazar

Jewish Expulsion (continued)

It is important not to underplay points of real disagreement between English and Jewish versions of the Expulsion. Unlike their Jewish counter parts for example, sixteenth-century English historians were particularly attracted to versions of the Expulsion that emphasized that the Jews were banished because they had committed economic and physical crimes against their Christian hosts. This interpretation was no doubt influence by Elizabethan anxieties about an expanding alien population. While Tudor historians could not point to a single episode as decisive in leading to the Expulsion, their litanies of Jewish ritual murders, circumcisions, coin clippings, and other crimes committed by this alien community made Edwards I's decision appear inevitable.

Despite the positive image with which Edward I was portrayed on the Elizabethan stage, many writers at the time did not flinch from stressing that the King had banished the Jews to line his own pockets. ... John Stow reminds his readers that Edward I exploited both the Jews and the commons: the "King made a mighty mass of money on their houses, which he sold, and yet the commons of England had granted and gave him [a tax of] a fifteenth of all their goods to banish them ; and thus much for the Jews." The playwright and historian Samuel Daniel also draws attention to Edward's profit motive: "Of no less grievance, the King the next year after eased his people by the banishment of the Jews.... And this King, having much to do for money (coming to an empty crown) was driven to all shifts possible to get it."

By the time of the Interregnum and the ensuing debate over allowing Jews to resettle in England, the issue of the abuse of royal prerogative only hinted at by Tudor and Stuart historians had emerged as central to the meaning of the Expulsion....

Readmission of the Jews in 1656

The history of the Readmission, like the Expulsion that preceded it, has generated a good deal of critical controversy. Two issues in particular have been contested: Why did the English consider readmitting the Jews in 1656? And did the Jews legally resettle in this year? The alternative explanation for why the English considered readmitting Jews were concisely put by William Prynne: either that "it may be a very probable hopeful means of the general calling and conversion of the Jewish nation to the Christian faith" or that the "allegation for bringing in the Jews is merely politic, that it will bring in much present and future gain and money to the state, and advance trading....

To these two explanations I would add a third: the Readmission debate was not simply about the the conversion or economic exploitation of the Jews but also, and perhaps more centrally, about redefining what it meant to be English during a period marked by social, religious, and political instability.. The return to "old writings" signals the extent to which this was grounded in the records of England's past about national identity and the validity of old laws still on the books, especially those that concerned heresy, conformity, and royal prerogative.

Source: James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (Columbia University Press, 1996), 46-57.

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Luck

And so may I, blind Fortune leading me, / Miss that which one unworthier may attain, / And die grieving. —Prince of Morocco



Fortune turning her wheel
Folger edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, 176

Is it better to have loved and lost than never to have lost at all? What can losing do for us?

Is it better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all?

What can we learn from a fortune lost better than from a fortune found?

You will be reborn, and must choose one of the following new identities: a) an aristocrat, b) a merchant, or c) a banker

How would your choice be affected if you learn that the aristocrat is broke, the merchant has all his goods at risk, and the banker has no rights of citizenship?

Would you reconsider if you learn that the poor aristocrat cannot be jailed for debt?

Would you change your identity if you learned that the aristocrat has land and wealth—but was of the opposite gender?

In short, is it lucky to be born with privilege?

Now reconsider your sense of luck: what are your lucky privileges?

Have you ever been saved from the serious consequences of careless behaviour?

Did luck influence the final outcome of your careless behaviour?

Have you seen "one unworthier" have more good luck than yourself? How did you feel?

Stephen Leacock said: "I'm a great believer in luck. I find the harder I work, the more I have of it." Is he right? Please comment.

Are you a lucky person?

Describe some of the lucky and unlucky events or moments in your life.

Have you had more good luck than bad? Why?

How may social status be a residue of good or bad luck?

How may your friends influence your good or bad luck?

Is good luck a reward for virtue or merit?

How may the luck of your birth shape your fortune?

Is your morality immune to luck?

Why can a friend (like Antonio or Portia) save you from profligate bad luck?

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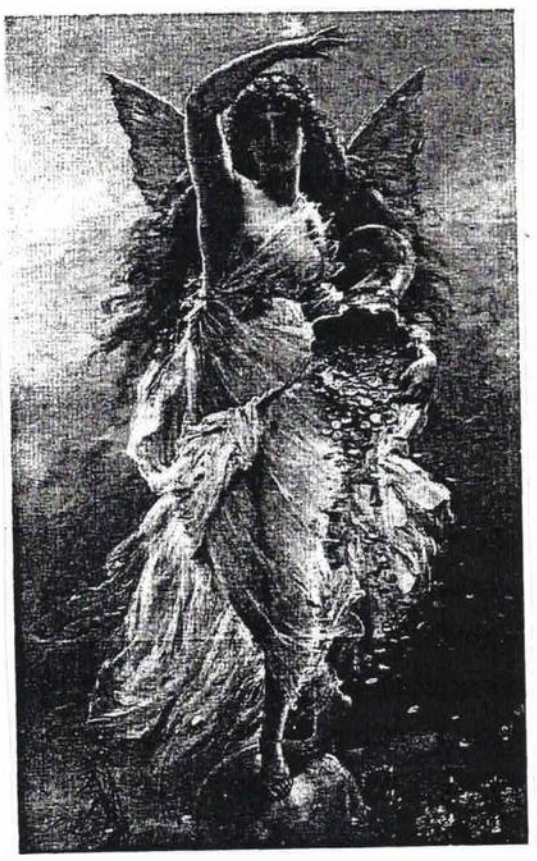
Luck

For herein Fortune shows herself more kind / Than is her custom: it is still her use / To let the wretched man outlive his wealth, / To view … an age of poverty… —Antonio, the merchant of Venice

Moral Luck
Lars Engle

Antonio gives Bassanio the means to retrospectively moralize past fecklessness, and Portia in the trial supplies him with the moral luck of not having to blame himself for Antonio's death. Portia, then, does not merely tidy an economic balance sheet and put the balance of erotic obligation in her own column, she also ensures Bassanio's relative moral blamelessness. Loving Bassanio in this play means supplying him with moral luck; the morally attractive are blessed not only by privileges which they exploit but by others who wish them to remain lucky.

Source: Lars Engle, *Shakespearean Pragmatism* (University of Chicago, 1993), 105.



Lady Luck on Google

Dame Fortune

1. She may be blind, she may be attractive, she may offer you a cornucopia of coins. But should she be trusted—blind-folded or not?
2. Why is Fortune always a she?
3. How would you describe her? Draw her.
4. Did you blind her in any way? Should you?
5. Argue that she should be a he.
6. Explain why you are morally lucky or morally unlucky.

Here are ten proverbs about luck. Indicate if you agree or disagree with them. And then select one (or one of your own) to support:

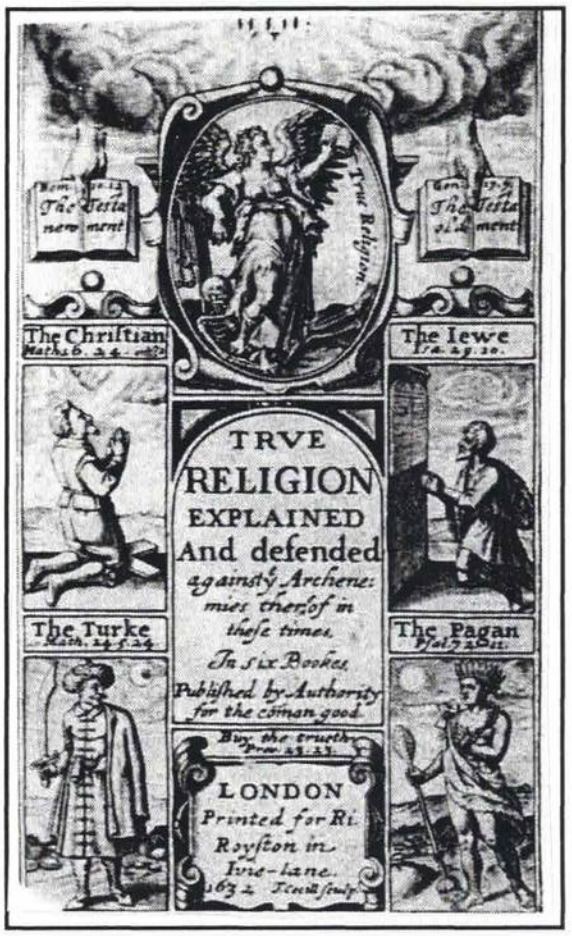
1) Fortune, not prudence, rules our life.
2) Better to be born lucky than wise.
3) The footsteps of fortune are slippery.
4) It is better to be born lucky than rich.
5) When the wagon of fortune goes well, spite and envy hang on to the wheels.
6) There is no fence against ill fortune.
7) The more knave, the better luck.
8) Fortune favours fools.
9) Fortune is made of glass.
10) You never know your luck.

Source: *The Penguin Dictionary of Proverbs*

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Conversion

If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife, /
Become a Christian and thy loving wife. —Jessica, a Jewish daughter



Disowned Other

Janet Adelman

Shylock is already a Venetian alien; after his conversion, what would he be–a Christian Jewish Venetian alien? Perhaps he never appears again after his conversion in part because these combinations are both untenable and close to home, for London's own resident Christian Jews—or Jewish Christians—might have provoked similarly disquieting questions about both religion and nationhood. Whether or not they practiced their Jewish rites, they—like Shylock and Jessica—apparently carried the bodily residue of their Jewishness with them. Indelibly alien within Christianity they were a kind of living contradiction within it, marking the place where theological and racial differences intersect: in what sense could these Jews be fully Christian? And their presence might similarly trouble developing notions of nationhood. ... As members by lineage of what Shylock persistently calls the "nation" of the Jews, could they ever become full members of the newly consolidating English nation?

Alien by both religion and nation, the conversos—like Shylock—might doubly serve as figures for the stranger within. [Sir Thomas] More's appeal to the English in fact plays exactly on this uncanny "within-ness." His speech works by asking the English to imagine themselves simultaneously as spurned-dogs and as knife-wielding strangers; if we catch a preliminary glimpse of Shylock-as-Jew here, it is Shylock as a figure for the English as strangers, the English when they are most alien to themselves. And like Shylock, the conversos not only trouble boundaries and definitions but also gesture toward a certain strangeness both within Englishness and within Christianity itself. The conversos were Jews who had become Catholics who had become Protestants who were—maybe—still Jews after all; their own history of conversion disquietingly echoed the vexed and imperfect recent history of conversion in England. And it echoed the Protestant understanding of a broader pattern of conversion as well: the passing of the promise not only from Jew to Christian but from Catholic to Protestant. But what if the residue of the Jew remained within Christianity, as the residue of the Jew remained within England? Both Catholics and Protestants of various stripes were fond of accusing one another of Judaizing; but what if the Jew was there, in the Christian, not through some inadmissible excess or residue but constitutively, at the heart of his Christianity? The converso is a haunting figure in part, I think, because the Jew-as-stranger has the potential to recall Christianity to its own internal alien; converted or not, he can become a figure for the disowned other within the self.

Source: Janet Adelman, "Introduction," *Blood Relations* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 11-12.

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He lends out money gratis and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice.
—Shylock, a moneylender

Jews in Venice

Elizabeth Horodowich

In the sixteenth century more Jews came to live in Venice. They had frequented the city with some regularity since the end of the fourteenth century when, in its state of financial desperation after the War of Chioggia, the government began to court the services of Jewish money-lenders as an alternative to Christian usury. The Jews not only paid taxes but also lent money to the state and the urban poor at a reasonable rate of return. They were allowed to come and work in the city by day, and the state increasingly extended their rights to stay in Venice over the course of the fourteenth century, to the point where they could remain in the city for up to 15 days. During the war of Cambrai, Jews offered their financial resources to help defend the city and, in return, the state allowed them to settle permanently in the lagoon in 1516.

Jews lived in the city under strict rules and regulations. They had to wear clothing in public that distinguished them as Jews—typically a circular yellow badge or hat—and were forbidden to own property or to marry Christians or have sexual relations with them. They were only allowed to practice certain professions, namely to work as doctors, money-lenders and vendors of used goods, and were kept physically separate from Christians on the island of the Ghetto. (The Ghetto was so called because it had previously been the site of an iron foundry, *getar* meaning 'to cast'.) The word 'ghetto', now used to mean any area of ethnic or racial confinement, represents a unique Venetian linguistic contribution to the history of violence and persecution in the West. Jews were required to return to the Ghetto at night where they were enclosed by a series of doors and drawbridges. Some claim that the windows on the first floor along the canals were even walled up to prevent night-time escapes. Others argue that since the growing number of Jews could not move to other islands, they were force to build upwards and construct buildings much taller than those found elsewhere in the city, often with their synagogues on top, which are still visible today. The Jewish population reached its height in 1630 with over 2,400 people living on this small island, which must have been extremely crowded. They lived under such cramped conditions until the end of the eighteenth century when Napoleon's threw open the Ghetto gates and allowed the Jew to live elsewhere in the city.

Source: Elizabeth Horodowich, *Brief History of Venice* (Running Press, 2009), 137-138.

Restrictions

1. When did Henry VIII convert England into a Protestant country?
2. What were his reasons for that conversion?
3. How long were Jews expelled from England?
4. How could a Jew remain in England after the year 1290?
5. Why is the converso a "haunting figure"?
6. When were full rights of citizenship restored to Jews in England?
7. What restrictions did Venetian Jews face in the sixteenth century?
8. Why were Venetian Jews useful to the state?
9. What prejudicial practices revealed in Venice in the sixteenth century continue today?

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Trade Wealth

Elizabeth Horodowich

For much of the Middle Ages there was a covered archway at the foot of the Rialto Bridge where merchants met to consider [the trade] routes and plan their voyages using a world map painted on the wall.

It took about a month to sail from Venice to Crete through most of the Middle Ages, about eight weeks to Constantinople and three months to Tana or Trebizond, though these times lessened as ships improved in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Trade in the opposite direction and cargo returning to Venice from the Mediterranean unloaded at the Rialto ['rivo alto' or high bank]. The Rialto, of course, was the commercial and mercantile heart of the city where barges from the mainland met incoming cargo from the sea. Ships carrying as much as 200 tons of cargo could come up the Grand Canal to unload, and the Rialto was a wooden drawbridge that allowed ships to pass under it for much of the Middle Ages. Unloaded cargo then followed a series of overland European trade routes, up rivers or over the Alps, through passages in Friuli towards Vienna and Cracow or through Brenner and Septimer passes towards Augsburg, Nuremberg and Ulm.

Venetians traded in a great variety of goods in different ports on the Mediterranean, but the bulk of their trade in the Middle Ages — and the greatest source of their profits — was in pepper, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and ginger, with spices being in high demand in Northern Europe. Even better, they were easily transported being light and not taking up too much space. They were incredibly valuable and relatively cheap to move. Furthermore, they did not spoil easily so merchants could keep them in warehouses or transport them over long distances without any risk of their rotting. They were the perfect cargo on which the Venetians could build a profitable empire. Though some of the spices came by overland routes from India, most of them were transported by ship into the Red Sea, to Jiddah, the port of Mecca on the Arabian peninsula, and then by camel to Damascus and Mediterranean ports including Acre and Jaffa. Alternatively, spices came via Egypt through the Red Sea port of Quseir and on to Alexandria. Pepper and ginger were the most in demand and the most profitable, and Venetians imported thousands of tons a year. By the middle of the fifteenth century Venetians were apparently importing as much as 5,000 tons of spices annually, and half of this in pepper and ginger. The volume of Venetian merchandise grew to approximate 10-12,000 tons in the fifteenth century. While these figures may not appear so great in terms of weight, we must keep in mind that the spices sold for a high price. One chronicler claimed that by the beginning of the fifteenth century the value of the cargo of an entire convoy in any given direction was about 250,000 gold ducats and could ever be double that depending on the cargo: a massive figure in the medieval economy when a salary of 15 or 20 ducats was enough for one family to live on rather well for a year.

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... dangerous rocks ... / Would scatter all her spices on the stream, / Enrobe the roaring waters with my silks —Salarino to Antonio

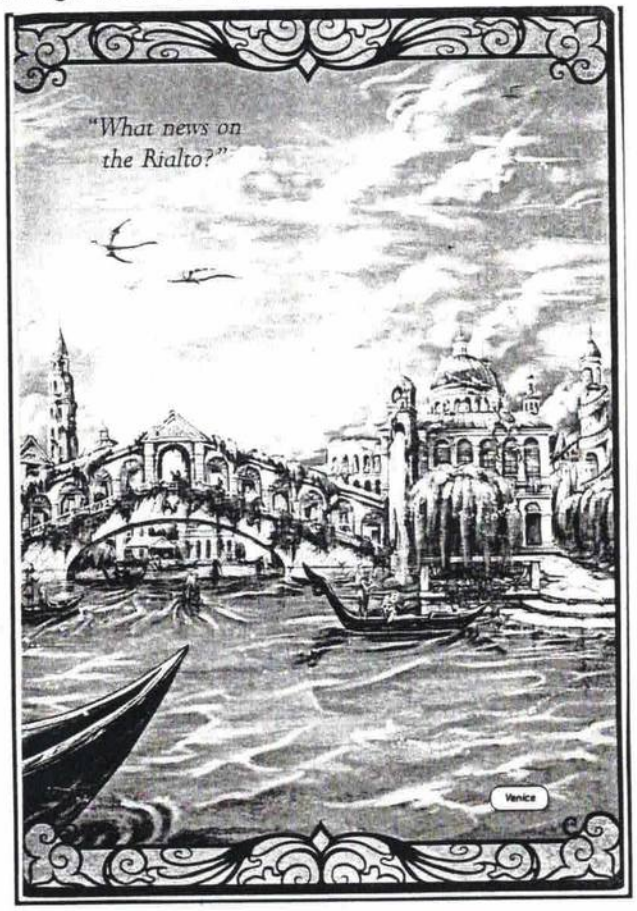
Trade Wealth (continued)

It is nearly impossible to overemphasize the role of spices in the history of Venice. Indeed, when we think about the city in a tangible and physical way — the construction of its streets, waterways, homes and churches, the commissioning of its art and architecture, and even the sewing of the clothes worn by Venetian men and women — much of this material culture was fundamentally built upon stone by stone or stitch by stitch from the income derived from spices. This so much the case that when we walk in the city and gaze upon Venice's medieval palaces and churches today, we can imagine each stone slab, brick and marble arch as purchased with the profits turned from cloves of ginger or pepper. Spices were the 'black gold' of the Middle Ages.

Other goods were also in demand and proved profitable for Venetian traders. A dazzling array of merchandise, including dyes, silks, carpets, gems, incense and cotton, was transported in both directions during the Middle Ages. Many of these luxury goods commanded extremely high prices, allowing merchants to double their capital investments. In Trebizond and Tana, for instance, Venetians found Eastern products, such as spices, silk and, more importantly, hemp for rope making in the shipbuilding industry, that were popular in Western markets. In addition, they traded in the Black Sea for slaves. Technically there was ecclesiastic legislation against enslaving Christians, but both Venetian and Genoese merchants regularly turned a blind eye to such regulations and carried nominally Christian slaves — primarily Russians and Tartars — from the Black Sea to Muslim ports in the greater Mediterranean....

Venetians made their profits in three ways. They sold products, such as glass, salt and soap. They managed to create monopoly markets where suppliers were either forced or strongly encouraged to sell their products only in the city of Venice, thereby placing Venice in control of both the supply and demand of products, such as salt and grain. And, for the most part, they had the monopoly as middlemen between Europe and the East. In the Adriatic Sea in particular they had a monopoly on all exchanges and, by the eleventh century, trade between any two cities in the Adriatic was permitted only in Venetian ships.

Source: Elizabeth Horodowich, *Brief History of Venice* (Running Press, 2009), 49-52.



The Merchant of Venice, illustrated by Faye Yong (Amulet Books, 2011), 11. (**Manga Shakespeare**)

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Reading Law and Ethnicity in the Manga *Merchant of Venice*



Figure 1. (C) SelfMadeHero, 2009. Illustrations by Faye Yong, Adapted by Richard Appignanesi

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First Impressions

From the following few lines for each character in the first act, give your opinion of that character.

ANTONIO

In sooth I know not why I am so sad.
It wearies me, you say it wearies you.

SALARIO

(Like signiors and rich burghers on the flood,
Or, as it were, the pageants of the sea)

SOLANIO

...Then let us say you are sad / Because you are not merry; and 'twere as easy /
For you to laugh and leap, and say you are merry / Because you are not sad.

GRATIANO

Let me play the fool.
With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come,
And let my liver rather heat with wine
Than my heart cool with mortifying groans.

LORENZO

I must be one of these same dumb wise men.
For Gratiano never lets me speak.

BASSANIO

Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing, more than any man in all Venice.

PORTIA

By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world.

NERISSA

And yet, for aught I see, they are as sick that surfeit with too much as they that starve with nothing.

SHYLOCK

But ships are but boards, sailors but men; there be land rats and water rats, water thieves and land thieves—I mean pirates—and then there is the peril of waters, winds, and rocks.

Sounds of Character
The rhythm and sound of words may reveal more about character than the literal interpretation of their words. There will be times when they are poetically iambic and other times when they are prosaically abrupt. What dictates the terms?

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Imaginative Language

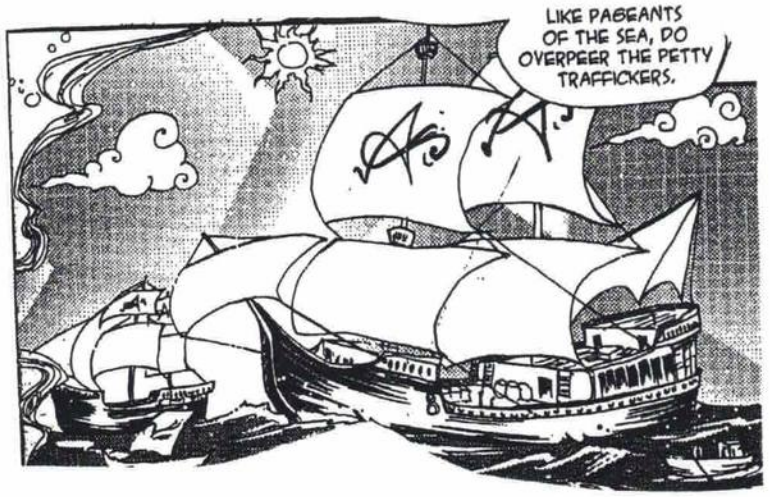
Compare the original text of the play with its prosaic translation.

Original Text

SALARINO

Your mind is tossing on the ocean,
There, where your argosies with portly sail,
Like signors and rich burghers on the flood—
Or, as it were, the pageants of the sea—
Do overpeer the petty traffickers
That curtsy to them, do them reverence
As they fly by them with their woven wings.
(I.1.8-14)

My wind cooling my broth
Would blow me to an ague when I thought
What harm a wind too great at sea might do.
I should not see the sandy hourglass run,
But I should think of shallows and of flats
And see my wealthy Andrews docked in sand,
Vailing her high top lower than her ribs
To kiss her burial. Should I go to church
And see the holy edifice of stone
And not bethink me straight of dangerous rocks,
Which, touching but my gentle vessel's side,
Would scatter all her spices on the stream,
Enrobe the roaring waters with my silks,
And, in a word, but even now worth this,
And now worth nothing? Shall I have the thought
To think on this, and shall I lack the thought
That such a thing bechanced would make me sad?
But tell not me. I know Antonio
Is sad to think upon his merchandise. (I.1.22-40)



Source: Manga Shakespeare, illustrated by Faye Yong *The Merchant of Venice* (Amulet, 2011).

Prosaic Translation

You're are worried about your ships. Your mind is out there getting tossed around on the ocean with them. But they're fine. They're like huge parade floats on the sea. They're so big they look down on the smaller ships, which all have to bow and then get out of the way. Your ships fly like birds past those little boats.

I'd get scared every time I blew on my soup to cool it, thinking of how a strong wind could wipe out my ships. Every time I glanced at the sand in an hourglass I'd imagine my ships wrecked on sandbars. I'd think of dangerous rocks ever time I went to church and saw the stones it was made of. If my ship brushed up against rocks like that, its whole cargo of spices would be dumped into the sea. All of its silk shipments would be sent flying into the roaring waters. In one moment I'd go bankrupt. Who wouldn't get sad thinking about things like that? It's obvious. Antonio is sad because he's so worried about his cargo.

Source: No Fear Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (Spark, 2003).

Lost in Translation

1. On a stage without special effects, what do Salarino's words give to the audience?
2. Reduce both passages to the fewest words possible without losing their intent.
3. Count the syllables in a few lines of the original text. How should an actor stress the syllables in the lines you have chosen?
4. How does Shakespeare keep the iambic rhythm from becoming monotonous?
5. Are Salarino's words in character, or are they meant only for visual embellishment?

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Plain Words

For the following passages, explain how the words and sentences suit the situation in which they are used.

SHYLOCK

Ho, no, no, no, no; my meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that he is sufficient. Yet his means are in supposition: he hath an argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies; I understand moreover, upon the Rialto, he hath a third at Mexico, a fourth to England, and other ventures he hath squandered abroad. But ships are but boards, sailors but men: there be land-rats and water-rats, water-thieves—I mean pirates—and then there is the peril of waters, winds, and rocks. The man is, notwithstanding, sufficient. Three thousand ducats; I think I may take his bond. (I.3.13-25)

SHYLOCK [Aside]

How like a fawning publican he looks!
I hate him for he is a Christian;
But more for that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis, and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.
If I can catch him once upon the hip,
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
He hates our sacred nation, and he rails,
Even there where merchants most do congregate,
On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,
Which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe,
If I forgive him! (I.3.37-48)

Business First

1. Contrast the two passages, and explain how the situation shapes Shylock's language.
2. Why does his language change when he moves into private thought?
3. Why are 'asides' and 'soliloquies' useful stage conventions?
4. What do we learn about Shylock (and Antonio) from the aside?
5. What would be lost to the play if this aside passage was deleted?

Sounds of Malice

Mark Van Doren

The voice of Shylock comes rasping into the play like a file; the edge of it not only cuts but tears, not only slices but saws. He is always repeating phrases, half to himself, as misers do—hoarding them if they are good, unwilling to give them wings so that they may spend themselves generously in the free air of mutual talk. They are short phrases; niggardly, ugly, curt. They are a little hoarse from their hoarding, a little rusty with disuse. And the range of their sound is from the strident to the rough, from the scratchy to the growled. The names of animals are natural to his tongue, which knows for the most part only concrete things, and crackles with reminders of brute matter.... Land-rats and water-rats: the very sound of the words announces their malice, confesses the satisfaction with which their speaker has cursed them as they left his lips. He will go on in the play to remind us of the cur, the goat, the pig, the cat, the ass, the monkey, and the mule.

Source: Mark Van Doren, *Shakespeare* (Anchor, 1953), 84-85.

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Elusive Allusions

Tell the whole story behind the classical names.

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 undervalu'd
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's Colchi's strand,
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.

(I.1.161-176)

Dark Side

Every story, no matter how adumbrated, usually leaves something out. The happy quest for the Golden Fleece that Bassanio alludes to, hides a hideous tale of betrayal, revenge, and murder. Shakespeare's audience, unlike us, were probably aware of the sad consequences of Jason's quest. In short, never take an allusion at face value.

JASON

A celebrated hero, son of Æson and Alcimedes. His education was entrusted to the Centaur Chiron. The greatest feat recorded of him is his voyage in the Argo to Colchis to obtain the Golden Fleece, which, aided by Juno, he succeeded in doing. Medea, daughter of Ætes, king of Cochis, fell in love with Jason. She was a powerful magician, and on Jason having vowed eternal fidelity to her, she gave him charms to protect him from danger. After securing the Fleece, Jason set sail from the country with his wife Medea.

After some years he became enamoured with Glauce, daughter of Creon, king of Corinth, whom he married, having divorced Medea. This cruel act was revenged by Medea, who destroyed her children in the presence of their father. Jason is said to have been killed by a beam which fell on his head as he was reposing by the side of the ship which had borne him to Colchis.

Source: *Handy Classical Dictionary* (Asprey), 59.

The Quest of the Golden Fleece

The first hero in Europe who undertook a great journey was the leader of the Quest of the Golden Fleece. He was supposed to have lived a generation earlier than the most famous Greek traveler, the hero of the *Odyssey*. It was of course a journey by water. Rivers, lakes, and seas, were the only highways; there were no roads. All the same, a voyager had to face perils not only on the deep, but on the land as well. Ships did not sail by night, and any place where sailors put in might harbor a monster or a magician who could work more deadly harm than storm and shipwreck. High courage was necessary to travel, especially outside of Greece.

No story proved this fact better than the account of what the heroes suffered who sailed in the ship *Argo* to find the Golden Fleece. It may be doubted, indeed, if there ever was a voyage on which sailors had to face so many and such varied dangers. However, they were all heroes of renown, some of them the greatest in Greece, and they were quite equal to their adventures.

Source: Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (Mentor, 1969), 117-118.

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Satirical Sketches

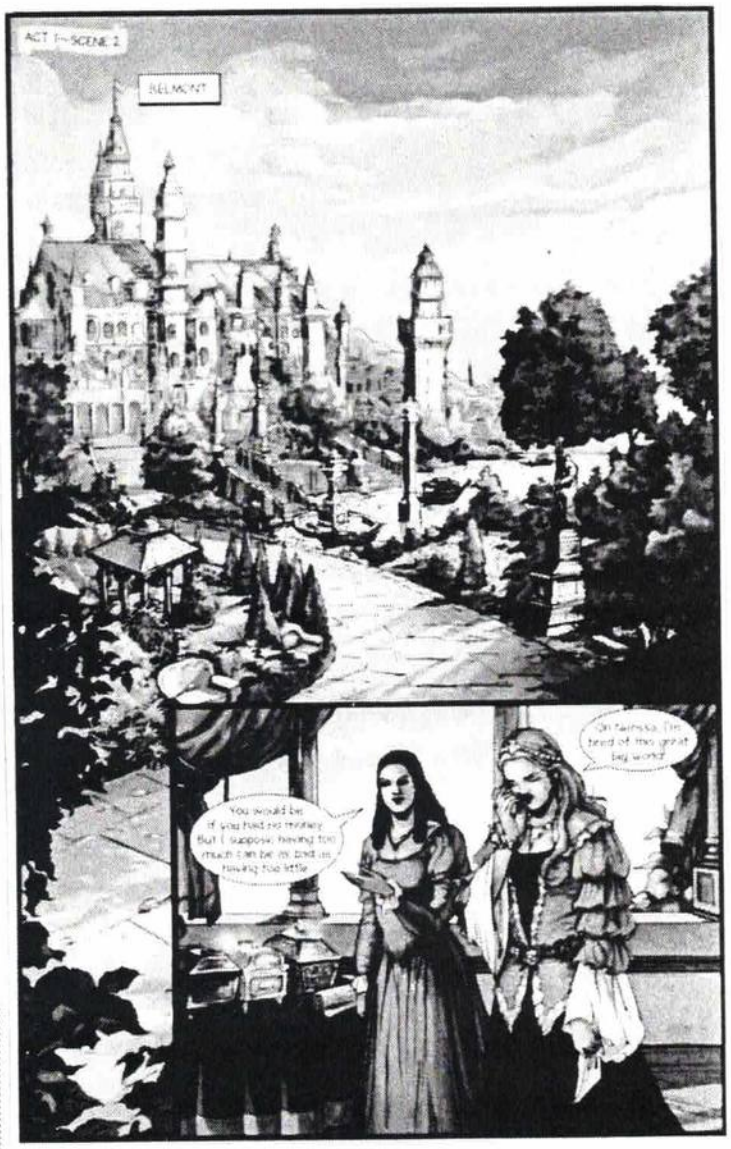
From Portia's description of any of her potential suitors, draw or paste a face that would match her description.

NERISSA
How like you the young German, the Duke of Saxony's nephew?

PORTIA
Very vilely in the morning, when he is sober, and most vilely in the afternoon, when he is drunk: when he is best, he is a little worse than a man, and when he is worst, he is little better than a beast. And the worst fall that ever fell, I hope I shall make shift to go without him.

NERISSA
If he should offer to choose, and choose the right casket, you should refuse to perform your father's will, if you should refuse to accept him.

PORTIA
Therefore, for fear of the worst, I pray thee, set a deep glass of Rhenish wine on the contrary casket, for, if the devil be within and that temptation without, I know he will choose it. I will do anything, Nerissa, ere I will be married to a sponge.



Campfire Classic of *The Merchant of Venice*



Replace this portrait with one of your own.

Romantic Preferences

1. Following Portia's satirical style, write a funny portrait of a former boy or girlfriend.
2. Though humor exaggerates, must it be cruel?
3. Why are obsessions (for horses, mood, dress, fencing, or drink) fair game for satire?
4. Nerissa and Portia act like a comedy team. How does one set up the other?
5. Find evidence that Portia knows the right answer to her father's riddle.
6. Write a satirical portrait of Bassanio to warn Portia of his spending habits.
7. Why is it necessary not to generalize the traits of one into the traits of all?

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A Second World

In *The Merchant of Venice* the second world takes the form of Portia's mysterious house in Belmont, with its magic caskets.... —Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*

Death in Venice

Harry Berger, Jr.

The Merchant of Venice represents "Venice" as the site of polyglot cultural activity, a trading center that brings together people of different origins. Insiders mingle with outsiders, Christians with Jews and Moors, merchants and moneylenders with soldiers, servants, aristocrats, and rulers. Their relations with each other are intimately affected by the fortunes floating on their flotillas far from home and by the news or gossip about these flotillas that travels through town. Consequently, as a system of inheritance, alliance, and exchange, Shakespeare's Venice is both ordered and embarrassed by overlapping racial, social, religious, and economic boundaries that are permeable, that invite transgression, and that are affected by remote events.

As W.H. Auden describes it, Venice is "inhabited by various communities with different loves...who do not regard each other personally as brothers, but must tolerate each other's existence." Like most commentators, Auden emphasizes the incompatibility of "the romantic fairy story of Belmont" and "the historical reality of money-making Venice," but he differs at one point when he insists the play compels us "to acknowledge that the attraction which we naturally feel toward Belmont is highly questionable." For this reason "*The Merchant of Venice* must be classed among Shakespeare's 'Unpleasant Plays.'"

I don't think this standard distinction between Belmont and Venice cuts very deep. The themes of property and inheritance affect both Portia's story and Jessica's with equal force. If anything, Belmont is a kind of marriage entrepôt, a place for the temporary deposit of suitors who come to exchange their self-respect for "a lady richly left."

"Politically speaking," Auden writes of the level of society represented in *Merchant*, "the more advanced the social organization, the greater the moral demands it makes upon its members and the greater degree of guilt which they incur if they fail to meet these demands." In the light of the preceding account, Auden's statement can be improved by replacing "guilt" with "embarrassment."

Source: Harry Berger, Jr., *A Fury in the Words* (Fordham, 2013), 80-81.

Green World

Northrop Frye

Shakespeare's type of romantic comedy follows a tradition established by Greene and Lyly, which has affinities with the medieval tradition of the seasonal ritual-play. We may call it the the drama of the green world, its plot being assimilated to the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the waste land. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* the hero Valentine becomes captain of a band of outlaws in a forest, and all the other characters are gathered into this forest and become converted. Thus the action of the comedy begins in a world represented as a normal world, moves into the green world, goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world. The forest in this play is the embryonic form of the fairy world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It*...and the pastoral world of the mythical sea-coasted Bohemia in *The Winter's Tale*. In all these comedies there is the same rhythmic movement from normal world to green world and back again. In the *Merchant of Venice* the second world takes the form of Portia's mysterious house in Belmont, with its magic caskets....

Source: Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), 182-183.

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Belmont

1. Where is Belmont?
2. How 'green' is Belmont? Does it belong in a fairy tale?
3. Why could Belmont be considered a gated community today?
4. How safe is wealth in Belmont?
5. Can the conditions of the lottery protect Portia's endowment?
6. Has Portia's father devised a realistic 'law for the blood'?
7. What is Portia's father protecting?
8. Compare Venice and Belmont. What is the fundamental difference?
9. Where would you prefer to live? Why?
10. How does money shape both worlds?
11. 'Belmont is a kind of marriage entrepôt.' Or is it more like a casino of love?
12. Select one of the following proverbs that you like best, and give your reason:
    a) It is a good divine that follows his own instructions. b) The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree. c) Such a hare is madness (the youth), to skip o'er the meshes of good counsel (the cripple).
13. Change LEAD into GOLD by changing one letter at a time: If you start with HEAD it may take four words. You could do it in three if you start with LOAD.
14. Can love turn lead into gold?
15. Is love a prejudicial passion?

Alchemy as Metaphor

Harold C. Goddard

The metaphor that underlies and unifies *The Merchant of Venice* is that of alchemy, the art of transforming the base into the precious, lead into gold. Everything comes back to that. Only the symbols are employed in a double sense, one worldly and one spiritual. By a kind of illuminating confusion, gold is lead and lead is gold, the base precious and the precious base. Portia had a chance to effect the great transformation—and failed. But she is not the only one. Gold, silver, and lead in one, the play subjects every reader or spectator to a test, or, shall we say, offers every reader or spectator the same opportunity Portia had. Choose—it says—at your peril. This play anti-Semitic? Why, yes, if you find it so. Shakespeare certainly leaves you free, if you wish, to pick the golden casket. But you may thereby be revealing more of yourself than of his play.

Source: Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, Volume 1 (Phoenix Books, 1951), 115.



Citing Scripture

Research the Biblical passages that are referred to in Act I, Scene 3.

SHYLOCK

When Jacob grazed his uncle Laban's sheep—
This Jacob from our holy Abram was,
As his wise mother wrought in his behalf,
The third possessor, ay, he was the third—
(I.3.67-70)

Old Testament

18 And Jacob loved Rachel; and said, "I will serve thee seven years for Rachel thy younger daughter.

19 And Laban said, *It is* better that I give her to thee, than that I should give her to another man: abide with me.

20 And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him *but* a few days, for the love he had for her.

21 And Jacob said unto Laban, Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in unto her.

22 And Laban gathered together all the men of the place, and made a feast.

23 And it came to pass in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in unto her.

24 And Laban gave unto his daughter Leah Zilpah his maid for an handmaid.

25 And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it was Leah: and he said to Laban, What is this thou has done unto me? did not I serve with thee for Rachel? wherefore then hast thou beguiled me?

26 And Laban said, It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn.

27 Fulfil her week, and we will give thee this also for the service which thou shalt serve with me yet seven other years.

28 And Jacob did so, and fulfilled her week: and he gave him Rachel his daughter to wife also. (*Genesis* 29:18-28)

Source: *The Holy Bible* (Cambridge Press), 39.

JACOB AND LABAN

When it was time for Jacob to return home with his two wives, Leah and Rachel, he agreed with Laban, his father-in-law, to take "all the speckled and spotted cattle" and goats as his share. Then "Jacob took him rods of green poplar...and pilled white strakes in them...." And when the flocks came in to the watering troughs to drink, Jacob held the rods before the stronger cattle. "And the flocks conceived before the rods, and brought forth cattle ringstraked, speckled, and spotted." So "the feebler were Laban's, and the stronger Jacob's. And the man increased exceedingly, and had much cattle...." (*Genesis* 30:25-43)

Source: W.B. Fulghum, Jr., *A Dictionary of Biblical Allusions in English Literature* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 121.

Biblical Analogy

1. From your research, how did Jacob's mother deceive her husband Isaac?
2. Jacob's 'wise mother' (Rebecca) deceived her husband and Laban deceived Jacob. Find deception in Shylock's analogy.
3. What is an analogy? Does similarity prove identity?
4. Analogies do break down. Was Jacob's rod trick an act of thrift or deception?
5. If a 'devil can cite Scripture for his purpose,' does this make Shylock a devil?
6. How does Antonio 'bedevil' Shylock?
7. How does Antonio's behaviour deprive Shylock of his livelihood?
8. Murder or castration: Where will Shylock extract his pound of flesh?
9. Is this bond just a merry deception?

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What is a Complexion?

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. (I.2.127-131)

MOROCCO

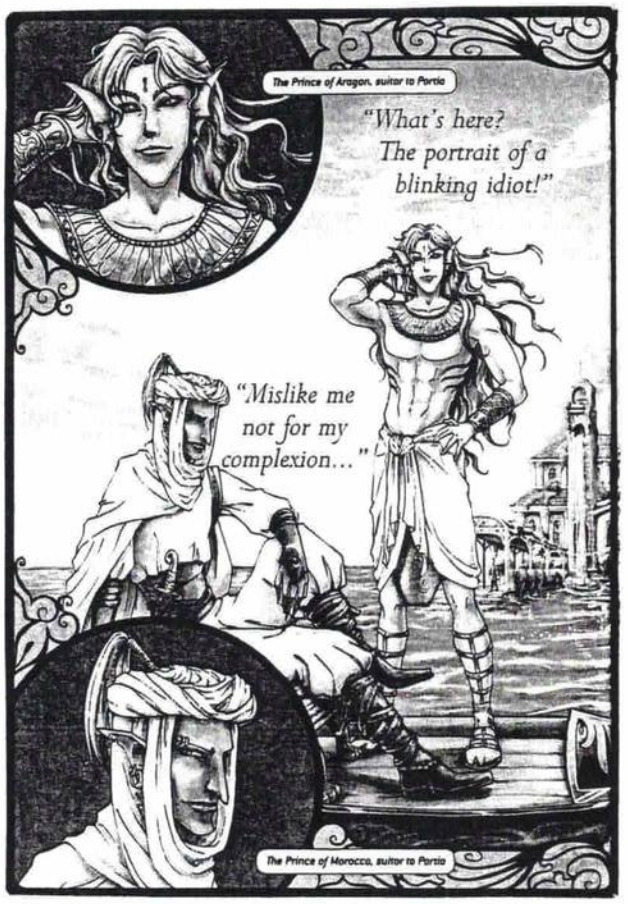
Mislike me not for my complexion,
The shadow'd livery of the burnish'd sun,
To whom I am a neighbour, and near bred.
Bring me the fairest creature northward born,
Where Phoebus' fire scarce thaws the icicles,
And let us make incision of your love,
To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine.
I tell thee, lady, this aspect of mine
Hath fear'd the valieant: by my love, I swear
The best regarded virgins of our clime
Have lov'd it too: I would not change this hue,
Except to steal your thoughts, my gentle queen.
(II.1.1-12)

PORTIA

A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go.
Let all of his complexion choose me so.
(II.7.86-87)

Character

1. Is character fate? Comment.
2. Find evidence that the Prince of Morocco is a proud man.
3. Find evidence of his pride of complexion.
4. Does Morocco believe in Fortune? Why is it easy to blame Fortune for our fate?
5. What words in his speeches reveal the probable choice he will make?
6. Find evidence that Portia has preferences.
7 Are her eyes directed by appearances?



Portia

We meet her first in Bassanio's description and it is not easy to determine whether the order of his praise reflects upon her qualities or his own.... Bassanio had partly concealed his fundamental seeking of wealth under the inflated image of the Golden Fleece. Morocco is both more elaborate and more direct....Our discomfort in the scene of Morocco's choice arises in part from our intuition that his words alone make the correct equation of Portia with wealth which is latent in the quest of all the suitors and not least Bassanio....

In the first three Acts the heiress of Belmont may be seen in an almost wholly romantic light as a corrective to the darker tones of Venice–*almost* wholly romantic, for even here there are both conscious and unconscious ironies in the characterization and a curious echo of the material cupidity of the Venetians.

Source: *The Merchant of Venice*, Introduction (Penguin, 1995), 50-54.

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Comic Confusions

LANCELET. Editors almost always change this name to "Lancelot," but it appears as "Lancelet" or "Launcelet" throughout the First Quarto and the First Folio. Since "lancelet" means a "small lance" (a small weapon or man-at-arms), we see no reason to change the name.

Folger edition of *The Merhant of Venice*

LANCELET

Well, the most courageous fiend bids me pack. "Fia!" says the fiend....
I should be ruled by the fiend, who (saving your reverence) is the devil himself. Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation....The fiend gives the more friendly counsel. I will run, fiend. My heels are at your commandment. I will run. (II.2.9-31)

(aside) O heavens, this is my true begotten father, who being more than sandblind, high gravelblind, knows me not. I will try confusions with him. (II.2.34-36)

LANCELET

But I pray you, *ergo*, old man, *ergo*, I beseech you, talk you of young Master Lancelet?

GOBBO

Of Lancelet, an't please your membership.

LANCELET

Ergo, Master Lancelet. Talk not of Master Lancelet, father, for the young gentleman, according to Fates and Destinies, and such odd sayings, the Sisters Three, and such branches of learning, is indeed deceased, or, as you would say in plain terms, gone to heaven.

GOBBO

Marry, God forbid! The boy was the very staff of my age, my very prop.

LANCELET

(aside) Do I look like a cudgel or a hovel-post, a staff or a prop?—do you know me father?...

Nay, indeed, if you had your eyes, you might fail of the knowing me. It is a wise father that knows his own child.

(II.2.55-75)



Despite the youthful cut to his garb, this fellow is at least 530 years old. He's Lancelot, one of the oldest surviving cards, printed from hand-carved wooden blocks in France around the 1440s.

Word Play

1. Find examples of word play between father (Gobbo) and son (Lancelet).
2. What is a malaprop? Find one.
3. What is a pun? Find one.
4. What is meant to be comical in Lancelet's use of foreign words?
5. Why is "high-gravel-blind" probably Lancelet's own invention?
6. How does Lancelet change the meaning of the proverb: "It is a wise child that know his own father."?
7. What slap-stick comedy is added to the word play in this scene?
8. Find a partner to act out this scene with you. Try to memorize as much as you can.
9. Language pretension is a sign of reaching for status and sophistication. Why is it both rich in humour and a noble pursuit?

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Elizabethan English

G.D. Willcock

Shakespeare's plays not only harvest the linguistic wealth of this [Elizabethan] period of expansion, but reveal also, especially the comedies, a linguistic consciousness. This prompts the speculation whether it is possible to trace among the late Elizabethans, as well as a rich sense of language, some unacademic factors at work, reaching even the more or less illiterate and uniting them in a common interest. One such factor must have been the widely diffused love of music, especially of singing. John Dowland's and other song-books demonstrate a capacity of lyrical composition far outside the ranks of identifiable poets, and in addition there was the whole body of genuinely popular folk-song and ballad. Any one who had by heart half-a-dozen representative songs had the root of the matter in him; he had a touchstone by which to gauge poetic rhythm and speech.

But, above all, the Elizabethan had to be a good listener; the more illiterate he was, the more he was forced to train his ear. There was little cheap print, and even the broadside was useless to the man who could not read. He absorbed the grisly details of the latest murder or the progress of some popular agitation from the lips of someone better informed or more imaginative than himself. There must have been such derangement of epitaphs among the Dogberry and Dame Quickly class in town and country. It is the inevitable result of hearing long words and never seeing them.

Malapropism in characters like Dogberry and the clown or yokel in *Love's Labour's Lost* [or Lancelet in *The Merchant of Venice*] is not a mere stage trick; it rests upon a difference in literacy between those days and these. The eager manner in which words were picked up shows the same acquisitiveness in the clowns as in their betters. Though they lived mainly upon the alms-basket of other people's words, if they found themselves at a feast of languages they stole the scraps: "Remuneration! O, that's the Latin word for three farthings...why it is a fairer name than French crown. I will never buy and sell out of this word" (*Love's Labour Lost,* III, i, 130-5*)*.

Punning and verbal acrobatics show the same eager attention to words on the part of all classes. According to Feste one of the functions of high-class clowning was the corruption of words—*i.e*. the audacious or humorous abuse of them—and the turning of sentences inside-out like 'cheveril gloves'. The trained jester had to keep his society jargon up-to-date and to know when *welkin* came in and *element* went out. He had to be ready with every sort of quip or quibble. In the theatres, too, the same sort of verbal wit passed current; otherwise dramatists would hardly have toiled so painfully at "...a practice / As full of labour as a wise man's art" (*Twelfth Night*, III, i, 69-70).

People loved, then, to follow words; they were also trained to listen strenuously. There is no comparison, between their listening and our short-flighted 'listening-in'. Large numbers stood in the open air for two hours or more listening in the theatres; they also stood listening to sermons at Paul's Cross and elsewhere; if they sat, they sat on stools or hard benches in unheated churches while coughing drowned the parson's saw. In many schools and homes young people were required to recapitulate on Monday Sunday's discourse. A conscientious and eloquent preacher would expect to hold his congregation for an hour.

Source: G.D. Willcock, "Shakespeare and Elizabethan English" in *A Companion to Shakespeare Studies,* eds. Harley Granville-Barker and G.B. Harrison (Anchor, 1960), 129-130.

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Parental Relations

Father and Son

GOBBO

Alack the day, I know you not, young gentleman. But I pray you tell me, is my boy, God rest his soul, alive or dead?

LANCELET

Do you not know me, father?

GOBBO

Alack, sir, I am sandblind. I know you not.

LANCELET

Nay, indeed, if you had your eyes, you might fail of the knowing me. It is a wise father that knows his own child. Well, old man, I will tell you news of your son. [*Kneels*] Give me your blessing: truth will come to light; murder cannot be hid long; a man's son may, but in the end, truth will out.

GOBBO

Pray you, sir, stand up. I am sure you are not Lancelet, my boy.

LANCELET

Pray you, let's have no more fooling about it, but give me your blessing. I am Lancelet, your boy that was, your son that is, your child that shall be.

GOBBO

I cannot think you are my son.

LANCELET

I know not what I shall think of that; but I am Lancelet, the Jew's man, and I am sure Margery your wife is my mother.

GOBBO

Her name is Margery, indeed. I'll be sworn if thou be Lancelet, thou art mine own flesh and blood. Lord worshiped might He be, what a beard hast thou got! Thou hast got more hair on thy chin than Dobbin my fill-horse has on his tail. (II.2.68-94)

Isaac and Jacob

In time, when Isaac grew old and his eyes dimmed, he called for Esau his eldest son and said:

"My son."

"Here, sir."

"You see how old I am and there's no telling when I may die. Go into the wild with your gear and hunt me some venison. Then prepare me my favorite festive dish and bring it to me to eat so that I can bless you with my very particular blessing before I die."

Rebecca overheard what Isaac said to his son Esau, and as soon as Esau had left for the wild to hunt venison for his father, she said to her son Jacob, "Listen, I have just heard your father say to Esau, 'Fetch me some venison and make me a special dinner so that when I have eaten it I can give you my blessing, endorsed by the Lord, before I die.' Now my son, pay attention to what I tell you. Go to the flock and bring me two choice kids. I shall prepare them in your father's favorite festive dish, which you can take to him and get him to bless you before he dies."

"But my brother Esau is a hairy man and I am smooth," Jacob said to his mother. "What if my father feels me? He will think I am making a fool of him and I shall bring down a curse on me, not a blessing."

"I'll take care of the curse," his mother replied. "Just listen to what I say and go and get them."

He went, picked them out, and brought them to his mother. She prepared the special dish his father was fond of. Then Rebecca took out some of Esau's best clothes, which she had in the house, and put them on Jacob her youngest son, covering his hands and the smooth of his neck with the kid skins. Then she put in his hands the special dish and the bread she had prepared, and he went in to his father. »

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Parental Relations

Isaac and Jacob (continued)

"Father, he said.

"Yes which son are you?"

"I am Esau your eldest. I did what you told me. So sit up, sir, please, and have some of my venison, then you can give me your blessing."

"But how did you come upon it so quickly, my son?" Isaac asked.

"Yahweh your God put it in my way," he answered.

Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come closer, my son, I want to feel you and see whether you really are my son Esau or not."

Jacob came up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau."

He did not detect him because of his hairy hands like his brother Esau's. Before he blessed him, however, he asked again, "Are you really my son Esau?"

"Yes, I am," Jacob replied.

"Then put the dish down by me," he said, "and let me eat my son's venison and afterward give you my very particular blessing."

(Genesis 27: 1-25)

Source: Paul Roche, *The Bible's Greatest Stories* (Mentor, 1990), 33-34.



Menorah, Jewish ceremonial candelabrum

Serious Comedy

1. What religious references appear in the scene between Lancelet and Gobbo?
2. Would an Elizabethan audience be aware of the story of Isaac and Jacob? If so, would they see its relevance to the play?
3. In your opinion, is the 'hair' episode in the play a parody of Isaac's blindness?
4. Why do you think Rebecca (Isaac's wife) preferred Jacob over Esau? Speculate!
5. Knowing the Isaac story, how does the proverb 'It is a wise father that knows his own child' take on new meaning?
6. Why does it take a wise child to know his own father?
7. Why is Isaac often compared with Christ?
8. How does the conception of Christ cast a paternal shadow over his birth?
9. What do Lancelet's jokes about infidelity add to the meaning of the play?
10. What would be lost if the comic scene were removed from the play?
11. How important is the theme of blindness in the play so far?
12. Why can we be 'blinded' by gold and silver, or even a pretty face?
13. How 'blind' are the Christians to the lives of outsiders, such as Shylock?
14. William James said that we are all blind "to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves." Is that true of all the characters in the play?
15. With blindness goes deception. Find examples of deceit throughout the play.

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Parental Relations

Father and Daughter

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.
(II.3.16-19)

SHYLOCK

What, are there masques? Hear you me, Jessica:
Lock up my doors, when you hear the drum
And the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife,
Clamber not you up to the casements then,
Nor thrust your head into the public street
To gaze on Christian fools with varnished faces,
But stop my house's ears (I mean my casements).
Let not the sound of shallow fopp'ry enter
My sober house. By Jacob's staff I swear
I have no mind of feasting forth tonight;
But I will go. Go you before me, sirrah;
Say I will come.

LANCELET

I will go before, sir. [*Aside to Jessica*] Mistress, look out at window for all this:
There will come a Christian by
Will be worth a Jewess' eye. *He exits.*

SHYLOCK

What says the fool of Hagar's offspring, ha?

JESSICA

His words were "Farewell, mistress," nothing else.

SHYLOCK

The patch is kind enough, but a huge feeder;
Snail-slow in profit, and he sleeps by day
More than the wild cat. Drones hive not with me.
Therefore I part with him, and part with him
To one that I would have him help to waste
His borrow'd purse. Well, Jessica, go in.
Perhaps I will return immediately.
Do as I bid you; shut doors after you.
Fast bind, fast find—
A proverb never stale in thrifty mind. *He exits.*

JESSICA

Farewell, and if my fortune be not crossed,
I have a father, you a daughter, lost. *She exits.*
(II.5.29-58)

Alienation

1. From the excerpt provided, describe the relationship of Jessica and her father.
2. What does she say to him?
3. How many words does she express to her father in this scene?
4. What reveals that Shylock is not a wise father who knows his own child?
5. What is Shylock's main concern?
6. Why is Shylock probably right, that fools wearing masks are not to be trusted?
7. Find evidence that Shylock is not fond of music, or of a particular kind of music.
8. Who represent the contrasting worlds of sobriety and festivity?
9. Which world would you run to? And why?
10. What are the virtues of thrift and waste?



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Parental Relations

Blood Relations

Janet Adelman

Lancelot plays out this guilt-ridden relation to Judaism when his own father appears onstage. And Gobbo himself stands in for the contradiction in the Christian figuration of Judaism. He can so easily substitute for Shylock, I suggest, because his blindness is typologically allied with the often-alleged blindness of Judaism, and yet he is the bearer of those prototypically Christian doves. Like Isaac, whose role he takes on as he plays deceived father to his disguised son, he is simultaneously Jew and Christian: for the blind old Jew Isaac carries the promise of the Christian seed in his lineage and is typologically a figure for Christ. Act 2, scene 2, thus encodes the sameness and difference that haunts Christianity's relation to its Jewish lineage: Lancelot's encounter with his father condenses not only anxieties about Christianity's originary deception of the father but also anxieties about its radical dependence on Jewish origins that must always be simultaneously embraced and denied, reminding us that the double figure of Isaac—archetypical Jew and type of Christ, betrayed father and bearer of the promise—will always shadow Christianity.

Through his encounter with Gobbo, Lancelot can simultaneously deny the father-Jew in Isaac and embrace Isaac as the bearer of Christianity, and he can complete his turn from Jew to Christian only by means of this complexly displaced negotiation. But an odd piece of by play when he and his father first meet suggests that he can never entirely leave the Jew's house after all. "Which is the way to Master Jew's?" Gobbo asks, and Lancelot answers him, "Turn up on your right hand...." "Turn" is of course at the root of *conversion*; and the obsessive repetition here would seem to confirm that conversion is indeed on Shakespeare's mind....

After the many turnings of 2.2, we finally arrive at Shylock's house in 2.3, and we find therein another would-be convert. Lancelot's escape from that house serves as a necessary prelude to Jessica's, a comic warding off of the anxiety that might otherwise be provoked by reading conversion as a betrayal of the father-Jew: for only Jessica can say "my father Jew" and mean it literally, and only she must literally leave the Jew's house in order to convert. In fact, the story that Lancelot enacts as he leaves that house turns up in a more attenuated form in Jessica's conversion, as though Shakespeare could not quite suppress the anxiety that story of stolen blessings expressed: when Jessica disguises herself, deceives her father, and steals her patrimony, she too enacts a shadowy version of Jacob's theft and therefore of the passing of the promise from Jew to Christian. But she enacts Lancelot's story of conversion with a difference....

Lancelot's conversion entails his disclaiming one "father" in order to claim the blessing of another. When Lancelot tells Jessica that she cannot be saved as long as Shylock is her father, he literalizes the terms of the conversion that he has enacted in 2.2: she too cannot become a Christian without changing fathers. But as Jessica points out, Lancelot is forgetting the place of the mother in his "hope" for her salvation, for Lancelot's solution can save her only by invoking the infidelity of her mother....

Marriage appears to occur to Jessica largely as a way to escape her father's blood.... Romance conventions would lead us to expect her to convert in order to marry, but the rhetorical weight of this speech moves in the opposite direction, suggesting that she would marry in order to convert.

Source: Janet Adelman, *Blood Relations* (Chicago, 2008), 64-71.

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Comic Cruelty

SOLANIO

I never heard a passion so confus'd,
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 sealèd bag, two sealèd 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 of 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. (II.8.12-27)



The ducat—the most trusted and widely used coin in Venetian trade—was minted of about three and a half grams of gold and stamped with sacred images. This specimen shows Saint Mark presenting his standard to the kneeling Francesco Foscari, Doge from 1423 to 1457. Christ is depicted on the other side.

Trash Talk

1. Speculate why Shakespeare chose to show Shylock's misfortune indirectly through the eyes of others.
2. When is someone else's misery humorous for you?
3. How do the two characters in this scene reveal as much about themselves as they do about Shylock?
4. What other purpose do these characters serve in the play?
5. For you, does this scene create more or less sympathy for Shylock? Why?
6. Shylock is called 'dog' and Antonio, 'kind'. Are these words reliable and fair?
7. Why may your view of each character change as the play progresses?
8. Does Shakespeare take sides in this scene? Or is his intention concealed?

Trust the Tale

Intentional fallacy, the name given to the widespread assumption that an author's declared or supposed intention in writing a work is the proper basis for deciding on the meaning and the value of that work. In their 1946 essay, critics [W.K. Wimsatt Jr and M.C. Beardsley] argue that a literary work, once published, belongs in the public realm of language, which gives it an objective existence distinct from the author's original idea of it: 'The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public.' Thus any information or surmise we may have about the author's intention cannot in itself determine the work's meaning or value, since it still has to be verified against the work itself. Many other critics have pointed to the unreliability of authors as witnesses to the meanings of their own works, which often have significances wider than their intentions in composing them: as D.H. Lawrence wrote in (1923), 'Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.'

Source: Christ Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford, 1990),110-111.

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Shylock

Elmer Edgar Stoll

We know that the poet is not with Shylock, for on that point, in this play as in every other, the impartial, inscrutable poet leaves little to suggestion or surmise. As is his custom elsewhere, by the comments of the good characters, by the methods pursued in the disposition of scenes, and by the downright avowals of soliloquy, he constantly sets us right.

As for the first of these artifices, all the people who come in contact with Shylock except Tubal—among them being those of his own house, his servant and his daughter—have a word or two to say on the subject of his character, and never a good one. And in the same breath they spend on Bassanio and Antonio, his enemies, nothing but words of praise....

As for the second artifice, the ordering of the scenes is such as to enforce this contrast. Launcelot and Jessica, in separate scenes, are introduced before Shylock reaches home, that, hearing their story, we may side with them, and, when the old curmudgeon appears, may be moved to laughter as he complains of Launcelot's gormandizing, sleeping, and rending apparel out. Still more conspicuous is this care when Shylock laments over his daughter and his ducats. Lest then by any chance a stupid or tender-hearted audience should not laugh but grieve, Solanio reports his outcries —in part word for word— two scenes in advance, as a matter of mirth to himself and all the boys in Venice.

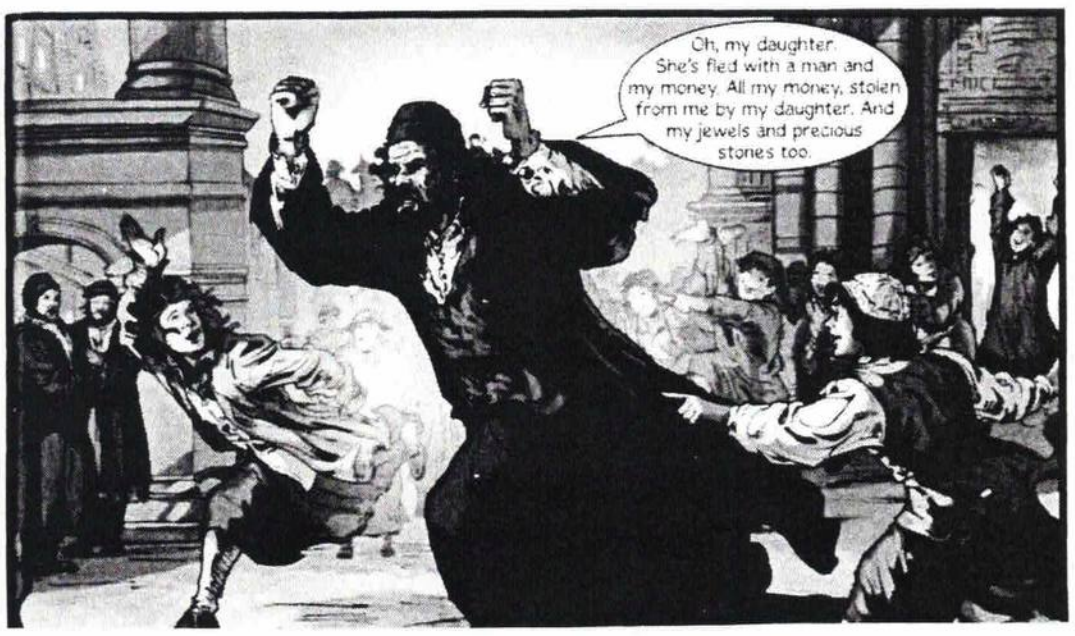
As for the third artifice, that a sleepy audience may not make the mistake of the cautious critic and take the villain for the hero, Shakespeare is at pains to label the villain by an aside at the moment the hero appears on the Boards:

> I hate him for he is a Christian,
> But more for that in low simplicity
> He lends out money gratis, and brings down
> The rate of usance here with us in Venice.

Those are his motives, later confessed repeatedly and either one brands him a villain more unmistakably in that day than in ours.

Only twice does Shakespeare seem to follow Shylock's pleadings and reasonings with any sympathy—"Hath a dog money?" is the first scene in which he appears, and "Hath not a Jew eyes?" in the third act—but a bit too much has been made of this. Either plea ends in such fashion as to alienate the audience. To Shylock's reproaches the admirable Antonio, "one of the gentlest and humblest of all men...," praised and honored by everyone but Shylock, retorts, secure in his virtue, that he is just as like to spit on him and spurn him again. And Shylock's celebrated justification of his race runs headlong into a justification of his villainy: "The villainy which you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction."

Source: *The Merchant of Venice* (Signet, 1987), 158-9.



Taunting of Shylock in Campfire Classic of *The Merchant of Venice*

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Doggerel Style

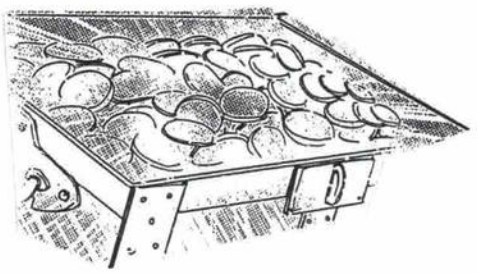
MOROCCO *opens the golden casket*

MOROCCO (Act 2, Scene 7)

Oh hell, what have we here?
A carrion of death, within whose empty eye
There is a written scroll. I'll read the writing.

All that glisters is not gold—
Often have you heard that told.
Many a man his life hath sold
But my outside to behold.
Gilded tombs do worms enfold.
Had you been as wise as bold,
Young in limbs, in judgment old,
Your answer had not been inscrolled.
Fare you well, your suit is cold.

Cold indeed and labor lost!
Then farewell heat and welcome, frost.
Portia, adieu. I have too grieved a heart
To take a tedious leave. Thus losers part.



ARRAGON *opens the silver casket*

ARRAGON (Act 2, Scene 9)

What is here? (*He reads.*)

The fire seven times tried this;
Seven times tried that judgment is
That did never choose amiss.
Some there be that shadows kiss;
Such have but a shadow's bliss.
There be fools alive, iwis,
Silvered o'er—and so was this.
Take what wife you will to bed,
I will ever be your head.
So begone; you are sped.

Still more fool I shall appear
By the time I linger here.
With one fool's head I came to woo,
But I go away with two.
Sweet, adieu, I'll keep my oath,
Patiently to bear my wroth.

Notes on Doggerel

Robert Frost

If one is to be a poet he must learn to get cadences by skillfully breaking the sounds of sense with their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the meter. Verse in which there is nothing but the beat of the meter furnished by the accents of the polysyllabic words we call doggerel. Verse is not that. Neither is it the sound of sense alone. It is a resultant from these two.

W.H. Auden

The writer of doggerel, as it were, takes any old words, rhythm and rhymes that come into his head, gives them a good shake and then throws them onto the page like dice where, lo and behold, contrary to all probability they make sense, not by law but by chance. Since the words appear to have no will of their own, but to be the puppets of chance, so will the things or persons to which they refer; hence the value of doggerel for a certain kind of satire.

Lead On

Imagine, for the doggerel fun of it, that Portia's father did not want any suitor to be successful. Write a scroll that he might have written for the lead casket that would deny any suitor the right to his daughter.

Follow the pattern of the two scrolls found so far: repetitious and forced rhymes, predictable rhythm, seven or eight syllables per line, and nonsense wherever it pleases you. Here are my first few lines:

As you can see your love has fled
From one who values only lead.
For finer things her life was bred,
And all you have is borrowèd.
Look no more for lady to wed,
A sterile curse is on thy head.

See if you can do better, and turn my lead into gold like a true alchemist.

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Honest Vices

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 my enemies—and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, 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. (III.1.52-72)

Why, there, there, there, there! A diamond gone cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfurt! The curse never fell upon our nation till now. I never felt it till now. Two thousand ducats in that and other precious, precious jewels! I would my daughter were dead at my foot and the jewels in her ear; would she were hearsed at my foot and the ducats in her coffin. No news of them? Why so? And I know not what's spent in the search! Why, thou loss upon loss! The thief gone with so much, and so much to find the thief, and no satisfaction, no revenge, nor no ill luck stirring but what lights o'my shoulders, no sights but o'my shedding.

(III.1.83-96)

Injured Eloquence

1. What does Shylock reveal to you in this scene that you had not noticed before?
2. How does he reveal his feelings?
3. In your opinion, why did Shakespeare have Shylock speak in prose?
4. How does the way Shylock speaks add to your assessment of his character?
5. Does this scene change your view of Shylock? Is he villain, clown, or human?
6. At what point does his repetition of grievances lose its effect?
7. In the first speech, Shylock is speaking to an enemy, and in the second, to a friend. What differences do you detect?
8. Count the references to money and daughter. What dominates the loss, money or daughter? Does that mean he did not love his daughter? Explain.
9. Do the words 'coffin' and 'casket' have similar connotations? Is Shakespeare playing with the idea of bound or dead wealth?
10. Why would Shylock naturally suspect that Antonio was behind the theft and abduction of his daughter?
11. William Hazlitt said, "He [Shylock] is honest in his vices; they [Christians] are hypocrites in their virtues." Comment.
12. "Shylock uses language as he uses money: carefully, and as a weapon." Compare Shylock's use of words with the words of his enemies.

Source: Lawrence Danson, *The Harmonies of The Merchant of Venice* (Yale Univ. Press, 1968).

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Shylock Unbound

Kenneth Gross

Shylock: Three thousand ducats, well. (I.2.1)

From the very first moments of its being broached in the play, the question of the bond is linked to Shylock's habit of verbal repetition. We can approach the matter of the bond through looking initially at this aspect of Shylock's speech, in which he makes his own the most basic of poetic schemes. Repetition becomes, paradoxically, one mark of his singularity, crucial to the building up of his peculiar idiom or dramatic idiolect.... It gives form to an eloquence increasingly mysterious, unanswerable, and self-consuming, and eloquence that starts to undo more rational or harmonious pictures of the work or place of eloquence.

The lines [I.2.1-25] mark Shylock's entry into the play's action. This is where he starts into our consciousness and into our ears. As we encounter his speech at this moment, Shylock's repetitions carry a comic note, as if he were echoing what others say. They also seem part of a calculated game. Shylock is playing dumb, taunting Bassanio by repeating his words yet refusing the answer they demand. He is, throughout the play, a great refuser of answers. Shylock may even be inviting Bassanio himself to weigh more carefully what it is he asks of the moneylender.... The repetitions have in them something of the accountant's manner of summing up the world, telling over the profits and losses, its risks, its currencies, its rates. ["There be land rats and water rats, water thieves and land thieves—I mean pirates" I.3.]. You might even say that the repetitions reflect a certain poverty or miserliness of language, a thrifty reuse of formulas that have served him before. It suggest Shylock's pleasure in hearing his own words, a pleasure not unrelated to what we will see is his habit of ventriloquizing others' voices through his own reinvesting them for his own rhetorical profit. There is something starker at stake as well. Shylock repeats words as a stay against chaos, and as way of resisting solicitations he knows are either empty or opportunistic....

The stakes of repetition deepen in Shylock's most famous speech ("I am a Jew."). Its claims on us lie in how it pushes repetition to structure a violent picture of sameness. One may wonder what particular abuses he is trying to remember in such repetitions, and what, at the same time, such repetitions allow him to forget or dissolve into generality. Scholars have sometimes taken these lines, for all of their human urgency or homely eloquence, to manifest the automatism of the comedic villain; they become a sign of Shylock's reducing himself to a robot or animal, even at the moment when he claims his humanity. There is indeed a relentless, privative logic in that insistent formula, naturalizing revenge: "X us, do we not Y?" It is Shylock's way of making a stand, a way of holding off the prepossession of meaning by those he hates. He uses repetition as a way of refusing their automatic separation of Christian and Jew, miming that automatism, even as he tries to bridge the huge, unspeakable gap between Jew and Christian ("us" and "you") that the Christian world throws in his face.... The source of the speech's power, indeed, lies in its attempts to master a humanness that always slips from intelligibility, held there if at all by words that only pretend to define it. And yet, if we have ears to hear, Shylock's rhetorical questions are also real questions. "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, sense, affections, passions?" What does it mean to be given these things, or simply to have them, as facts of the body and facts of the mind, facts about one's relation to the world, one's way of taking in, shaping, and being shaped by the world? It is everything and nothing. ...

Source: Kenneth Gross, *Shylock is Shakespeare* (University of Chicago, 2006), 55-58.

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False Appearances

GRATIANO

You must not deny me. I must go with you to Belmont.

BASSANIO

Why, then you must. But hear thee, Gratiano.
Thou are too wild, too rude, and bold of voice—
Parts that become thee happily enough,
And in such eyes as ours appear not faults.
But where thou art not known—why, there they show
Something too liberal. Pray thee, take pain
To allay with some cold drops of modesty
Thy skipping spirit, lest through thy wild behaviour
I be misconst'red in the place I go to,
And lose my hopes.

GRATIANO

Senior Bassanio, hear me;
If I do not put on a sober habit,
Talk with respect, and swear but now and then,
Wear prayer books in my pocket, look demurely—
Nay more, while grace is saying hood mine eyes
Thus with my hat, and sigh and say Amen,
Use all the observance of civility
Like one well studied in sad ostent
To please his grandam, never trust me more.
(II.2.176-194)

BASSANIO

So may the outward shows be least themselves;
The world is still decived with ornament.
In law, what pleas so tainted and corrupt,
But being seasoned with a gracious voice,
Obscures the show of evil? In religion,
What damnèd error but some sober brow
Will bless it, and approve it with a text,
Hiding the grossness with fair ornament?
(III.2.73-80)

BASSANIO

When I told you
My state was nothing, I should have told you
That I was worse than nothing; for indeed
I have engaged myself to a dear friend.
Engaged my friend to his mere enemy
To feed my means. (III. 2.258-263)



A gondola. (2.8.8)
From Cesare Vecellio, *Habiti antichi* . . . (1598).

Studied Ostent

1. Find evidence that appearances are important to Bassanio. What kind?
2. When has Gratiano revealed his 'wild behaviour' in the play so far?
3. Who said, "Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing. . . ." Does he?
4. Simplify Gratiano's response to Bassanio's request. What does your simplification do to his character?
5. How does Gratiano's response reveal his true character?
6. Apparently the word *gratiano* means 'a foole or clownish fellow in a play or comedie.' Is he a clown in this play?
7. Read Bassanio's whole casket speech aloud in as many ways as you can.
8. How does Bassanio's speech differ from the way he has spoken before?
9. How does Bassanio's confession to Portia differ from his casket speech?
10. Names are chosen with purpose. What may Shakespeare have us associate with the name *Bassanio*?

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Passion for Names

"Shakespeare's 'passion for names' is manifest in *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare creates an interlocking pattern of character names which, when closely attended to, deepens our understanding of the play's personae and their relationships." Now that you have met most of the characters, speculate why the name suits the character. Use some of the clues provided by Grace Tiffany in her article, "Names in *The Merchant of Venice.*"
See also Sir Israel Gollancz, *Allegory and Mysticism in Shakespeare* (pages 41-43).

Names	Clues	Interpretations
ANTONIO	Saint Anthony, an "ascetic" who was "remembered for showing great patience when faced with many trials," who was the "patron of the poor"	
BASSANIO	lowness and weight, the musical register of the bass, heaviness of lead casket, sobriety, and base behaviour	
GRATIANO	lightness, grace note, comic influence, fool, clown, and garrulous	
SHYLOCK	compulsively guarded, locked tight, impenetrable, separation from self and others, pronounced 'shill' as in Shillock	
PORTIA	an opening, portal, doorway, open casket, a partial welcome, qualified openness, Porta *c.* 1600 an Italian alchemist, Brutus' Portia	
JESSICA	Old Testament name, Abraham's niece, "she who looks out" or "spy", a jess, a strap that bound a falcon to its master's leash, flight from bondage	
SALERIO SOLANIO	a chorus of echoing pairs, two Sallies, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or tweedledee and tweedledum, but with some differences	
GOBBO	a clown's name, if only from sound; Lancelot, a playing card figure before Shakespeare's time	
LORENZO	a dignified sounding name	
TUBAL	Old Testament name, son of Japheth and the nation descended from him	

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Male Friendships

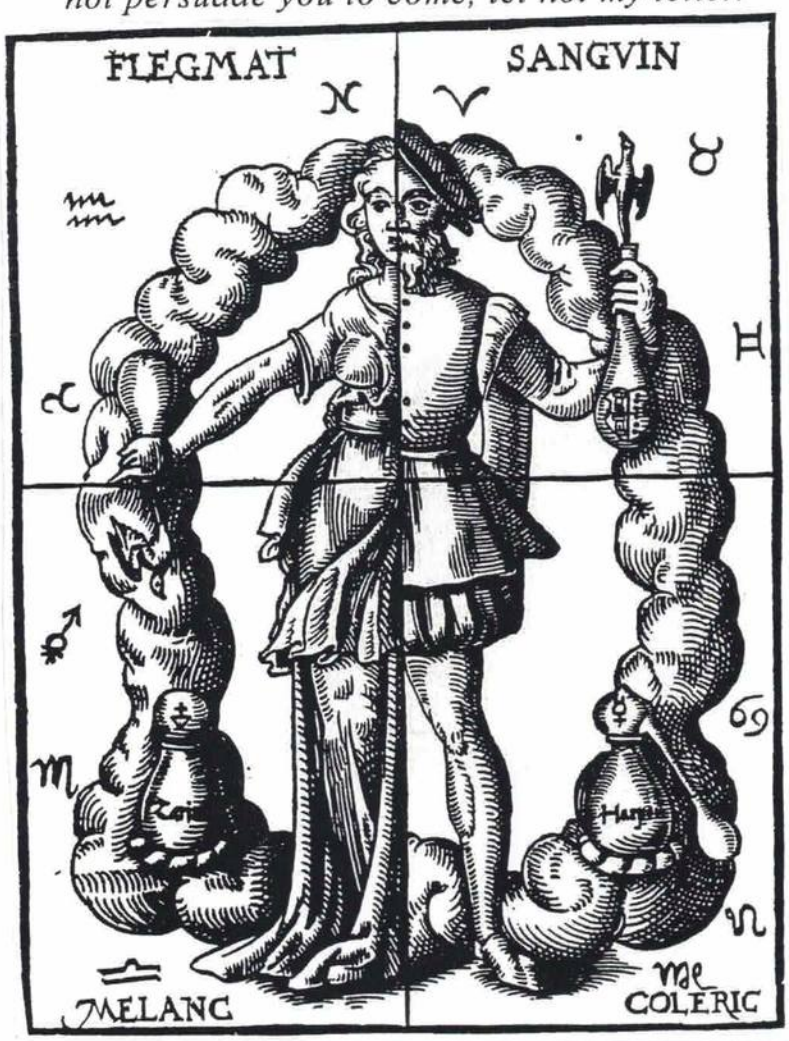
ANTONIO (in Act One)
In sooth I know not why I am so sad.

SOLANIO
Why, then you are in love.

ANTONIO
Fie, fie!

BASSANIO (in Act Three)
The dearest friend to me, the kindest man,
The best-condition'd and unwearied spirit
In doing courtesies, and one in whom
The ancient Roman honour more appears
Than any that draws breath in Italy.

BASSANIO (reads)
Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low, my bond to the Jew is forfeit. And since in paying it, it is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared between you and I, if I might but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your pleasure; if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter.



Roman Honour

1. Chronic sadness was called melancholy, one of four humours in the human body. In Shakespeare's time, it was a theory used to explain personality, depending on which fluid was predominate:
   Melancholy cold, gloomy, depressed
   Choler angry, quarrelsome, violent
   Phlegm cool, sluggish, apathetic
   Blood warm, hopeful, confident
   Assign a humour to each character in the play, but argue how they may be more complex than any single humour.
2. Some directors have given Antonio and Bassanio's friendship an erotic spin. How would you interpret their relationship?
3. What is chivalry? Did it apply to men and women? How did it apply to men and their relationships?
4. Are Antonio and Bassanio members of the same class? If not, why would that affect their relationship?
5. Compare their friendship with that of Portia and Nerissa.
6. What class distinctions are manifest in the play? Who are the outsiders?
7. Why is Antonio kind to Bassanio but not to Shylock?
8. Have male relationships changed since Shakespeare's time? If so, in what way?
9. How does Portia respond to Antonio's situation? What does she urge Bassanio to do about it?
10. Write Bassanio's response to Antonio's letter, declaring his intention to save Antonio from his fate.

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Noble Love

Paul Dingman

But if he [Antonio] is in love, the question becomes with whom? Shakespeare provides no direct answer, but Bassanio is the only credible candidate in the play. Modern critics sometimes view this love as a tension, a source of emotional or even sexual rivalry with Portia, but in doing so they miss another, older aspect that is also important for interpretative history. The intense friendship Antonio expresses for Bassanio marks him as a virtuous man in medieval/early modern terms just as Bassanio's affection for Antonio brands him noble, for as Cicero (and others) teach, true friendship only touches the good. Whether desire contributes to the attraction at some level remains an open question, but the implied ethical signification in the close friendship is crucial to understanding the characters and the play.

Once Gratiano and the others depart, an intimate scene of shared confidences and promise develops between the two companions with Bassanio declaring, "To you Antonio / I owe the most in money and in love." This line establishes their amity but also casts their relationship, like so many in Shakespeare's Venice, in terms of debts and bonds. The metaphor is not entirely misplaced for these two, nor is their meeting without an agenda. Too much largesse on Bassanio's part, another classic chivalric trait, has left the young nobleman's estate financially "disabled" and led him to request a substantial loan—another substantial loan—from his dear friend, Antonio. The advance, Bassanio says, will enable him to "get clear of all the debts I owe." No doubts nor recriminations ensue; rather, warmth and goodwill imbue the exchange.

Antonio, his earlier gloom apparently forgotten in Bassanio's presence, asks only one stipulation of his companion before providing full support: whether the proposed enterprise lies "within the eye of honor". Such phrasing constitutes a nod to the chivalric ideals of virtue in which honor is always paramount, for the reference was no anachronism in Shakespeare's time but a serious cultural component. Chivalry, the ethos tied to the Middle Ages, arguably reached its zenith in the Renaissance.... Chivalric society certainly had to adjust to new conditions, and knighthood as a governing ideal faded over time, but the process was exceedingly slow. As a result, several recognizable features of elite male friendship endured within the broader developing culture and literary arts of the Renaissance, and a chivalric sense of integrity surely remained an immense concern for aristocratic men and women in the early modern period.

So, with the overarching principle of honor in place, Antonio states that he will do his "uttermost" to aid Bassanio, even though he himself must borrow the requested money, since his current "fortunes are all at sea." Antonio is wealthy, and his credit in Venice is considerable, but a real possibility of danger exist, and of course all the danger is realized (and then some) as the play progresses. So, the main plot turns on this early agreement between two close friends, but Shakespeare also takes care to create an ethical sense around these two characters by demonstrating the clear trust each has for the other. Antonio's willingness to hazard both his credit and himself—"my purse, my person"—for his beloved companion raise his honor in particular.

Source: Paul Dingman, "Why Then You Are In Love," in New Readings of *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Horacio Sierra (Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 50-51.



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Charmed Circle

When I examine my own conception of human excellence, I find that, doubtless owing to early environment, it contains many elements which have hitherto been associated with aristocracy, such as fearlessness, independence of judgment, emancipation from the herd, and leisurely culture. Is it possible to preserve these qualities, and even make them widespread, in an industrial community? And is it possible to dissociate them from the typical aristocratic vices: limitation of sympathy, haughtiness, and cruelty to those outside a charmed circle?

—**Bertrand Russell**

Fairy-Story World

W.H. Auden

If the wicked Shylock cannot enter the fairy-story world of Belmont, neither can the noble Antonio, though his friend, Bassanio, can. In the fairy-story world, the symbol of final peace and concord is marriage, so that, if the story is concerned with the adventures of two friends of the same sex, male or female, it must end with a double wedding. Had he wished, Shakespeare could have followed the *Pecorone* story in which it is Ansaldo, not Gratiano, who marries the equivalent of Nerissa. Instead, he portrays Antonio as a melancholic who is incapable of loving a woman. He deliberately avoids the classical formula of the Perfect Friends by making the relationship unequal. When Salanio says of Antonio's feelings for Bassanio, *"I think he only loves the world for him"* we believe it, but no one would say that Bassanio's affections are equally exclusive. Bassanio, high-spirited, elegant, pleasure-loving, belongs to the same world as Gratiano and Lorenzo; Antonio does not. When he says: *"I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano, / A stage, where everyman must play a part, / And mine a sad one"*, Gratiano may accuse him of putting on an act, but we believe him, just as it does not seem merely the expression of a noble spirit of self-sacrifice when he tells Bassanio: *"I am a tainted wether of the flock, Meetest for death; the weakest kind of fruit / Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me."*

...In *Pecorone*, the Lady of Belmonte is a kind of witch and Gianetto gets into financial difficulties because he is a victim of magic, a fate which is never regarded as the victim's fault. But Bassanio had often borrowed money from Antonio before he ever considered wooing Portia and was in debt, not through magic or unforeseeable misfortune, but through his own extravagances, and we feel that Antonio's continual generosity has encouraged Bassanio in his spendthrift habits. Bassanio seems to be one of those people whose attitude towards money is that of a child; it will somehow always appear by magic when really needed. Though Bassanio is aware of Shylock's malevolence, he makes no serious effort to dissuade Antonio from signing the bond because, thanks to the ever-open purse of his friend, he cannot believe that bankruptcy is a real possibility in life.

Shylock is a miser and Antonio is open-handed with his money; nevertheless, as a merchant, Antonio is equally a member of an acquisitive society.... The commodities, that is to say, in which the Venetian merchant deals are not necessities but luxury goods, the consumption of which is governed not by physical need but by psychological values like social prestige, so that there can be no question of a Just Price. Then, as regards his own expenditure, Antonio is, like Shylock, a sober merchant who practises economic abstinence. Both of them avoid the carnal music of the world. ... Neither of them is capable of enjoying the carefree happiness for which Belmont stands.

Source: W.H. Auden, "Love and Usury in *The Merchant of Venice*" in *Four Centuries of Shakespearean Criticism* (Avon, 1965), 245-249.

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Female Friendships

PORTIA

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;
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.
(III.2.57-174)

PORTIA

I never did repent for doing good,
Nor shall not now; for in companions
That do converse and waste the time together,
Whose souls do bear an equal yoke of love,
There must be needs a like proportion
Of lineaments, of manners, and of spirit;
(III.4.10-15)

PORTIA

I hold thee any wager,
When we are both accoutered like young men,
I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two,
And wear my dagger with the braver grace,
And speak between the change of man boy
With a reed voice, and turn two mincing steps
Into a many stride, and speak of frays
Like a fine bragging youth, and tell quaint lies,
How honourable ladies sought my love,
Which I denying, they fell sick and died—
I could not do withal. Then I'll repent,
And wish, for all that, that I had not killed them.

Master or Servant

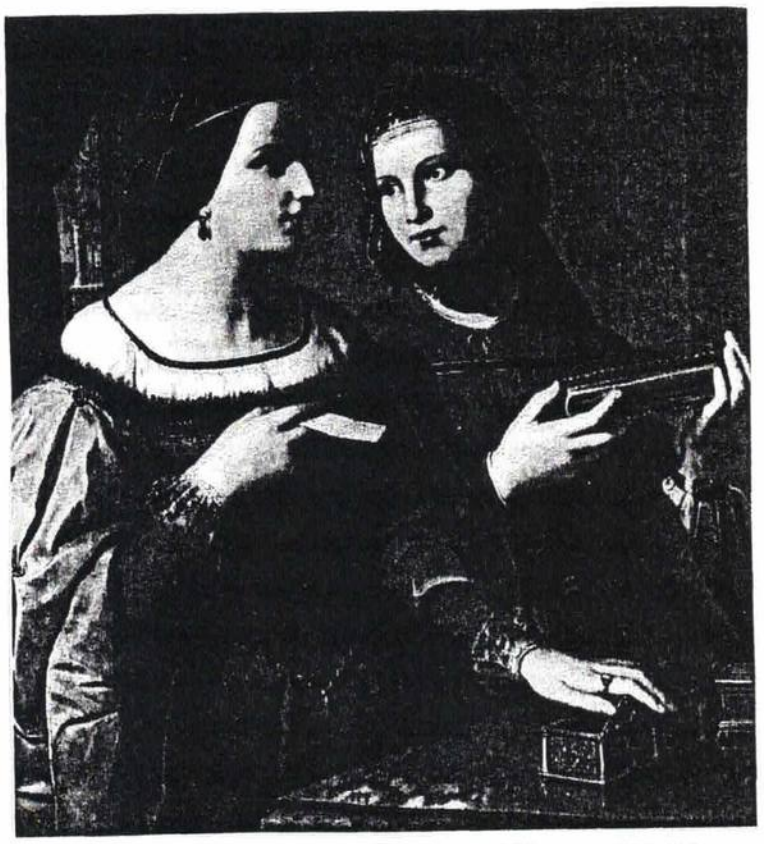
1. In the first speech, Portia is speaking to Bassanio after he has won her hand. What does she concede to him?
2. What conditions does she place on those concessions?
3. How "unschooled" does she appear to be?
4. Is her submission "a garment she wears as gracefully as her disguise"?
5. Whose "vantage" does the ring proclaim?
6. Absolutes and ultimatums abound in this play: from bonds to rings. Why should we be cautious about 'nevers' and 'forevers'?
7. Debate: Be it resolved that Portia (in her concession to Bassanio) describes the ideal relationship between spouses.
8. In the second speech, Portia is speaking about Bassanio's love for Antonio. How do her words appear to contradict her cross-gender relationship with Bassanio?
9. Must true companions be alike?
10. What makes any friendship work?
11. In the third speech, Portia is speaking to Nerissa, her maid. Examine their earlier exchanges, and assess their relationship. Do they "bear an equal yoke of love"?
12. How "unschooled" is Portia's assessment of men?
13. What, says Portia, are the proclivities of men? Are men from Mars?
14. How do gender roles affect gender friendships? Can those roles permit an equal relationship?
15. Describe the perfect friendship.

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Wifely Empowerment

Corinne S. Abate

Portia is delighted with the outcome, and makes a congratulatory speech to Bassanio that may begin in an unexpectedly self-deprecating way, but by the end conveys in no uncertain terms what she expects from Bassanio now that Portia is the person upon whom he will and must rely for all his needs. As Juliet Dusinberre so elegantly puts it, "submission is a garment she wears as gracefully as her disguise." Portia embodies the economic viability of Antonio, so Bassanio will now turn to her for any future assistance as he once did to his male friends. This position of Bassanio as dependent is one Portia establishes immediately in her first speech as a woman freed from her father's strictures, while simultaneously fashioning for herself the role of empowered wife. Pointedly employing economic metaphors throughout her speech, Portia calls herself "the lord / Of this fair mansion," before she apparently bequeaths the estate and all it entails, including herself, to Bassanio: "I give them with this ring." This seems to be a gesture of traditional wifely submission and self-marginalization on Portia's part. Instead, she has successfully inverted the subjugation and oppression expected during the nuptial process because she collapses and consolidates Bassanio's access and entitlement to her worth in a ring, a symbol of ownership traditionally bestowed by men upon women. In effect, when Portia seals their marriage contract with a ring, she is playing the groom's role, having no father to give her away. By proffering a ring in an engagement only moments old, "lord" Portia relinquishes nothing to Bassanio, which means that any enhancement of his own depleted assets to which he may now lay claim can only occur with his wife's permission and blessing.



Friedrich Brockmann, *Portia and Nerissa* (1849)

Portia is the sole architect of this scheme as well, which she reveals when she explains in private to her trusted confidant Nerissa that "I have work in hand / That you yet know not of." As Lawrence Norman notes, Bassanio must learn from Portia "the lesson of bodily exclusivity that marriage signifies, and as part of this process friendship is subordinate to marriage." Never one to be left out where Portia is involved, Nerissa unhesitatingly follows her mistress, and looks forward to testing her own husband for the same signs of fraternal privileging. And their husbands-cum-guinea pigs fail the test almost immediately.

Source: Corinne S. Bate, "Nerissa Teaches Me What to Believe," in *The Merchant of Venice:: New Critical Essays* (Routledge, 2002), 291-292.

New Debate

Be it resolved that women marry for money and men marry for possession.

Or

Be it resolved that power is a greater aphrodisiac than wealth.

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LORENZO

... the Moor is with child by you, Lancelet.

LANCELET

It is much that the Moor should be more than reason; but if she be less than an honest woman, she is indeed more than I took her for.

LORENZO

How every fool can play upon the word! I think the best grace of wit will shortly turn into silence, and discourse grow commendable in none only but parrots. Go in, sirrah, bid them prepare for dinner.

LANCELET

That is done, sir; they have all stomachs.

LORENZO

Goodly Lord, what a wit-snapper are you! then bid them prepare dinner.

LANCELET

That is done too, sir; only 'cover' is the word.

LORENZO

Will you cover, then sir?

LANCELET

Not so, sir, neither! I know my duty.

LORENZO

Yet more quarreling with occasion! Wilt thou show the whole wealth of thy wit in an instant? I pray thee, understand a plain man in his plain meaning: go to thy fellows, bid them cover the table, serve in the meat, and we will all come in to dinner.

LANCELET

For the table, sir, it shall be served in; for the meat, sir, it shall be covered; for your coming in to dinner, sir, why, let it be as humours and conceits shall govern.

Word Play

double entendre,
a French phrase for 'double meaning', adopted in English to denote a pun in which a word or phrase has a second, usually sexual, meaning.

1. In many productions Lancelet's role is greatly reduced. If you were producing this play, justify keeping or removing this scene.
2. In two filmed versions, the scene between Lancelet and his father Gobbo (II.2) is omitted. How may that omission change the meaning of the play?
3. Explain Lancelet's pun on Moor.
4. Lancelet's pun may be an artful deception of his part in making more of the Moor. What other deceptions has he had a hand in?
5. Why is sex often a subject for humour?
6. Sexual love crosses racial and religious barriers in this play: Lancelet loves a Moor and Jessica loves Lorenzo. Is Shakespeare making a point with these liaisons?
7. Are puns the lowest form of humour?
8. Someone said, "Puns are the lowest, if you did not think of them first!" Do you have a favorite pun, and when did you use it?
9. When can punsters become tiresome?
10. How does the word 'cover' get used?
11. Explain: "Wilt thou show the whole wealth of thy wit in an instant?"
12. Comedians need a straight man. How does Lorenzo provide the occasion for Lancelet?
13. What additional flourish of meaning does Lancelet give to the words *served in*, *covered*, *coming in*?
14. Why may humour be considered deception by means of diversion or distortion?

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Word Play

Fool's Word Play

James Newlin

ANTONIO (aside)

Mark you this, Bassanio,
The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.
An evil soul producing holy witness
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,
A goodly apple, rotten at the heart.
O, what goodly outside falsehood hath!

(I.3.93-98)

Lancelet understands that the "ambivalent zones" of language are the place for *play*. Like Antonio's use of "goodly," [Lancelet's Moor] passage rings with repetition. Yet Lancelet's repetitions are puns, so their repetition is more traditionally, aesthetically pleasing. Where Antonio's aside seemed to say too much with the extraneous image of the apple, Lancelet seems to exclude necessary adjectives:"it is much" what?

Though the issue at hand is quantification —how much more of the Moor is there? *Another* Moor?—Lancelet plays with language's unique powers of qualification. To be "less" than something should not be evidence of being "more" than something else, since by definition the second term also have to be "less" than the initial one. But language, "the word," is the exclusive realm where what is "more than reason" can be expressed and one person's individual reason or meaning can be asserted as *the* reason or meaning. What Lancelet originally "took" the Moor for was the opposite of honest, rather than simply less than honest. Here the play upon the word that accounts for the play's allegories of reading clarifies not just that the meanings of the given allegories are personal, and therefore potentially arbitrary or fraudulent, but the form of allegory itself may be thoroughly deceptive as well. The lesson we are to learn from Lancelet about deception and the word was prefigured earlier by his parody of Jacob's deception of his father Isaac in 2.2. Lancelet's transition from biblical allegory to a more deconstructive play upon the word parallels Antonio's similar move from familiar, biblical exegesis to tropological confusion (though Lancelet understood that even typological allegories should be "played").

Source: James Newlin, "Allegories of Reading," in *New Readings of The Merchant of Venice* (Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 118.



Tropes

1. Define *tropology*, and explain how Lancelet uses a double sense of words.
2. Define *allegory*. Why can mythic stories be given more than one meaning?
3. Whose speech about falsehood is easier to understand, Antonio or Lancelet? Does Lancelet give *more* than he should?
4. Once again, let's eliminate Lancelet from the play. Agreed?
5. Or let's keep him because he serves as an essential bridge between alien worlds (racial and religious). Agreed?
6. What have we learned about deception so far in this play?

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Race and Sex

Shakespeare's Views on Race?

But Post-Colonial rereadings of Shakespeare did not start with New Historicist revelations that *The Tempest* is a "discourse of imperialism". The critique has a rich background among Caribbean writers like George Lamming, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Aimé Césaire. Shakespeare is in any case very concerned with racial difference. His first black character is Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* (Shakespeare may have played the role himself), who glories in his colour (IV.ii.97-103) ...

What, what, ye sanguine, shallow-hearted boys!
Ye white-lim'd walls! ye alehouse painted signs!
Coal-black is better than another hue,
In that it scorns to bear another hue;
For all the water in the ocean
Can never turn the swan's black legs to white,
Although she lave them hourly in the flood.



Despite this, some critics have complained that white is assumed as a standard of beauty and sexual attraction in Shakespeare, forgetting too that his most alluring character is of course Cleopatra.



Curiously neglected by recent commentators, from the insistence on her "dun" complexion she should really be called the "Black Woman" rather than the Dark Lady. It has been argued that she may have been based on a black courtesan called Lucy Negro (Sonnets 127-52).

Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* does however present the problem of anti-Semitism. Although he is not a racist type but a complex character in himself, the play is difficult to deal with after the Holocaust.

Source: Nick Groom and Piero, *Introducing Shakespeare* (Icon and Totem Books, 2001), 146-147.

No-Holds Bard

Norrie Epstein

There's no denying it: Shakespeare was not merely bawdy—the usual term used to convey full-blooded Elizabethan lustiness—he was stunningly vulgar. And his audience loved it. Bodily functions, secretions, smells, references that we would consider tasteless or private, were to them the pinnacle of wit. Privacy, particularly concerning personal hygiene, is a relatively modern idea, and the Elizabethans were far less squeamish than we are today.

Shakespeare, as might be expected, used bawdy language with more verve than his contemporaries, the most neutral words often doing overtime as double, and sometimes triple and even quadruple, entendres.... Once you know the Elizabethan meaning of one or two words, a whole passage suddenly takes on a startling alternative meaning. Slang hunting in Shakespeare is amusing, and the underlying crudity doesn't detract from the beauty of the lines—it only adds another dimension. What makes Shakespeare unique is that he is capable of being tender, sexy, funny, and sad, all at the same time.

Since most Elizabethan sexual slang is no longer current, students today can study *Romeo and Juliet* without any idea of what they're reading. Editors tend to evade explicit annotation, restoring to the bland "This is a bawdy quibble," the editorial equivalent of a squirm. This is unfortunate, since understanding Shakespeare's earthiness might enhance his reputation among high school students....

Source: Norrie Epstein, *The Friendly Shakespeare* (Penguin, 1993), 117-118.

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Money Matters

ANTONIO

The duke cannot deny the course of law.
For the commodity that strangers have
With us in Venice, if it be denied,
Will much impeach the justice of his state,
Since that the trade and profit of the city
Consisteth of all nations.

(III.3.26-31)

SHYLOCK

I have possessed your grace of what I purpose,
And by our holy Sabbath have I sworn
To have the due and forfeit of my bond.
If you deny it, let the danger light
Upon your charter and your city's freedom.

(IV.1.35-39)

King Money in Venice

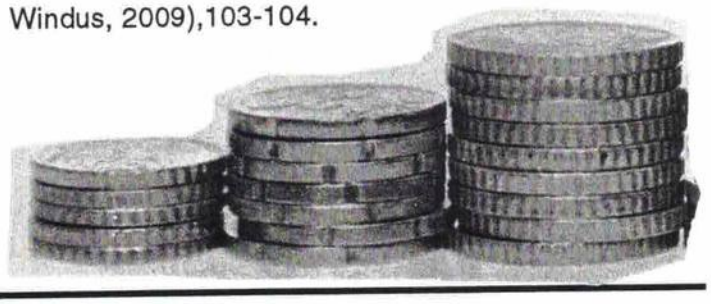
Peter Ackroyd

Some of the earliest banks in the world were established in Venice. There are private banks mentioned in official records from 1270. In the thirteenth century, too, Venice created the first publicly funded national debt known as the *Monte*. The *Monte* meant literally a 'pile' of coins. Until the fourteenth century moneylenders were free to practise in the city, although they were forbidden in most other cities. In the twelfth century charging large interest was said to be 'an old Venetian custom'. The counters for the money-changers, covered in cloth or carpet, were set up at the base of the campanile in Saint Mark's Square. Truly the Venetians made a religion out of money. On the bills of exchange was often inserted the phrase, 'And may Christ watch over you'. There was a public bank in the city by 1625, 107 years before the foundation of the Bank of England. Venice became the largest bullion market in the world.

The merchant of Venice was the master of Venice. The founders of Venice were merchants or, rather they were forced to trade in order to survive. The doges themselves engaged in trade. So there is the curious anomaly that the earliest nobility of the city were wholly involved with commerce; there was no hierarchy of birth, dependent upon a feudal system of honour, but a social framework entirely fashioned out of commercial speculation. As an English ambassador wrote in 1612, '*Omnes vias pecuniae norunt*'. They know all the paths of money. Fortunes were not made out of landed property but out of skill in business. This accounts in part for the evident sense of equality that the Venetians experienced, one with another; in the realm of King Money, all subjects are intrinsically equal. Money knows no duty or honour.

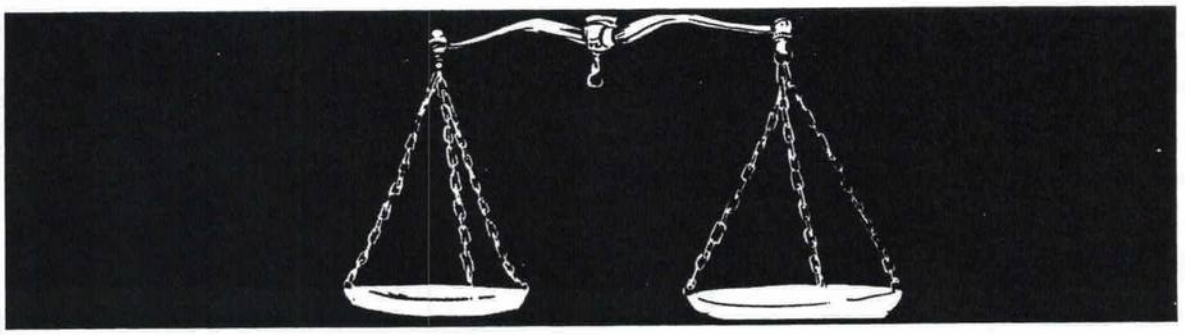
Yet in practice it was government of the rich, by the rich, and for the rich. There was no merchant's guild in Venice, for the simple reason that the city itself was one grand guild. It was a government of merchants. Much of its commerce was in fact controlled by a relatively small number of families who had always been in business. They were characterised by their acumen as a family unit so that, for example, the Dandolos were known to be audacious and the Giustinianis were benevolent. The domestic partnership whereby brothers, or fathers and sons, traded together was known as *fraterna*; its account books could pass through many generations, like a piece of family furniture. Household accounts were not separated from business accounts. They amounted to the same thing. The senate was essentially a board of directors, with the doge as the chief executive officer.

Source: Peter Ackroyd, *Venice: Pure City* (Chatto & Windus, 2009),103-104.



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Money and Slavery



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 seat 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, is 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?

(IV.1.89-103)

Hypocrisy

1. Is Shylock for or against slavery?
2. How does he use the concept of slavery to advance his case?
3. Money slavery (indebted) or body slavery (indentured): how do they differ?
4. Unlike Gratiano, Shylock says more in fewer words with more effect. Do you agree or not?
5. Why did Christians support slavery and forbid usury for so long in their history?
6. How does poverty make slavery possible?
7. What are some of the disguises that slavery wears in the world today?
8. Why may the law tend to support ownership?

Christian Hypocrisy

Harold Bloom

It is all too easy to get this speech wrong, as some Marxist critics have done. Shylock has no sympathy for the slaves, and he seems quite unaware of the irony his citation of the slaves evokes, since as a Jew he annually celebrates the Passover, with its opening reminder that his ancestors were slaves in Egypt until God liberated them. It is never wise to assume that Shakespeare did not know anything that was available in or near his world; his curiosity was unappeasable, his energy for information boundless. Shylock really does *mean* his ghastly parallel: one pound of Antonio's flesh is enslaved to him, and he will have his bond. What startles and delights us is Shylock's shrewd indictment of Christian hypocrisy, which he makes earlier in the play, but not with this shocking force. The Venetian slaves, like all slaves, are so many pounds of flesh, no more, no less. And in the context of [current] America, the satire still works: our pious reformers of Welfare are determined to see that the descendants of our slaves do not lie down in beds as soft as theirs, and season their palates with such viands, let alone marry the heirs of the Contract with America. Yet Shylock does not care about his own fiercest point; he is, alas, not a prophet, just a would-be torturer and murderer. It is Shakespeare, exploiting the role of Shylock, who slyly provides the material for moral prophecy, which no one in the comedy is prepared or enabled to make.

Source: Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (Riverhead Books, 1998), 188-189.

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Mercy and Justice

PORTIA [*as BALTHAZAR*]

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 scepter 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 scept'red 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 the same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. I have spoke this 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.

SHYLOCK

My deeds upon my head! I crave the law,
The penalty and forfeit of my bond.

(IV.1.183-206)

Portia's Disguises

1. How many lines of this speech can you memorize in 20 minutes?
2. Listening to this speech, would you be persuaded? Why or why not?
3. Is Portia's speech in character or in disguise? What does it add to the revelation of her character?
4. What do the last nine lines of her speech add to the first fourteen?
5. Should mercy season justice? Why?
6. How may the last two lines of her speech entrap Shylock?
7. Is Portia guilty of deception?
8. Or has Portia allowed Shylock to be hoisted by his own legal petard?
9. What seems more flexible, mercy or the law? May 'mercy' be too gratuitous?
10. Who said: "Use every man after his own desert, and who should 'scape whipping"? Does Portia?

Mercy

Mercy is transcendent, it comes from heaven as a blessing bringing about the mystery of give-and-take. Mercy derives from L. *merces*, which means *reward*. In its postclassical meaning of *misericordia*, *merces* is a mercantile metaphor, which is present in the give-and-take of the *Sacrum commercium* as well as the *commercium amoris*. The paradoxical identity of *merces* and "mercy" is a basic component of *The Merchant of Venice*. Nothing is achieved in this play without *merces*, meaning "means" which are given or *lent out gratis*, or lent on surety, or even stolen.

Source: Inge Leimberg, "What may words say...?" A Reading of *The Merchant of Venice* (Fairleigh Dickinson, 2011), 177-8.



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Portia's Failure

Harold C. Goddard

In all Shakespeare—unless it be Hamlet with "To be or not to be"—there is scarcely another character more identified in the world's mind with a single speech than Portia with her words on mercy. And the world is right. They have a "quality" different from anything else in her role. They are no prepared words of the Young Doctor she is impersonating, but her own, as unexpected as was Shylock's disconcerting question. Something deep down in him draws them from something deep down—or shall we say high up?—in her. They are the spiritual gold hidden not beneath lead but beneath the "gold" of her superficial life, her reward for meeting Shylock's objection with sincerity rather than with evasion.

A hush falls over the courtroom as she speaks them (as it does over the audience when *The Merchant of Venice* is performed). Even the Jew is moved. Who can doubt it? Who can doubt that for a moment at least he is drawn back from the brink of madness and logic on which he stands? Here is the celestial visitant—Portia God made—sent expressly to exorcise the demonic powers that possess him. Only an insensible clod could fail to feel its presence. And Shylock is no insensible clod. Can even he show mercy? Will a miracle happen? It is the supreme moment. The actor who misses it misses everything.

And then, incredibly, it is Portia who fails Shylock, not Shylock Portia. The same thing happens to her that happened to him at that other supreme moment when he offered Antonio the loan without interest. Her antipodal self emerges. In the twinkling of an eye, the angel reverts to the Doctor of Laws. "So quick bright things come to confusion." Whether the actress in Portia is intoxicated by the sound of her own voice and the effect it is producing, or whether she feels the great triumph she has rehearsed being stolen from her if Shylock relents, or both, at any rate, pushing aside the divine Portia and her divine opportunity, the Young Doctor resumes his role. His "therefore, Jew" gives an inkling of what is coming. You can hear, even in the printed text, the change of voice, as Portia sinks from compassion to legality: [in last four lines of her mercy speech]. It would be unbelievable if the words were not there. "You should show mercy," the Young Doctor says in effect, "but if you don't, this court will be compelled to decide in your favor." It is as if a mother, having entreated her son to desist from some wrong line of conduct and feeling she had almost won, were to conclude: "I hope you won't do it, but, if you insist, I shall have to let you, since your father told you you could." It is like a postscript that undoes the letter. Thus Portia the lover of mercy is deposed by Portia the actress that the latter may have the rest of her play. And the hesitating Shylock, pushed back to the precipice, has nothing to say but

> My deeds upon my head! I crave the law.
> The penalty and forfeit of my bond.

The rest of the scene is an overwhelming confirmation of Portia's willingness to sacrifice the human to the theatrical, a somewhat different kind of sacrifice from that referred to in the inscription on the leaden casket. If there was any temptation that Shakespeare understood, it must have been this one. It was his own temptation. And, as he tells us in the *Sonnets*, he nearly succumbed to it:

> And almost thence my nature is subdu'd
> To what it works in, like the dyer's hand.

Portia's *was* subdued.

Source: Harold C. Goddard, *Volume I, The Meaning of Shakespeare*, (Phoenix Books, 1963), 106-107. Also in *Modern Critical Interpretations of The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Harold Bloom (Chelsea House, 1986).

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Law and Letter

PORTIA [*as BALTHAZAR*] (IV.1.303-353)

Tarry a little; there is something else,
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 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.

* * *

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.

* * *

Tarry, Jew!
The law hath yet another hold on you.
It is enacted in the laws of Venice,
If it be proved against an alien
That by direct or indirect attempts
He seek the life of any citizen,
The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive
Shall seize one half his goods; the other half
Comes to the privy coffers of the state.



Alien

The very word "alien" has an odd ring to it, despite its accuracy as a legal term for the status of Jews in Venice. It has never been used before in the play. We have heard Shylock called dog, cur, swine, usurer, devil, Jew, enemy, and inhuman wretch, yet he has felt like an inescapable denizen of Venice, a creature of the place, haunting street and market-place, known on the Rialto, owning his house and attending his synagogue. We should recall here that the play itself knows nothing about the Venetian ghetto; we get no sense of a legally separate region of Venice where Shylock must dwell. Perhaps the word "alien" ironically reflects something about the substance of his danger, the reason for his being hated by the community that makes use of him, for within the social and economic orders of Venice Shylock is not an alien at all. The scene shows us the Venetians' revenge against a creature who may remind them too much of themselves, of their own bondage to law and money, to the making of infectious profit, not to mention slavery. The figure of the hated Jew has been a creature onto whom they can project and make alien their guilt, including their unacknowledged guilt over persecuting Jews. The word "alien" also serves Portia here insofar as it strips Shylock of the more resonant, arcanely mythic terms of abuse that he had made his own, made his mask and the feeder of his rage, and that he had used to shame the Venetians in turn. The word tries to contain an otherness more absolute, harder to find a name for. This is a preparation for making him vanish more completely from the scene.

Source: Kenneth Gross, *Shylock is Shakespeare* (University of Chicago, 2006), 102-103.

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Literalistic Legalism

Joan Ozark Homer

'Tarry a little' indeed. What has Shylock not seen? What has Shylock assumed in 'this strict court of Venice' which is intolerant of assumptions, let alone equity? To what extent does Shylock contribute to the cause of his own defeat? Shakespeare's artistic brilliance in the trial's first reversal, Shylock's negation of his bond, has too often been unfairly dismissed by critics as a cheap triumph — a mere 'quibble', the 'merest technicality', or a 'trick'. To the contrary. Portia's reversal works legally in this strict court precisely because it is strict construction. Literalistic legalism is what is at stake in a *strict* court where law is not assumed to have 'spirit'. Instead, Shakespeare deliberately contrasts the letter of the *law* with the spirit of *men*. The letter of the law allows only for justice and judgement. If either Antonio or Shylock are to receive any mercy, it will not come from the law but from the hearts of men. Therefore, Portia's literal interpretation involves no wordplay and no trickery. If Portia's interpretation did stoop to such means, it would make a mockery of the law of strict justice, and Shylock would have the right to complain of being cheated and not legitimately defeated.... Because Shylock's bond is legal according to the letter of Venetian law, the letter of the bond itself — not the letter of the law — is what is left open to interpretation. Shylock therefore denies his bond once he discovers he has not been literal enough in the wording of it and that there are legal consequences for taking the bond in violation of its 'tenour'. Through careful interrelation of imagery, idea, and characterisation, Shakespeare measures up to the task of avoiding the interpretation's potential reduction to mere quibble or technical trick.

How, then, does Portia's interpretation legitimately work within the stage law of the play? As we have seen Shylock is a literalist who glosses his figures of speech. With exquisite irony there is one figure of speech he does not gloss, and it is his most important, 'a pound of flesh'. This irony is intensified by Shylock's failing to hear the clues Portia gives him, just as Morocco and Arragon missed the verbal clues in the casket choice. Selfish literalists hear and understand only what they want to hear and see. Portia has just given Shylock the essential linguistic clues when she asks Shylock if he has 'the balance' ready 'to *weigh* the flesh' (my italics), and if he should have a surgeon ready to prevent Antonio from too much loss of *blood*. Shylock has the balance ready, but he cannot admit the surgeon. The precise literal meaning of the words, 'a pound of flesh', means just that — a pound (neither more nor less) of flesh (flesh per se, not blood, hair, or bone that could accompany the flesh). It is Shylock, not Portia, who desires a figurative interpretation of 'a pound of flesh' to mean an approximate pound of flesh inclusive of whatever pertains to the particular pound taken. Because Shylock insists on the letter of his bond, however, he should have been more literal, more specific in his written expression in order to gain what he intends.

Source: Joan Ozark Holmer, *The Merchant of Venice: Choice, Hazard and Consequence* (MacMillan, 1995), 202.

A Merry Bond

1. In your opinion, are Portia's interpretations of the bond literal quibbles? Comment.
2. Some say Portia deceived Shylock; others suggest that Shylock deceived himself. How do you see it?
3. If you were to rewrite Shylock's bond, what words would you add to it?
4. Though Shylock called it a merry bond, what evidence suggests that he was serious?
5. When did it go from joke to revenge?
6. The location of the 'flesh' was vague in the contract. Was it his heart or elsewhere? Prove that he intended murder.

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Conversion

ANTONIO

So please my lord the Duke, and all the court,
To quit the fine for one half of his goods,
I am content so he will let me have
The other half in use, to render it
Upon his death, unto the gentleman
That lately stole his daughter.
Two things provided more: that for this favour
He presently become a Christian;
The other, that he do record a gift,
Here in the court, of all he dies possess'd
Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter.



DUKE

He shall do this, or else I do recant
The pardon that I late pronouncèd here.

PORTIA

Art thou contented, Jew? What dost thou say?

SHYLOCK

I am content. (IV. 1.378-392)

Forced Conversion

1. There are no apparent clues for saying Shylock's final line in the play: "I am content." How would you speak it?
2. Harold Bloom asks: Who can believe Shylock's 'I am content'? Can you?
3. The actor Laurence Olivier uttered it as a strangled sound and by a howl off stage. Justify that interpretation.
4. Why may Antonio's conditions be seen more as revenge than kindness?
5. As a Christian, Shylock could no longer ply his trade. Prove it.
6. Jews in Shakespeare's England were either *conversos* or *marranos*. What was the difference?
7. Apparently "conversion" was not in Shakespeare's source, *Il Pecorone*. Then why did he add it to his play?
8. Why may Shakespeare's audience see 'conversion' as a gift of salvation?
9. Why may a modern audience see 'forced conversion' as a cruel act?
10. What exactly will happen to Shylock's goods and estate?
11. Calling Lorenzo "son " seems beyond the pale, if not beyond the faith. Why?
12. Has Shylock been treated fairly in this scene, and throughout the play?
13. Does Shakespeare's portrayal of all the characters reveal that he is taking sides? Comment.

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Conversion

A Wronged Man

Heinrich Heine

When I saw a performance of this play at Drury Lane, a beautiful pale-faced English woman stood behind me in the box and wept profusely at the end of the fourth act, and called out repeatedly: 'The poor man is wronged.' Her face was the noblest Greek cast, and her eyes were big and dark. I have never been able to forget those big dark eyes weeping for Shylock.

But thinking of those tears I must count *The Merchant of Venice* among the tragedies, although the framework of the play is ornamented with the gayest masks, satires and love episodes, and the author's real intention was to write a comedy. Perhaps Shakespeare had in mind to create, for the entertainment of the masses, a trained werewolf, a loathsome fabulous monster thirsting for blood, and thereby losing his daughter and his ducats, and becoming a laughing stock.

But the genius of the poet, the universal spirit which inspires him is always above his individual will, and so it happened that he expressed in Shylock, in spite of all his glaring grotesqueness, the vindication of an ill-fortuned sect, whom Providence for mysterious reasons has made the butt of the hatred of high and low, and who have not always shown loving kindness in return.

But what am I saying? The genius of Shakespeare rises above the petty jealousies of two religious factions, and his drama shows us really neither Jew nor Christian, but oppressor and oppressed, and the savage rejoicing of the latter when he can pay back with interest the suffered injuries to his callous tormentor. There is not the slightest trace of religious differences in this play: in Shylock Shakespeare merely represents a man whom Nature compels to hate his enemy, and in Antonio and his friends he portrays by no means the disciples of that divine teaching which tells us to love our enemies.... In fact, Shakespeare would have written a satire on Christianity if he intended it to be represented by those characters who are hostile to Shylock, and yet are hardly worthy of unlacing his shoes. The bankrupt Antonio is a weakling without energy, without strong hates and also without strong likes, a dull worm's-heart, whose flesh is really not fit for anything but to bait fish withal. Besides he never returns the borrowed three thousand ducats to the duped Jew. Nor does Bassanio refund his money, and he is a true fortune-hunter, as one English critic calls him; he borrows money to buy fine clothes and entice a wife with a fat dowry....

As for Lorenzo, he is the accomplice of one of the most famous burglaries, and according to Prussian criminal law he would be pilloried and sentenced to fifteen years hard labour; although he is not only the receiver of stolen ducats and jewels, but also receptive to beauty, to moonlit landscapes and music. As for the other Venetians who appear as Antonio's companions, they do not seem to abhor money either, and when their own friend is in distress they have nothing but words, coined air, for him.... However much we must hate Shylock, we cannot blame even him if he despises those people a little.

Source: Heinrich Heine, *Shakespeares Mädchen and Frauen*, 1839 in F.E. Halliday, *Shakespeare and His Critics* (Duckworth, 1959), 176-177.

Vindication

1. How fair is Heine's portrayal of Antonio and Lorenzo?
2. Write your own assessment of them.
3. Does Shakespeare portray Shylock as a "loathsome fabulous monster" throughout the play? Or at any time?
4. Is the play more a tragedy than a comedy?
5. Northrop Frye said that his theory of comedy fails to accommodate Shylock, and fails to internalize justice as a proper end of a comedy. What does he mean?

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Conversion

Cynical Malice

Kenneth Gross

The demand that Shylock become a Christian hasn't even the blind arrogance of a spiritual or political order which, in totalitarian fashion, knows that it knows the needs of its members better than they themselves do. No one onstage can think that conversion would penetrate so violent a heart, much less advance the millennium, a fantasy at work in much Tudor writing about the conversion of the Jews, as James Shapiro has shown. The demand for conversion rather has in it the inventiveness of a cynical malice. It is the last twist of the knife in the staged humiliation of this Jew, one that tries to outmatch the Jew's humiliation of the merchant. By just so obviously not having any inward force, the idea of conversion reminds us of the more intractable spaces of mind and imagination the play has opened up in Shylock, even as it seems like an attempt to shut them down, or simply make them irrelevant.

The playwright himself added the forced conversion to the old story of the pound-of-flesh bond, derived from such sources as Giovanni Fiorentino's collection of comic tales, *Il Pecorone* (The simpleton), written in the fourteenth century and published in Milan in 1558. This adds to one's sense of its contingent perversity. In Fiorentino's version of the tale, for example, there is no conversion; the nameless Jewish moneylender merely tears his bond and retreats in a rage. The addition that Shakespeare makes is so blunt that it is hard to know its weight or to find the right language to speak about it. Shylock's bland, almost mute acceptance of the terms offered to him itself seems to reflect this. "I am content," he says.... It is as if there were nothing more for him to say; he has no resources left.

Source: Kenneth Gross, *Shylock is Shakespeare* (University of Chicago, 2006), 107.

Attempted Salvation

Joan Ozark Holmer

There is no issue in the play, however, more sensitive today than the treatment of the Jew and especially the conversion to Christianity asked of him. In the 1988 Folger Shakespeare Theatre production of this play, directed by Michael Kahn, Antonio's lines for the conversion stipulation were simply cut. However, if we disembody the conversion request from its dramatic and historical context and if we ignore its union with Antonio's deed of gift request, we do aesthetic violence to the body of the play. We overlook that the conversion and deed of gift requests are Shakespeare's additions to his literary source, *Il Pecorone*, and we misjudge Shakespeare's purpose for these additions by judging them according to only our modern ideas. We cannot unfairly expect the Elizabethans to have the foresight that has now become our hindsight....

It is very difficult for a modern audience to recover a full Elizabethan sense of Antonio's lines even though enough historical scholarship has now established that the conversion stipulation, appreciated from the Elizabethan perspective, is an *attempt*, not a guarantee, to save Shylock from himself, to save his soul. Baptism is not a guarantee for salvation because the individual has a free will to choose whether or not to *live* the gift of faith; a nonembraced faith is a dead faith. Shylock could be baptised publicly, but never embrace that baptism in his heart, as was the case for converts called 'Marranos'. Unlike 'Conversos', who internally embraced conversion, 'Marranos' were so called because they were believed to be converts in name only, who had undergone formal conversion to avoid other penalties, such as death or loss of wealth.

Source: Joan O. Holmer, *Merchant of Venice: Choice, Hazard and Consequence* (MacMillan, 1995), 220-1.

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Act Four

Ironic Comedy

BASSANIO

Most worthy gentleman, I and my friend
Have by your wisdom been this day acquitted
Of grievous penalties, in lieu whereof,
Three thousand ducats due unto the Jew
We freely cope your courteous pains withal.

ANTONIO

And stand indebted, over and above,
In love and service to you evermore.

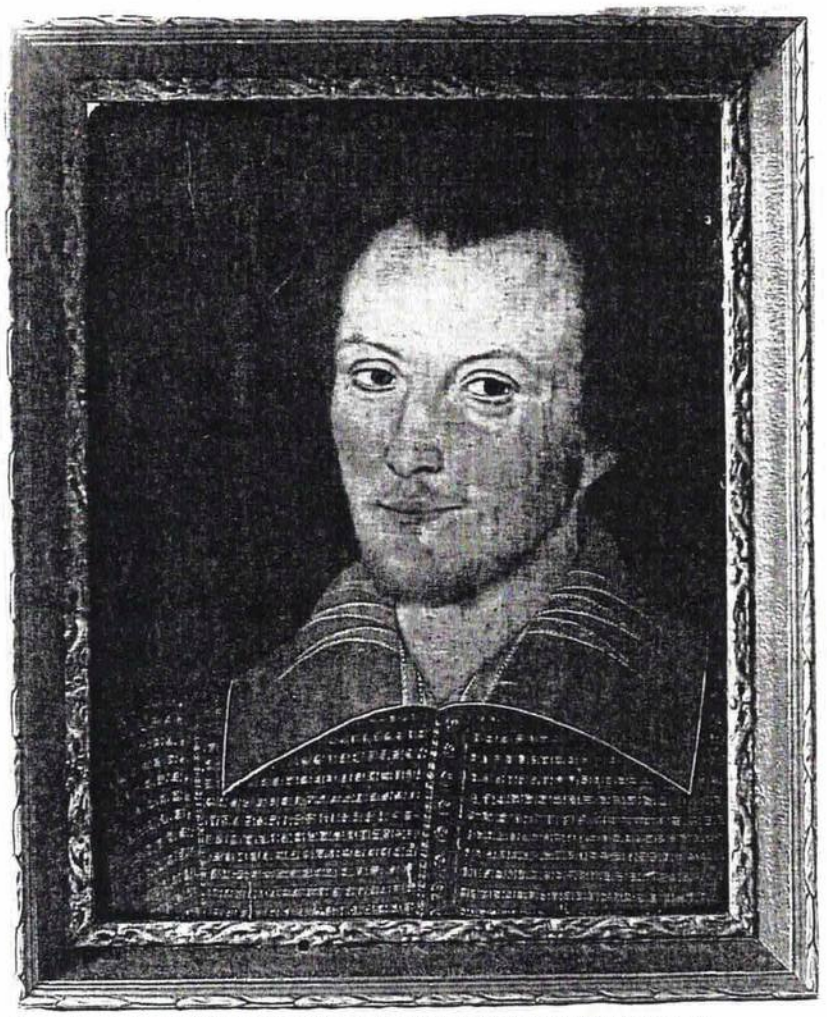
PORTIA

He is well paid that is well satisfied,
And I, delivering you, am satisfied,
And therein do account myself well paid:
My mind was never yet more mercenary.
I pray you know me when we meet again.
I wish you well, and so I take my leave.

(IV.1.407-420)

Mock Trials

1. Stage classroom trials of the charactersfor the following or other charges:
   a) Antonio - increasing a friend's debt
   b) Bassanio - wasting borrowed funds
   c) Gratiano - trash talking and racial slurs
   d) Portia - falling in love with appearances
   e) Nerissa - acting above her station
   f) Lorenzo - grand theft
   g) Jessica - betrayal of family trust
   h) Lancelet - deceit and opportunism
   i) Old Gobbo - for appearing in the play
   j) Tubal - wounding with bad news
   k) Salerio & Solanio - mob mentality
2. Become Shylock's defence attorney, and prepare a counter argument to the charges against him.
3. Add a few more comic scenes to the play, or make some of them funnier.
4. Hold Shakespeare on trial for making the Christians too good, and the Jew too bad.
5. Comedy or Tragedy? Who cares?



The portrait has been in Lloyd Sullivan's family for more than 400 years. PATTI GOWER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Contested portrait of William Shakespeare

Theory of Comedy

Northrop Frye

The tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society: the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated. Comedy often includes a scapegoat ritual of expulsion which gets rid of some irreconcilable character, but exposure and disgrace make for pathos, or even tragedy. *The Merchant of Venice* seems almost an experiment in coming as close as possible to upsetting the comic balance. If the dramatic role of Shylock is ever so slightly exaggerated, as it generally is when the leading actor of the company takes the part, it is upset, and the play becomes the tragedy of the Jew of Venice with a comic epilogue.

Sources: Northrop Fry, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), 165.

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Mercenary Justice

A.D. Moody

To emphasise the importance and centrality of irony, I would suggest that the play is "about" the manner in which the Christians succeed in the world by not practising their ideals of love and mercy; that it is about their exploitation of an assumed unworldliness to gain the worldly advantage over Shylock; and that, finally, it is about the essential likeness of Shylock and his judges, whose triumph is even more a matter of mercenary justice than his would have been. In his view the play does not celebrate the Christian virtues so much as expose their absence.

Yet this account too, though no less true than the more usual one, would be less than adequate to the experience. For the special quality of the play is that it refuses to endorse any such simple judgements. It compels an intensely sympathetic insight into Shylock's tragically corrupt nature, yet we are unlikely to identify ourselves with him. It reveals in the Christians a complacent inhumanity, and yet we are likely to find them attractive in their fashion. No account of the play which offers to see it in terms of simple good and evil can hope to satisfy. It is too subtle and exploratory for that; and also, perhaps, too ironic in its resolution....

The major instance of this irony is the contrast between Portia as we see her at Belmont, lightly disregarding the bonds of law and duty, and as we see her in the court, disguised as the wise doctor of law. One observation will be enough to suggest how grave the disparity could be, and to what ironic effect. When Portia declares, "I was never yet more mercenary," there is a curious and significant effect. The immediate sense, quite innocently playful, is clear enough. And yet "mercenary" is a startling word to have just there, the more so as it echoes "mercy," which would have seemed the obviously appropriate word. Behind the echo, as it happens, lies the fact that both words come from the same Latin root, *merces* (reward of fee). The direct, secular, development was to "mercenary," meaning "actuated by self-interest." But at the same time, through the influence in Christian Latin ..."mercy" came to mean "pity or compassion".... All this is manifestly very relevant to our thinking about Portia, in which a main question must be whether her conduct conforms to the ideal of loving one's neighbour as oneself, or is more nearly self-interested. Coming where it does, with its oddness and ambiguity, that "mercenary" crystallises the suspicion that what we have seen in her is perhaps literally mercenary, and that her appearance as Justice and Mercy has been a most deceiving disguise. There is then a possibility that Portia has outdone even the Venetians in subverting religion to her own worldly will, reducing its supreme principle of generous love to something nearly its opposite. *Can* Portia be said to love Shylock as herself, or as she loves her Christian friends?

However, this ironic questioning of Portia, though it is pervasive, is unlikely to lead us to reject her. What it should do is prevent the uncritical acceptance of her at face-value. After all, one of the main themes of the play is that "the world is still deceived with ornament," and the action is constantly exploring the ways in which the appearance and the reality may differ.... Shylock's image of "Christian fools with varnished faces" may be apt in more ways than its context at first suggests.

Source A.D. Moody, 'An Ironic Comedy, '*Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Merchant of Venice* (Prentice-Hall, 1970), 101-104.

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Comic Fairy Tale

Atypical Comedy

Roland Mushat Frye

In *The Merchant of Venice* we have a conflict of such proportions that it threatens to break out of the form of comedy. Shylock is a formidable figure on any count, but the extent to which he is a villain is debatable. He does, to be sure, insist upon cutting the forfeited pound of flesh out of Antonio's heart, and few indeed would deny that this is in intent an act of villainy. On the other hand, Shylock has been discriminated against, abused, insulted, humiliated, and even spit upon. The fact that Shakespeare was not creating Shylock as a piece of anti-Semitic vilification should be amply demonstrated by the way in which he has made us sympathize with him, even though we cannot sympathize with his blood-thirsty vindictiveness. The viciousness of the treatment which Shylock had himself suffered surely contributed to the viciousness of his own inhuman drive for revenge.

It seems plausible to conjecture, indeed, that Shakespeare's interest in this human process of hatred and counter-hatred led him to develop Shylock to such a degree that in *The Merchant of Venice* conflict and evil come closer to upsetting the balance of comedy than in any other play typical of Shakespeare's writing in this dramatic form. Nevertheless, Shylock is securely controlled by the wit of Portia, and the field is completely reversed upon his intended villainy. But as a result of the intensity of the conflict which swirls about Shylock, Shakespeare had to devote the last part of the fourth act and all of the fifth to redressing the balance of comedy, so that the play can end as a comedy should.

Shylock is thus atypical in the comedies, for the general pattern is not only to minimize villainy, but to keep conflicts between various characters on a scale where reconciliation is always possible.

Source: Roland Mushat Frye, *Shakespeare: The Art of the Dramatist* (Houghton Mifflin, 1970), 91-92.

The Return to Comedy

Harley Granville-Barker

The Merchant of Venice is a fairy tale. There is no more reality to Shylock's bond and the Lord of Belmont's will than in Jack and the Beanstalk.

Shakespeare, it is true, did not leave the fables as he found them. This would not have done; things that pass muster on the printed page may become quite incredible when acted by human beings, and the unlikelier the story, the likelier must the mechanism of its acting be made. Besides, when his own creative impulse was quickened, he could not help giving life to a character; he could no more help it than the sun can help shining. So Shylock is real, while his story remains fabulous; and Portia and Bassanio become human, though, truly, they never quite emerge from the enchanted thicket of fancy into the common light of day..... But Shakespeare's practical business, once he had chosen these two stories for his play, was simply so to charge them with humanity that they did not betray belief in the human beings presenting them, yet not so uncompromisingly that the stories themselves became ridiculous. (opening paragraphs of his preface)

Thence to Belmont [in Act V]; and while Lorenzo and Jessica paint its moonlit beauty for us, Balthasar and his clerk have time to change costume and tire their heads again for Portia and Nerissa.... The play ends, pleasantly and with formality, as a fairy tale should. One may wonder that the last speech is left (against tradition) to Gratiano; but one practical reason is plain. Portia and Bassanio, Antonio, Lorenzo and Jessica must pace off the stage in their stately Venetian way, while Gratiano's harmless ribaldry is tossed to the audience as an epilogue. Then he and Nerissa, now with less dignity than ever to lose, skip quickly after. (closing paragraph)

Source: Harley Grenville-Barker, *Prefaces To Shakespeare* Volume I (Princeton,1946), 333-363.

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Perfidious Love

LORENZO

The moon shines bright. In such a night as this,
When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees,
And they did make no noise, in such a night
Troilus methinks mounted the Troyan walls,
And sigh'd his soul toward the Grecian tents
Where Cressid lay that night.

JESSICA In such a night

Did Thisbe fearfully o'er trip the dew,
And saw the lion's shadow ere himself,
And ran dismay'd away.

LORENZO In such a night

Stood Dido with a willow in her hand
Upon the wild sea-banks, and waft her love
To come again to Carthage.

JESSICA In such a night

Medea gather'd the enchanted herbs
That did renew old Æson.

LORENZO In such a night

Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew,
And with an unthrift love did run from Venice,
As far as Belmont.

JESSICA In such a night

Did young Lorenzo swear he lov'd her well,
Stealing her soul with many vows of faith,
And ne'er a true one.

LORENZO In such a night

Did pretty Jessica, like a little shrew,
Slander her love, and he forgave it her.

JESSICA

I would out-night you, did nobody come;
But hark, I hear the footing of a man.

(V.1.1-24)



Performing Pairs

Select a partner and agree how you wish to perform the dialogue of lovers that appears above. Then perform it for an audience.

Lyrical Seduction

1. What effect does the repeated phrase "In such a night" have on you?
2. Why may Lorenzo's opening lines lull us into a sweet surrender?
3. How may rhythm and repetition conceal dreadful consequences?
4. What makes the moon an ideal icon for unstable or perfidious lovers?
5. Cressid, Thisbe, Dido, and Medea: What do these lovers have in common?
6. How did Troilus' passion for Cressid ignite the Trojan War? Or was it Helen?
7. How did Medea suffer from Jason's pursuit of the golden fleece?
8. Connect words from their 'out-night' banter that echo elsewhere in the play.
9. What is the tone of the banter: Is it comic with dark details, or serious with light playfulness? Or something else?
10. How may comedy be used to cover or forgive our faults?

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To Be or Not to Be Act Five

Belmont Revisited

Miriam Gilbert

Shylock's power, even in defeat – or perhaps especially in defeat – is one of Shakespeare's dazzling reversals, as he transforms the villain into the victim. As Shylock increasingly took centre stage, and as nineteenth-century productions became ever more elaborate, thus making set changes more difficult, the text not only got rearranged, with Belmont scenes placed together, but cut. By the mid-nineteenth century, the play sometimes ended with Shylock's exit, as in the production starring Edwin Booth. When Henry Irving began producing the play in 1879, he restored the last act (somewhat cut, both in terms of lyrical speeches and sexual bawdy) – though a year later it vanished again, to reappear in his productions from time to time.

But twentieth-century productions have almost always included Act 5, usually seeing it as a short sequence of love lyricism, comedy and finally harmony.... So powerful is the evocation of lovers in a moonlit night, so hypnotic the repeated 'In such a night', that it may seem churlish to ask 'Is Belmont really a place of romance and harmony?' But that questioning has become one that is asked more and more often, especially at the beginning and end of the play's final scene.

As many critics have noted, most extensively Paul Gaudet, the lyrical dialogue between Lorenzo and Jessica, with its references to a series of unhappy love relationships, may seem an unusual conversation for two young newly-weds. Why, one might ask, should they be talking about Troilus and Cressida, Pyramus and Thisbe, Dido and Aeneas or, more frighteningly, Medea, the sorceress who helped Jason win the golden fleece and who later, when abandoned by him, murdered their two children? M.M. Mahood, the Cambridge editor of the play, notes that Jessica's reference to 'the enchanted herbs' stresses Medea's healing powers when she made Jason's father young again. But I still find it difficult to escape the more sinister connotations of this reference for Medea later tricked the daughters of Jason's uncle (and enemy) into killing their father by telling them that her magic herbs would restore his youth. Thus, for Jessica to mention Medea is, in part, to raise questions about daughters who betray fathers and about women who destroy men. Perhaps, as Gaudet suggests, she is 'struggling to sustain an increasingly untenable fiction and to rationalize a residual guilt'.

Given all the dark undertones to these references, the question for directors and actors then becomes: do the characters choose the references deliberately, perhaps to express some kind of underlying tension in the Lorenzo/Jessica relationship, or do they speak the lines with a sense of light-hearted banter, or are they completely unaware of the darker implications of their words? Most productions have chosen something like the middle option, giving Lorenzo and Jessica a chance to tease each other, but with the knowledge that the teasing is a kind of sexual foreplay, since the two almost always wind up in an embrace later in the scene, as suggested by Portia's lines, 'the moon sleeps with Endymion / And would not be awak'd.'

Comic Distance in Act Five

1. Man slips on banana peel: up close may be tragic; at a distance may be comic. 'Comedy equals tragedy plus time.' How does Act 5 create distance from the previous Acts?
2. Like laughing in the dark, what are the dark shadows lurking in Act 5?
3. In your production of this play, argue for or against the retention of Act 5.
4. Granville-Barker argued that Launcelot in Act 5 is 'incongruously superfluous'. Would you keep him in your production?
5. Explain some of the jokes (puns) in Act 5.

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Sweet Sounds

LORENZO

Leave holloaing, man! Here.

LANCELET

Tell him there's a post come from my master with his horn full of good news. My master will be here ere morning. [*Lancelet exits.*]

LORENZO, [*to Jessica*]

Sweet soul, lets in ....
My friend Stephano, signify, I pray you,
Within the house, your mistress is at hand,
And bring your music forth into the air.
[*Stephano exits.*]
How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank.
Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears; soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.
Sit Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.
There' not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins.
Such harmony is in immortal souls.
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.
[*Enter Musicians*]
Come ho, and wake Diana with a hymn!
With sweetest touches pierce your mistress' ear,
And draw her home with music. [*Music plays*]

JESSICA

I am never merry when I hear sweet music.

LORENZO

The reason is, your spirits are attentive.

* * *

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils.
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.

(46-85)



cornucopia, horn of plenty

Harmony

1. The clown enters and mimics a horn with 'Sola, sola!': Time for a pun and a cornucopia of good news. Is this a comic prelude to music?
2. Does music disperse sadness, and bring happiness to the participants?
3. Why does heavenly harmony not ensure human harmony?
4. What harmony must still be restored in Belmont?
5. Where is Shylock in this scene? Does your sense of harmony include aliens?
6. 'Such harmony is in immortal souls.' If so, why do we fail to hear it?
7. Can we achieve harmony with others without achieving it within ourselves?
8. Irony is the contradiction of words and behaviour. Is it true of this play?
9. The ring plot suggests that awareness and harmony go hand in hand. How do you see it?

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Harmony

Self-Knowledge

Inge Leimberg

In the first seven lines of the play, Antonio complained of having "much ado to know [him]self"; and in the last scene he is told by Portia that the knowledge he now, perhaps, most urgently desires, is denied him, and Antonio, accepting the denial, answers "I am dumb." *Dumb* has far from pejorative connotations in Shakespeare....

The theme of self-knowledge is not dropped after Antonio's "I am dumb." On the contrary, it is reopened when the transition from end to beginning takes place, which is factually identical with the transition from the stage play to everyday life. In that no-man's-land between night and day, the stage and the world, illusion and reality, art and nature are to be answered "faithfully." Faith is "the evidence of things not seen," or, since vision means knowledge, the certainty of things not known. The exchange of questions and answers that is now to take place will have that kind of "evidence" and certainty, and, it is to be hoped, harmony.

According to Kepler, harmony is not realized by the quality of its components or the proportions determining their composition. It comes into being only when those components and proportions are internalized by the human soul and compared by it with its own archetypal harmony. Similarly, according to Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*, the kind of knowledge which comes into its own in self-knowledge is not something that can be learned and mastered, once and for all, like a special branch of science, but an activity that is inseparable from the life of the soul, a continual discourse of questions asked and answers given, not knowingly but "faithfully."

And now the end of the play has come. Portia has said: "Let us go in," and Gratiano concludes: "Let it be so." ...

Source: Inge Leimberg, *What may words say . . .?* (Fairleigh Dickinson, 2011), 240-242.

Limited Harmony

Alexander Leggatt

The harmony of the comic ending must be achieved by selection; Portia's speeches about finding beauty by shutting out distractions have suggested as much.... The play includes many characters—notably Shylock—who have no part in the final scene. Antonio is on stage, but his involvement is limited and his share in the lovers' harmony is dubious. And the comic stylization of the ring sequence, though it functions effectively on its own terms, involves a narrowing of the play's stylistic and emotional range. In short, the play has shown a larger world than it can finally bring into harmony. This sense of instability is reflected in the dramatic idiom. The play's ultimate gamble is to combine conventionalized action with human reality, naturalistically conceived. This combination produces shifting, unpredictable results, from the trust in convention in the casket scenes to the distaste of the trial scene, in which the conventionalized action suggests an unhealthy narrowing of vision. In the end Shakespeare pulls back from some of the new territory he has explored. The ring sequence, with its patterned teams of lovers ... and games of romantic love, presents, in a now familiar way, an image of order coming from apparent disorder: it is a standard comic ending. But such an ending is itself a convention, and in *The Merchant of Venice* that convention, for all its power, is allowed only a limited success in bringing order out of an intractable world. The security the lovers attain is, like the candle that shines from Portia's house, "a good deed in a naughty world," an area of private happiness for those who can achieve it. The gamble of wedding complex characters to formalized action is exciting. But the combination is too volatile to allow more than a limited sense of harmony at the end.

Source: Alexander Leggatt, 'The Fourth and Fifth Acts,' *The Merchant of Venice* (Signet Classic, 1987), 191-2.

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Act Five

Ring Plot

PORTIA

A quarrel, ho, already! what's the matter?

GRATIANO

About a hoop of gold, a paltry ring
That she did give me, whose posy was
For all the world like cutler's poetry
Upon a knife, "Love me, and leave me not."

NERISSA

What talk you of the posy, or the value?
You swore to me, when I did give it you,
That you would wear it till your hour of death,
And that it should lie with you in your grave.
Though not for me, yet for your vehement oaths,
You should have been respective and have kept it.
(V.1.159-179)

BASSANIO

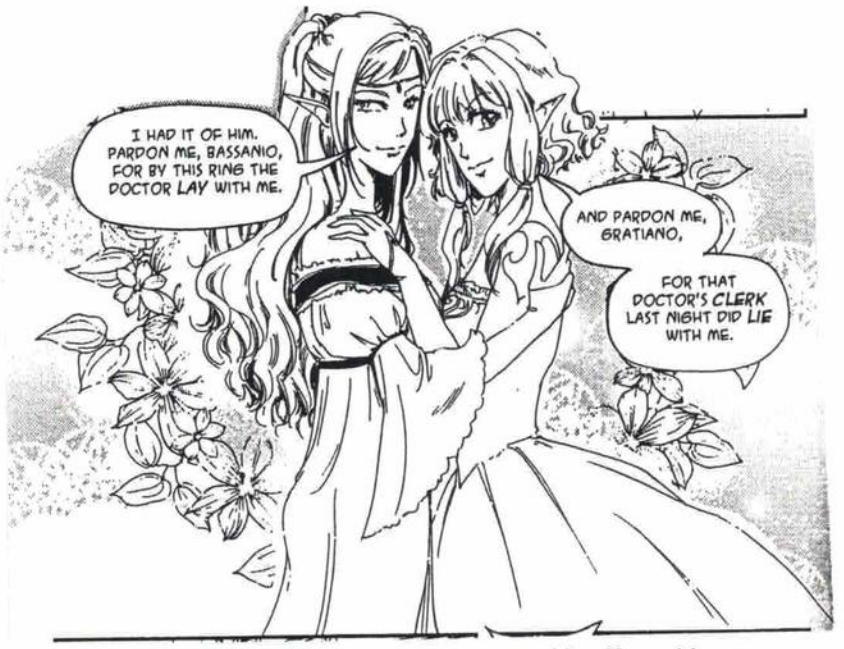
Sweet Portia,
If you did know to whom I gave the ring,
If you did know for whom I gave the ring,
And would conceive for what I gave the ring,
And how unwillingly I left the ring
When naught would be accepted but the ring,
You would abate the strength of your displeasure.

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.
What man is there so much unreasonable,
If you had pleased to have defended it
With any terms of zeal, wanted the modesty
To urge the thing held as ceremony?
Nerissa teaches me what to believe:
I'll die for't but some woman had the ring.
(V.1.208-224)

GRATIANO

Well, while I live, I'll fear no other thing
So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring.
(V.1.328-329)



Manga *Merchant of Venice*, illustrated by Faye Yong

Vehement Oaths

1. Gratiano and Bassanio are being had. Pair up and perform the two dialogues. How would you keep Nerissa and Portia from laughing?
2. Count the number of 'rings' — and decide if Gratiano's last 'ring' in the play is the same as all the others.
3. Since the audience is in on the ring joke, how does its repetition augment the comedy?
4. What other ribald remarks does Gratiano make in this scene? Are they in character? Does he "mar the young clerk's pen"?
5. How does Shakespeare use gender identity for comic effect? Why are we willing to suspend our disbelief — that Portia and Nerissa are not recognized by their mates?
6. Never make an oath (or a bond) you cannot keep! How does the ring plot mesh with the casket and bond plots?
7. Antonio swears "I dare be bound again / My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord / Will never more break faith advisedly." How does this bond differ from all the others? Can it be kept in "a naughty world"?

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Redemption

Marc Shell

The process of the last scene in *The Merchant of Venice* will indeed "mar the young clerk's pen" by revealing the Clerk (with a penis) to have been Nerissa whose ring Gratiano, threatened with being cuckolded, finally learns that he must keep safe.

At this point, however, Gratiano tries to defend his giving the ring to the Clerk by arguing that the ring was a mere "trifle." The offended Nerissa's rejoinder is that neither the epigrammatic posy inscribed in the ring nor the metal of which the ring is made tells its true value. As in the episodes involving the suitors' interpretations of the inscribed caskets and coins, the gist is that one should attend to more than the statements impressed in and the exchange values of metals. The symptomatic derogation of Nerissa's gold ring by Gratiano further diminishes our trust in the ability of metals to test human mettle and in Bassanio's choice of the lead casket. Will Bassanio, who gave Portia's ring to Balthasar, be able to pick up courting Portia where he left off?

Portia agrees to forgive Bassanio for "break[ing] an oath" if he swears the only "oath of credit" she will accept, an oath "by [his] double self". As it happens, Antonio offers to "second" Bassanio. In a striking spiritual recapitulation of the original bond between Antonio and Shylock, which seems to lift that bond from the lives of bodies to that of souls, he says, "I dare be bound again / My soul upon the forfeit...." If Antonio at the beginning of the play was a spiritual usurer who lent his body, he becomes at the end a usuer of money who lends his soul.

In exchange for Antonio's soul as "surety" in the new bargain, Portia gives the ring to Antonio. Antonio, who staked the beginning of the Bassanio-Portia courtship , now oversees its completion when he gives the ring to Bassanio. He marries no woman (he does marry in one of Shakespeare's sources), but he is the one who marries or presides over the union of Portia with Bassanio. Thus the tainted wether plays the role of holy hermit. The difficult fix is again "redeemed" by Antonio's personal surety....

Ring Plot

The Merchant of Venice may be treated as a medieval duel (a kind of moot court of law, torture, or combat) in which the synthesis of the dual theses (the defense and the prosecution) is merely an illusion. Perhaps Shylock's early elimination from the stage tends to make us believe or want to believe in the dissolution of the "differences" between Jew and Christian or between money-lender and nobleman. But the drama is not a tragedy in which two opposite forces are cancelled—destroyed, incorporated, and transcended. (The marriage bond is very like the revenge bond. Since the former is not cancelled—it is rather the expected end—neither can the latter be cancelled anywhere but in Portia's topical court and courtship.) The confrontation between Christian and Jew — "the difference of [their] spirit[s]" — or between capitalist merchant and feudal royal aristocrat, and the subsequent conversions between two groups (Shylock's to Christianity, for example, and the royal-merchant Antonio's to Jewish usury) hints that such a dramatic movement is possible. But the end of the comedy does not depict the tragic destruction of an old order (one that would sweep Venice away) or the creation of a new domestic and political economy. No single bond is genuinely cancelled and redeemed. The fate of Shylock, who sold his revenge, is not a dispensation or reckoning (*moira*) like that parceled out by Greek tragedy but rather an apportionment to him by the comedist Portia.

Source: Marc Shell, "The Wether and the Ewe: Verbal Usury," *Modern Critical Interpretations: The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Harold Bloom (Chelsea House, 1986), 116-120

Ring Farce

Leslie A. Fiedler

It is all, of course, pure farce, though only Portia realizes the fact; but it is for her, farce without a purpose: a burlesque lover's quarrel intended partly as erotic foreplay, partly as a way to even her score with her rival, Antonio.

Source: Leslie A. Fiedler, "These Be the Christian Husbands," Modern Critical Interpretations: *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Harold Bloom (Chelsea House, 1986), 89.

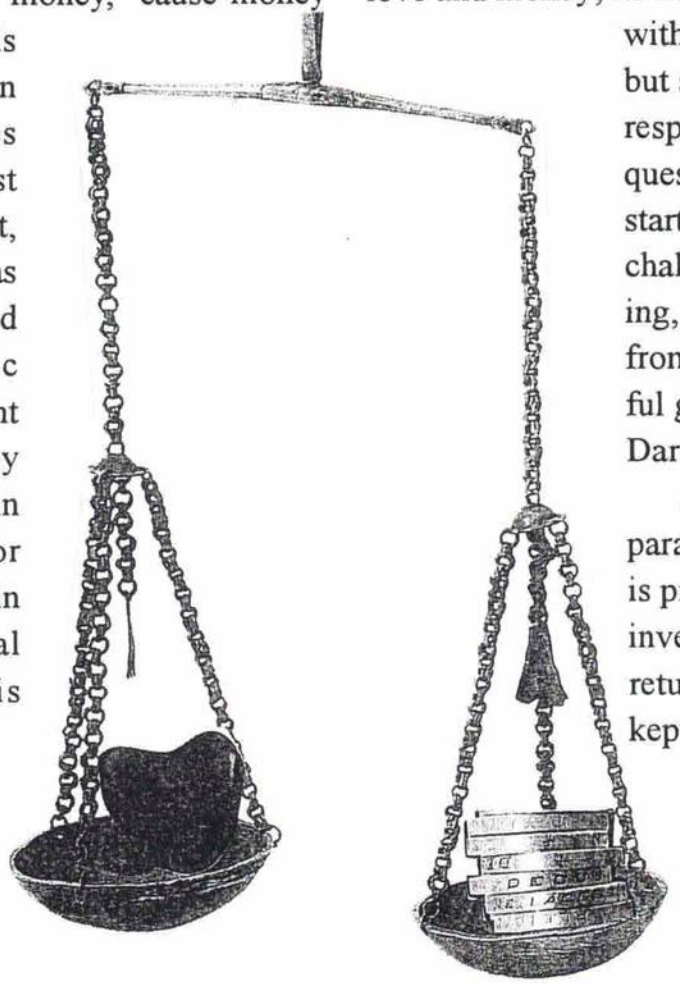
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Themes

Love and Money

Richard Harp

A perennial question for some persons of every generation is: shall I marry for love or for money? It is typical of the open-minded Shakespeare that he finds nothing wrong with marrying for both. There is in him no niggardly stinginess, no ghostly idealism that finds something amiss with combining the noblest spiritual ideal—love—with the most fundamental material reality—money. Without of course wishing to challenge the general wisdom of the Beatles' classic formulation "I don't care too much for money, 'cause money can't buy me love," there is more compatibility between the two than is sometimes acknowledged. The richest king in the Old Testament, for example, Solomon, was also the one who indulged the most his romantic desires. The Old Testament patriarch Jacob, praised by the comic villain Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* for his clever industriousness in multiplying his financial gains when breeding his father-in-law Laban's sheep, was also the most romantic of the patriarchs, working for seven years to marry his heart's desire, Rachel, only to be tricked by Laban into having to work still another seven years to gain her hand—and doing this without complaint. And even Shylock, who dreams at night of moneybags, has a sentimental side; when his friend Tubal tells him of the rumor that his daughter Jessica has sold a family ring "for a monkey," the old moneylender laments, "It was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor."



One stereotyped romantic plot familiar to everyone has parents warning their daughters against fortune hunters and consequently insisting on arranging marriages with young men of equal fortune so that their social status and wealth will be safeguarded. But great stories have been written that also work against this theme. *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, is the famous account of a rich aristocrat, Mr. Darcy, rejecting … his peers' expectations about whom he should marry and choosing finally a spouse of modest income. But the novel still makes clear the compatibility of love and money; its heroine, Elizabeth Bennet without question loves Darcy, but she also has no hesitation in responding to her sister Jane's question about when she first started to love the romantically-challenged gentleman by saying, "I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley," Darcy's grand country estate….

According to the Biblical parable of the talents, money is properly used when it is invested and brings forth a good return, not when it is hoarded or kept back from supporting good enterprises….In these texts, so familiar to all persons in Shakespeare's time, money has power to build up and transform society for the common good, as love has power to change the supple human form to something more enduring. The perversion of commerce and the pursuit of wealth in *The Merchant of Venice* is usury, the exorbitant charging of interest on transactions where no new wealth is created….

Source: Richard Harp, "Love and Money in *The Merchant of Venice*," Modern Age, Winter 2010, 37-8.

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Themes

Justice and Mercy

Nevill Coghill



Now if we allow [a] Christian tradition of a former age to show us a pathway into Shakespeare, it will lead us to a theme that can make a unity of *The Merchant of Venice*, and solve our dilemma.

The play can be seen as a presentation of the theme of Justice and Mercy, of the Old Law and the New. This puts an entirely different complexion upon the conflict of Jew and Gentile. The two principles for which, in Shakespeare's play, respectively, they stand, are both inherently right. They are only in conflict because, whereas God is held to be absolutely just as He is absolutely merciful, mortal and finite man can only be relatively so, and must arrive at a compromise. In human affairs either justice must yield a little to mercy, or mercy to justice; the former solution is the triumph of the New Law, and the conflict between Shylock and Portia is an *exemplum* of this triumph.... [T]hey are allegorical in the sense that they adumbrate, embody, maintain, or stand for these concepts, while remaining individuals in fullest humanity. Shylock, therefore, should seem a great Old Testament figure, a patriarch perhaps, standing for the Law; and he will be tricked, just as Satan was tricked by the Incarnation, according to the tradition of the Middle Ages.... We must not, therefore, think the ruse by which Portia entraps Shylock is some sly part of her character, for it is in the tradition; besides she gives Shylock every chance. Thrice his money is offered him. He is begged to supply a surgeon. But no, it is not in the bond. From the point of view of the medium of theater, the scene is, of course, constructed on the principle of peripeteia, or sudden reversal of situation, one of the great devices of dramaturgy. At one moment we see Mercy a suppliant to Justice, and at the next, in a flash, Justice is suppliant to Mercy. The reversal is as instantaneous as it is unexpected to an audience that does not know the story in advance. Portia plants the point firmly: "Down, therefore, and beg mercy of the Duke." And, in a twinkling, mercy shows her quality: [the Duke responds] "That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit, / I pardon thee thy life before thou aske it."

Out of this there comes the second reversal. Shylock, till then pursuing Antonio's life, now has to turn to him for favor; and this is Antonio's response: [that he leave his estate to Lorenzo and Jessica, and that he become a Christian.]

Evidently Antonio recognizes the validity of legal deeds as much as Shylock does and his opinion on Jessica's relationship with Lorenzo is in agreement with Shakespeare's, namely that the bond between husband and wife overrides the bond between father and daughter. ... Nor is it wholly alien to Shylock who is himself a family man. For him to provide for Jessica and Lorenzo is not unnaturally harsh.

It is Antonio's second condition that seems to modern ears so fiercely vindictive. In these days all good humanitarians incline to the view that a man's religion is as good as another, if sincerely followed.

But the Elizabethans were not humanitarians in this sense.... Whether we dislike it or not, Shylock had no hope, by Elizabethan standards, of entering a Christian eternity of blessedness; he had not been baptized. It would not have been his cruelty that would have excluded him....

Shylock had spent the play pursuing the mortal life of Antonio (albeit for private motives) in the name of justice. Now, at this reversal, in the name of mercy, Antonio offers him the chance of eternal life, his own best jewel....

[F]rom Antonio's point of view, Shylock has at least been given his chance of eternal joy, and it is he, Antonio, that has given it to him. Mercy has triumphed over justice, even if the way of mercy is a hard way....

Source: Nevill Coghill, "The Theme of *The Merchant of Venice*," Twentieth Century Interpretations of *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (Prentice Hall, 1970), 110-113.

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LANCELET: Do you not know me, father?
GOBBO: Alack, sir I am sandblind. I know you not.

Comic Purblindness

John Palmer

Shylock, carrying his hatred to extremes, exposes the injustice and ferocity of the social institutions from which it springs. He appeals to the twin laws of retribution and property on which the society in which he lives is based. Nothing is further from Shakespeare's mind than to convey a lesson. But the lesson is there, product of a perfectly balanced and sensitive mind intent upon the dramatic presentation of human realities. The debated question whether Shakespeare writing certain passages of *The Merchant of Venice* was pleading for toleration or indicting Christian hypocrisy, exalting equity above the law or divine mercy above human justice, does not arise. He presents a situation in which all these issues are involved, characters in which their effects are displayed, arguments appropriate to the necessary incidents and persons of the comedy; and leaves it to his critics to draw the indictment or convey the apology. His purpose was to write a comedy and he is never more intent on this purpose than in the scene whose moral implications have excited so much interest among those who study the play in the light of their own ethical and social standards. Shylock eagerly producing the bond for Portia's inspection—the bond which is to prove his own undoing—is undeniably comic. So is Shylock examining the bond to verify that the flesh must be cut from Antonio nearest his heart. So is Shylock looking in vain for any mention of a surgeon. So is Shylock applauding the wisdom of the judge who is about to ruin him. So, above all, is Shylock promptly asking for the return of his money when he realises that his claim to Antonio's flesh will not be allowed.

And behind all this obvious comedy is the indifferent irony of the comic spirit which, in presenting the human realities of a situation, necessarily exposes the blindness of human beings to their own inconsistencies: Portia, singing the praises of mercy when she is about to insist that the Jew shall have the full rigours of justice according to the strict letter of the law; Antonio, congratulating himself on his magnanimity in the very act of imposing on his enemy a sentence which deprives him of everything he values; Christian and Jew mutually charging one another with an inhumanity which is common to both parties.

How Shylock, imagined by Shakespeare as a comic figure and sustaining his comic character to the last, was yet able to become a depositary of the vengeance of his race, the ruins of a great and noble nature and the most respectable person in the play is now perhaps sufficiently evident. The question when and how, if ever, Shylock ceases to be comic answers itself as we read the play. To the question when? the answer, if we bear in mind that Shakespeare's comedy springs from imaginative sympathy and not from intellectual detachment, is: never for an instant. The question how? should not therefore arise.... No-one can remain wholly insensible to the emotional impact of the play. The imaginative effort expended by Shakespeare in making his Jew a comprehensibly human figure has imparted to him a vitality that every now and then stifles laughter and freezes the smile on our lips. If these passages are rightly handled by the actor or accorded their just place and value by the reader, the comedy remains intact. If, on the contrary, these passages are thrown into high relief and made to stand out of their context, the comedy is destroyed. Heinrich Heine maintained that Shakespeare intended to write a comedy but was too great a man to succeed. This comes very near the truth, but what really happened was something rather more subtle and difficult to describe. Shakespeare took the comic Jew for a theme, and wrote a true comedy. But it was a comedy after his own pattern and desire—a comedy in which ridicule does not exclude compassion, in which sympathy and detachment are reconciled in the irony which is necessarily achieved by the comic spirit in a serene presentation of things as they are.

Source: John Palmer, *Comic Characters of Shakespeare* (Macmillan, 1946), 86-88.

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Themes

The Cosmic Dance
E.M.W. Tillyard

Ever since the early Greek philosophers creation had been figured as an act of music; and the notion appealed powerfully to the poetically or the mystically minded. As late as 1687 Dryden gave it its best-known rendering in English poetry, keeping strictly to the old tradition.

> From harmony, from heavenly harmony,
> This universal frame began:
> When nature underneath a heap
> Of jarring atoms lay
> And could not heave her head,
> The tuneful voice was heard from high:
> Arise, ye more than dead.
> Then cold and hot and moist and dry
> In order to their stations leap
> And music's power obey.
> From harmony, from heavenly harmony,
> This universal frame began:
> From harmony to harmony
> Through all the compass of the notes it ran.
> The diapason closing full in man.

But there was the further notion that the created universe was itself in a state of music, that it was one perpetual dance. It was a commonplace in the Middle Ages and occurs in the works of Isidore of Seville, most popular of all encyclopedists. He wrote: "Nothing exists without music; for the universe itself is said to have been framed by a kind of harmony of sounds, and heaven itself revolves under the tones of that harmony."

The idea of creation as a dance implies 'degree', but degree in motion. The static battalions of the earthly, celestial, and divine hierarchies are sped on a varied but controlled peregrination to the accompaniment of music. The path of each is different, yet all the paths together make up a perfect whole. Shakespeare's

> Take but degree away, untune that string,
> And hark, what discord follows,

together with Lorenzo's speech on music shows his knowledge of the general doctrine. (109-110)

Lorenzo says to Jessica after referring to the quiring orbs:

> Such harmony is in immortal souls;
> But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
> Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

A further imagining – perfect example of that fusion of Plato and Genesis that appealed as strongly to the Elizabethans as to any generation that had accepted it – was that before the Fall man *could* hear the music.

Source: E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (Penguin, 1986), 57, 109-110.

Allegory and Mysticism in Shakespeare
Sir Israel Gollancz

The theory of the music of the spheres goes back to the mysticism of the Middle Ages in a remarkable way. Shakespeare does not borrow the whole thing from Plato directly or indirectly. He links the Platonic idea with the Biblical, and in place of the Sirens in Plato we have the Cherubim. That he derives from the medieval plays; "Seraphim" was the word the prophet Isaiah used. The idea of the music of the spheres we have in Pythagoras; and Plato uses this in a remarkable way. Then we have it declared in *Job* that "the morning stars sang together." The medieval idea of the mystics was very wonderful. It was this: that souls away from the uncleanliness of the world may catch the echo, an echo as it were, of the heavenly music.

The idea was very beautiful. And Shakespeare, through the speech of Jessica and Lorenzo, in a marvellous way shows us his hope that man divested of the muddy vesture—which is not merely the corporeal flesh, but evil, that is, hatred, indignity, narrowness, strife—all those elements removed, may then have hope again. Then it is as though Shakespeare had this idea: Truth will spring up from the earth; and Righteousness will meet Truth from heaven; Mercy and Truth will meet together; and Righteousness and Peace will kiss. So the whole of that play is rounded off with the idea that fascinated Shakespeare: the problem of harmony.

Source: Sir Israel Gollancz, *Allegory and Mysticism in Shakespeare* (Folcroft Press, 1931), 67-68.

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SHYLOCK

Lock up my doors … when you hear the drum
And the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife

And others, when the bagpipe sings i' th' nose,
Cannot contain their urine

Fulfillment and Reconciliation

Lawrence Danson

There are heard melodies in *The Merchant of Venice*: the song "Tell me where is Fancy bred" accompanies Bassanio's casket-choice, and in act 5 Lorenzo calls upon Portia's musicians to "draw her home with music" (5.1.70). There are unheard melodies too. A masque had been planned in Venice. It should have been accompanied by fife and drum, and against its "sound of shallow fopp'ry" Shylock had warned Jessica to "stop my house's ear"s (2.5.29-36). But that joyfully raucous noise had to be postponed in favor of the more serious business of wooing. Now, in act 5, a sweeter sort of unheard melody is invoked by Lorenzo for the benefit of the attentive Jessica; the heard music that sounds throughout much of the last act is sensory approximation of that heavenly music which (as Lorenzo explains) sounds just beyond the threshold of our gross mortal perception.

The limits of sensory experience and the folly of trusting to even the most reasonable shows of the world are alluded to several times in the play. It is a part of the "moral" of the casket-trials. Those who "choose by show" (2.9.26), taking their evidence only from what can be seen or heard, will never choose aright. Those "worldly choosers" are contrasted with another sort who "choose not by the view" (3.2.131); the latter enact a secular demonstration of the faith which, according to St. Paul, "is the grounde of things which are hoped for, and the evidence of things which are not sene.".At one extreme stands Shylock, whose faithful adherence to the literal makes him deaf and blind to what might be discovered in "soft stillness and the night" (5.1.56). But in Belmont, in the last act, the person who has an attentive ear and a spiritual eye is granted a fleeting perception, muted and lit only by candle and stars, of "the deepe things of God"….

Therefore, in *The Merchant of Venice*, music properly accompanies Bassanio's casket-choice; it properly is called upon to draw home Portia and Nerissa; and it properly suggests itself as the accompaniment to the tripartite dance of gracious giving that unites Bassanio, Portia, and Antonio. And, of course, it confirms the difference between the play's two merchants: Antonio, who is out-of-tune as the play opens but is attuned when he extends his love beyond the circle of his friends; and Shylock, who wilfully prefers his silent entombment in the flesh.

Source: Lawrence Danson, *The Harmonies of The Merchant of Venice* (Yale, 1978), 170-188.



Mutable Motifs

1. Ignore all previously expressed opinions. From your own close reading of the play, select a motif that unifies the play for you.
2. Write a short essay on your chosen motif.
3. *The Merchant of Venice* is a kaleidoscope of multi-patterns. Shake the play again. What new patterns do you see?
4. Would you agree with Shylock's view of the fife and drum — and the bagpipe?
5. Play a discordant note against music.
6. How is music in the play used for deception and seduction? Or could be argued so?
7. What makes the play so rich is that it cannot be nailed to any theme! How do you see it?

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Sources

Il Pecorone: The Simpleton

Giovanni Fiorentino (1378)

Most of the major plot elements as well as themes in *The Merchant of Venice* appear in Fiorentino's first tale told on the fourth day in *Il pecorone*, though Shakespeare alters them and, combining them with elements from other sources (not least his own fertile imagination), transforms them into something far more compelling, both dramatically and intellectually. In Fiorentino's tale, for example, Giannetto (the hero) is the adopted son of a wealthy Venetian, Ansaldo, a friend of his lately deceased father—not Giannetto's older friend, as Antonio is to Bassanio. Ansaldo showers gifts as well as affection upon Giannetto, and when the young man wants to take a trip with two of his friends to Alexandria, Ansaldo provides him with a ship like theirs, fully fitted out for the journey. En route, as the ships pass Belmonte, Giannetto learns about the mysterious lady who rules there. She has promised to give herself and everything she has to the man who possesses her. Intrigued, Giannetto gives his friends the slip, enters the harbour, and is entertained graciously by the lady. In the evening, after a great feast, he and the lady retire to her bedchamber, where she invites him to drink before going to bed. The drink is drugged, and soon as the young man's head touches the pillow, he falls asleep till well after daybreak. As a forfeit, Giannetto is obliged to surrender his ship and everything in it.

Giannetto sneaks back to Venice, chagrined and ashamed, but is at last persuaded to see Ansaldo, who believes his false story about shipwreck and forgives him. Smitten with love for the lady of Belmonte, Giannetto determines to try his luck again, and again he fails in exactly the same way. By now Ansaldo has spent most of his wealth, but he is willing to borrow from a Jewish money-lender so that Giannetto can try once more to sail to Alexandria and make his fortune, which he repeatedly proclaims as his goal. This time, taking pity on the handsome and debonair young man, a servant girl warns him about the drink, and Giannetto successfully possesses the lady—to everyone's delight and satisfaction. In his new-found joy, however, he forgets the due date on Ansaldo's bond, which elapses, leaving the benefactor at the mercy of the Jew, who thereupon demands his pound of flesh, the forfeit agreed upon. When belatedly Giannetto arrives with the money, the Jew refuses payment, insisting on his forfeit. Meanwhile, the lady also arrives, disguised as a lawyer, and foils the Jew's wishes. She also succeeds in getting a ring from Giannetto that his bride had given him, and at the end reveals her deception and cleverness. Ansaldo returns with them to Belmonte and is married to the servant girl who had told Giannetto how to win the lady.



While certain similarities to the Belmont plot in *The Merchant of Venice* are immediately apparent, differences also emerge that are equally if not more important. The lady's motivation for tricking her suitors suggests a concupiscence that does not fit with her otherwise noble character; hence, Shakespeare adds a more virtuous motivation, borrowed from the story in the *Gesta romanorum*. The Jew's behaviour also lacks adequate motivation. Of an ancient grudge between the two principals, or a 'merry bond', there is nothing. The only suggestion of religious rivalry occurs in the Jew's explanation of his intransigence, simply that he could then boast that he had put to death the greatest of Christian merchants. While other merchants appeal to the Jew to relent, and Giannetto arrives and offers many times over the original sum borrowed, the trial lacks Portia's eloquent speech on mercy as well as most of the drama of the situation, though it heightens the comedy. Retaining the lady's insistence that the Jew extract precisely one pound of flesh without spilling so much as a drop of blood, the episode ends not with forced conversion of the Jew, but with his furious anger as, outwitted completely, he tears the bond to pieces.

Source: Jay L. Halio, "Introduction," *The Merchant of Venice* (Clarendon Press, 1993), 14-16.

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Sources

THE

NOVEL

FROM WHICH

The MERCHANT of VENICE

IS TAKEN.

THERE lived at Florence, in the houſe of the Scali, a merchant whoſe name was Bindo, who had been ſeveral times at Tana, and at Alexandria, and had made the other long voyages uſually made by the merchants. This Bindo was rich, and had three ſons grown to man's eſtate. He being near his end, called for the two eldeſt, and in their preſence made his will, and left theſe two heirs of every thing he had in the world: to the youngeſt he left nothing. The will being made, this youngeſt, whoſe name was Giannetto, hearing what had been done, went to his father's bedſide, and ſaid to him, What has my father done? not to have mentioned me in his will is ſomewhat extraordinary. The father replied, My dear Giannetto, there is no creature living

B to

Palimpsest

1. Artistic creation is seldom in a vacuum. Show how Shakespeare used the various tales that inspired him.
2. Some of the early medieval sources of *The Merchant Venice* were moralistic. How did Shakespeare keep his play more ambiguous?
3. Why would combining three or more tales into one help to create layers of meaning?
4. Do those various layers become integrated in *The Merchant of Venice*? Please comment.
5. How does 'money' make this play modern?
6. What is the most creative addition to the tales?

The Casket Story

Shakespeare's use of the casket story probably derives from the *Gesta romanorum*, as translated by Richard Robinson, but it too has ancient origin in myth and fable as well as great psychological and symbolic significance. In Robinson's version of the *Gesta romanorum*, Ancelmus, the emperor of Rome, agrees to marry his only son to the daughter of the king of Ampluy. After undergoing many hardships, including shipwreck at sea, the princess arrives at the emperor's court, but she must pass a further test before she can marry the emperor's son. The emperor sets before her three caskets of gold, silver, and lead. The first, encrusted with precious but containing dead men' bones, is inscribed, 'Whoso chooseth me shall find that he deserveth'.The second, crafted of fine silver but containing earth and worms, is inscribed 'Whoso chooseth me shall find that his nature desireth'. The leaden casket, inscribed with the motto 'whoso chooseth me, shall find that God hath disposed for him', is filled with precious stones. The princess piously chooses the last one, to the satisfaction of all concerned, and is married to the prince....

The Jessica-Lorenzo Subplot

The fourteenth story in Masuccio's *Il novellino* provides the likeliest source for the Jessica-Lorenzo subplot, although Abigail, Barabas's daughter in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* may have first led Shakespeare to think of a daughter for Shylock. In Masuccio's tale, an old miser, a merchant of Messina, has a lovely young daughter much like Miranda in *The Tempest*, someone who has hardly ever seen a man. She falls in love with Giuffredi Saccano, a cavalier, who notices her one day at her window and is likewise inflamed with passion for her. The cavalier plots with a slave girl to trick the old man and get Carmosina to elope with him. He succeeds; moreover, Carmosina steals away with a store of her father's treasure, leaving the miser doubly bereft.

Source: Jay L. Halio, "Introduction," *The Merchant of Venice* (Clarendon Press, 1993), 19.

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Sources

Medieval Influences

Sir Israel Gollancz

One of the greatest collections we have is the *Gesta Romanorum*. That is a collection of tales where after each tale a moralisation is given. In the *Gesta Romanorum* we have the story of the Pound of Flesh: how, in order to win the love of a lady—a rather fierce lady—a virago indeed—a certain young man borrows money from a man who is avaricious—a very monster. This monster is willing to lend money on condition that if it is not repaid by a certain day the young man shall forfeit one pound of his flesh. That story is explained in a moralisation: how the lady is the soul made in the likeness of God, and how the wicked monster is, of course, the Devil. That story we have in a great number of forms....

Long before Shakespeare thought of dealing with the theme, when Shakespeare was still young—a schoolboy—the story of the Jew with reference to the same story that we have in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* had been enacted on the English stage. As early as 1579 we have a reference to it, but the play is lost; we know it only from Gosson's reference. The man who dramatised that story did an extremely remarkable thing. He dealt not only with the story of the Pound of Flesh, but also with that other side of the story as we have it in Shakespeare, the Choice of the Caskets. This, too, is a story in the *Gesta Romanorum*. ... But there you have a choice; a lady making choice of the casket to win the hand of a prince. It is the woman who makes the choice of the casket, and not the man. We know at once, as we read that story of the Choice of the Casket in the *Gesta Romanorum*, the young prince stands, of course, for Christ, and the human soul is the wooer.

In the story of the Pound of Flesh, as I indicated, the lady is a virago—a fierce, mercenary creature. All that had to be changed, and Shakespeare, or even the man who preceded Shakespeare, the dramatist I have alluded to, saw that some change was necessary, and introduced this other story, reversing the whole idea by making the man the wooer and the lady to be wooed. That is only another aspect of our allegory. Man, in the medieval times of mystical literature—man in his pilgrimage on earth—had to woo Grace Dieu, a noble lady, the daughter of the Divinity—Grace of God, as she was called, a noble and beautiful lady. A man walking on earth was qualified by his pilgrimage to be led ultimately to Grace Dieu—into the Divine Presence in his future life. In 1579 we have already two elements that make up *The Merchant of Venice*; the Pound of Flesh motive on the one hand and, on the other, the Choice of the Caskets, combined into one play, *The Jew*, "representing the greediness of worldly chusers, and the bloody mindes of Usurers."

Let us look a little more closely into Shakespeare with reference to this lost play. I have said that the medieval preacher rightly caught hold of this idea of illustrating true wisdom by means of the tale, and driving it in until it entered at lowly doors. In the history of the drama the same thing took place. On the medieval stage you first had the dramatisation of the Biblical story, so that people might learn the story of Christ and the lives of the saints from these pageants. The teachers took the hint from this drama and said: "Why don't the dramatists use scriptural texts? Why not take your text from the Bible—your text so often replete with abstractions—and, supplying allegorical characters, let them act their parts." So there arose a second stage of medieval drama, the morality plays, which, dramatising abstractions, gave lessons for the betterment of human life. As we come to the Elizabethan period, these morality plays, though still written and acted, very often combine with abstractions real characters; and there can be little doubt, I think, that the play of *The Jew*, as acted in 1579 when Shakespeare was a boy, represented Lucre and Covetousness and Want of Conscience, and that, later, combined with these abstractions were real characters —the Jew on the one hand, and some of those other characters, the prototypes of Shakespeare's characters. It comes as a surprise to students to discover that while Shakespeare was writing some of his greatest plays of the early period, dramatists were still writing morality plays....

Source: Sir Israel Gollancz, *Allegory and Mysticism in Shakespeare* (Folcroft Press, 1931), 52-54.

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The Jew of Malta

A tragedy, with comic elements, by **Christopher Marlowe**. It was first produced in about 1590 but not published until 1633....

Barabas, a successful Jewish merchant of Malta, counts his riches and ponders on the Christians' envy of his success, and their persecution of his people. He knows them for hypocrites who use their religion as their excuse. Barabas longs for the power that would enable him to deal with his enemies.

The Turks demand tribute from Malta and the governor of the island decides to extract the money from the Jews. Barabas resists but his wealth is taken by force and his house confiscated – the governor turns it into a nunnery. Barabas decides to revenge himself on those who have wronged him and embarks on a campaign of destruction. Abigail, his daughter, has a Christian lover and he disposes of both of them.. He poisons wells and destroys the entire nunnery, his former house, with poisoned porridge. But his plan to destroy the Turkish commander and his retinue at a banquet by means of a collapsible floor goes awry. He is betrayed and meets his death in a cauldron under the same floor.

Source: *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* (Cambridge, 1992), 514.

MAIN CHARACTERS

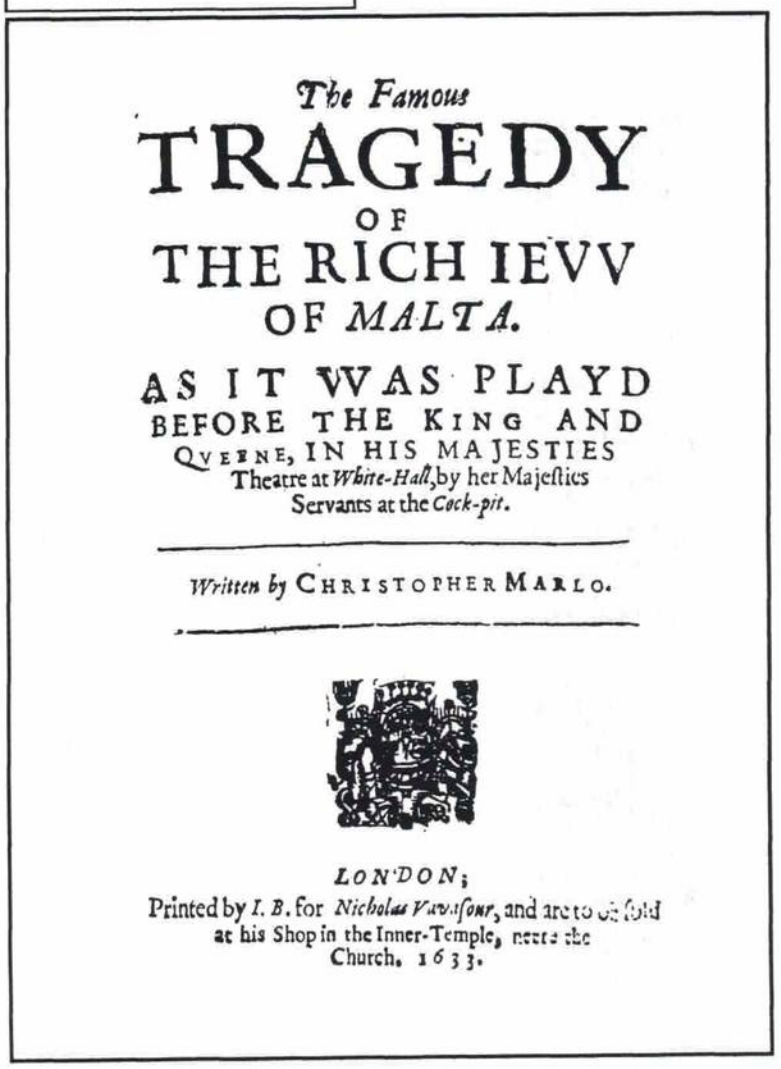
FERNEZE, Governor of Malta
LODOWICK, his son
SELIM CALYMATH, son to the Grand Seignior
MARTIN DEL BOSCO, Vice-Admiral of Spain
MATHIAS, a gentleman
BARABAS, a wealthy Jew
ITHAMORE, his slave
JACOMO, a friar
BARNARDINE, a friar
PILIA-BORZA, a bully
KATHERINE, mother to Mathias
ABIGAIL, daughter to Barabas
BELLAMIRA, a courtesan
OTHERS: merchants, Jews, nuns, and knights

READER. "First the tribute-money of the Turks shall all be levied amongst the Jews, and each of them to pay one-half of his estate."
BARABAS. [aside] How, half his estate? I hope you want not mine.
FERNEZE. Read on.
READER. "Secondly, he that denies to pay shall straight become a Christian."
BARABAS. [aside] How, a Christian? Hum, what here to do?
READER. "Lastly, he that denies this shall absolutely lose all he has."
ALL THREE JEWS. O my Lord, we will give half.
BARABAS. O earth-mettl'd villains, and no Hebrew born!
And will you basely thus submit your selves
To leave your goods to their arbitrament?
FERNEZE. Why, Barabas, wilt thou be christ'ned?
BARABAS. No, Governor. I will be no convertite.
FERNEZE. Then pay thy half.
BARABAS. Why, know you what you did by this device?
Half of my substance is a city's wealth.
Governor, it was not got so easily;
Nor will I part so slightly therewithal.
FERNEZE. Sir, half is the penalty of our decree,
Either pay that, or we will seize on all.
BARABAS. *Corpo di Dio!* stay! you shall have half;
Let me be us'd but as my brethren are.
FERNEZE. No, Jew; thou hast denied the articles.
And now it cannot be recall'd.
[*Exeunt* Officers, *on a sign from* FERNEZE]
BARABAS. Will you then steal my goods?
Is theft the ground of your religion?
FERNEZE. No, Jew; we take particularly thine
To save the ruin of a multitude;
And better one want for a common good
Than many perish for a private man.
Yet, Barabas, we will not banish thee;
But here in Malta, where thou gott'st thy wealth.
Live still, and, if thou canst, get more.
BARABAS. Christians, what or how can I multiply?
Of naught is nothing made.

(I.2.68-105)

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Sources



The Famous
TRAGEDY
OF
THE RICH IEVV
OF *MALTA.*

AS IT WAS PLAYD
BEFORE THE KING AND
QVEENE, IN HIS MAJESTIES
Theatre at *White-Hall*, by her Majeſties
Servants at the *Cock-pit.*

Written by CHRISTOPHER MARLO.

LONDON;
Printed by *I. B.* for *Nicholas Vavasour*, and are to be ſold
at his Shop in the Inner-Temple, neere the
Church. 1633.

BARABAS. But whither wends my beauteous Abigail?
Enter Abigail, *the Jew's daughter.*
O, what has made my lovely daughter sad?
What, woman! moan not for a little loss;
Thy father has enough in store for thee.
ABIGAIL. Not for myself, but aged Barabas;
Father, for thee lamenteth Abigail.
But I will learn to leave these fruitless tears,
And, urg'd thereto with my afflictions,
With fierce exclaims run to the senate-house,
And in the senate reprehend them all,
And rent their hearts with tearing of my hair,
Till they reduce the wrongs done to my father.
BARABAS. No, Abigail, things past recovery
Are hardly cur'd with exclamations.
Be silent, Daughter; sufferance breeds ease,
And time may yield us an occasion
Which on the sudden cannot serve the turn.
Besides, my girl, think me not all so fond
As negligently to forego so much
Without provision for thyself and me.
Ten thousand portagues, besides great pearls,
Rich costly jewels, and stones infinite,
Fearing the worst of this before it fell.
I closely hid.
ABIGAIL. Where, father?
BARABAS. In my house, my girl.
ABIGAIL. Then shall they ne'er be seen of Barabas,
For they have seiz'd upon thy house and wares.
BARABAS. But they will give me leave once more, I trow.
To go into my house.
ABIGAIL. That may they not;
For there I left the Governor placing nuns,
Displacing me; and of thy house they mean
To make a nunnery, where none but their own sect
Must enter in, men generally barr'd.
BARABAS. My gold, my gold, and all my wealth is gone!
You partial heavens, have I deserv'd this plague?
What, will you thus oppose me, luckless stars,
To make me desperate in my poverty?
And knowing me impatient in distress,
Think me so mad as I will hang myself,
That I may vanish o'er the earth in air,
And leave no memory that e'er I was?
No, I will live; nor loathe I this my life;
And, since you leave me in the ocean thus
To sink or swim, and put me to my shifts,
I'll rouse my senses and awake myself. —
Daughter, I have it! Thou perceiv's the plight
Wherein these Christians have oppressed me.
Be rul'd by me, for in extremity
We ought to make bar of no policy.
ABIGAIL Father, whate'er it be to injure them
That have so manifestly wronged us,
What will not Abigail attempt?
BARABAS. Why, so;
Then thus: thou told'st me they have turn'd my house
Into a nunnery, and some nuns are there.
ABIGAIL I did.
BARABAS. Then, Abigail, there must my girl
Entreat the abbess to be entertain'd
ABIGAIL. How, as a nun?
BARABAS. Ay, Daughter, for religion
Hides many mischiefs from suspicion.

(I.2.225-282)

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Comprehensive

Marlowe's Influence

1. *The Jew of Malta* (1590) was produced five years before *The Merchant of Venice* (1595). From the two excerpts provided from *The Jew of Malta*, find evidence that Shakespeare probably had seen or read Marlowe's play.
2. Compare Barabas and Shylock.
3. Compare Abigail and Jessica.
4. What appear to be the main differences between the two plays so far?
5. As a copyright sleuth, find some evidence of copyright violation.
6. Knowing that Barabas was a merchant and not a money-lender, how would that change your copyright charge?
7. Locate Malta on a map. Why is Malta a more vulnerable setting than Venice?
8. Explain how the Turkish element changes radically the conflict in Marlowe's play from that in Shakespeare's play.
9. "No, Governor, I will be no convertite." What is the penalty for not becoming a Christian?
10. When Barabas changed his mind, why did the Governor confiscate all of his wealth?
11. Barabas asks the Governor of Malta, "Is theft the ground of your religion?" What would your answer be?
12. How affectionate and compliant is Abigail with her father?
13. Barabas says, "sufferance breeds ease." Does that sentiment appear in *The Merchant* too?
14. "Ay, Daughter, for religion / Hides many mischiefs from suspicion." Find echoes of that view in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Sources

Intertextual Study

Robert A. Logan

From an intertextual study of *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice* what is visible and, at the same time, not so visible is that Marlowe's chief influence on Shakespeare lay in emboldening him to discover and develop creative resources in himself, especially those responsible for the artistry of his play. That these resources set him on a path very different from that of Marlowe does not diminish the latter's impact. Shakespeare did not borrow from Marlowe's play the particulars of either character or action. Instead, in combination with the accumulation of influences that he felt from other of Marlowe's writings, both the specific and the general influences, allowed Marlowe's free play of imagination in *The Jew of Malta* to inspired his own in *The Merchant of Venice*. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in Shakespeare's innovations in the genre of romantic comedy. He saw that Marlowe stretched the boundaries of tragedy by incorporating elements of farce into the plot; he followed suit by introducing dark elements into his romantic comedy. In effect, Marlowe became for him the prototype of the artistic imagination in healthy operation. As such, Shakespeare better understood how to exercise and give form and definition to his own strong, individual talent.

In experiencing the *The Jew of Malta*, Shakespeare was alerted to aspects of dramatic writing that he then had to decide whether to accept or reject—as, for example, Marlowe's rhetorically engaging but psychologically unrealistic characterizations which he rejected.... To be sure, Shakespeare did not try to imitate his fellow playwright, but he did perceive and absorb Marlowe's freedom of invention. It is difficult not to conclude that he was thereby made more aware of his own artistic choices and was thereby better able to raise his own talent and commercial success to greater heights.

Source: Robert A. Logan, *Shakespeare's Marlowe* (Ashgate,2007), 136-137.

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BARABAS

Welcome, the first beginner of my bliss!
O Abigail, Abigail, that I had thee here too,
Then my desires were fully satisfied.
But I will practise thy enlargement thence:
O girl! O gold! O beauty! O my bliss! *Hugs his bags.*

(The Jew of Malta, II.i.47-54)

A Reconsideration of Influence

Ian McAdam

In any consideration of the artistic influence of Christopher Marlowe on William Shakespeare, the pairing of *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice* represents an obvious example but also constitutes one of the more problematic and contentious cases. In spite of their radical generic differences … I will argue for a close affinity between these two plays, perhaps the most controversial texts produced by each of the playwrights. The controversy appears rooted in the political/economic and psychological/theological levels of meaning in the two plays, and an examination of these aspects reveals Shakespeare taking important cues from Marlowe. The unbridled materialism of Malta and Venice, and of Christian as well as Jew, leads to an exposure of Christian hypocrisy; the Catholic context of the parallel Christian communities ostensibly offers an ideological buffer for a predominantly Protestant theatre audience in London, but in both plays English mercantilism and 'spiritual' self-righteousness is implicated indirectly. Such aggressive and secular concerns throw light on the pressures of masculine self-fashioning in the face of waning theological scruples, and anxiety about masculine control also contributes to the establishment of subtle but significant homoerotic subtexts in Marlowe as well as Shakespeare.

While I thus imply important thematic connections between these plays, it will be helpful to first recognize and contextualize their obvious differences. This essay admittedly challenges, in one sense, a critical position I am in other ways fundamentally in agreement with. Robert Logan, in a definitive assessment of Marlowe's influence on Shakespeare, has asserted that 'Shakespeare shows himself primarily interested in the theatrical and literary techniques of Marlowe that made him a successful commercial playwright, and not in Marlowe, the Cambridge intellectual reflecting and moralizing on serious issues.' This assertion, of essentially continuities of dramatic style over content, is consistent with the apparent differences between *The Jew* and *The Merchant*, which while treating similar sociopolitical contexts, seem comparable primarily in that they both contain a Jewish anti-hero, in the former as protagonist and in the latter as antagonist. With respect to this parallel treatment of Jewishness, readers are apt to embrace the distinctions drawn by Julia Reinhard Lupton:

> It is the fate of Marlowe's Jew of Malta to find himself a few steps behind Shakespeare's Shylock. Barabas is Shylock's evil twin and nasty precursor –a rougher, meaner, and more starkly stereotypical stage Jew whose exorbitant antics bring into relief the glimmer of humanity that partly illuminates Shakespeare's achievement.

This comparison would seem to give Shakespeare the (artistic and moral) advantage for having created a more psychologically realistic character less dependent on anti-Semitic stereotypes. … And yet in some paradoxical sense, Shakespeare has produced, potentially a more disturbingly anti-Semitic play. Simon Shepherd, for one confidently pronounces *The Jew of Malta* 'a play about racism, not a racist play' and suggests in contrast that, politically, '*Merchant* is a naïve, if not nasty, play, with its … Belmont above the grubby world of commerce, its silence over the links of personal and political, and its sentimentalising of wealth.' While I find *The Merchant* an enormously complicated and subtle, not naïve, play, its ability to disconcert and disturb is undeniable. Moreover, Shakespeare, but not Marlowe, is historically open to the accusation that, in writing his work, he was consciously taking advantage – as an irresistible 'commercial' opportunity – of the swell of anti-Semitic feelings in London after the execution in 1594 of the Queen's physician Roderigo Lopez, a converted Jew found guilty of attempting to poison her.

Source: Ian McAdam, *The Jew of Malta: A Critical Reader*, ed. Robert A Logan (Arden Shakespeare, 2013), 107-109.

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Sources

THE JEW OF MALTA

[THE PROLOGUE]

[*Enter*] MACHIAVEL

ALBEIT the world think Machiavel is dead
Yet was his soul but flown beyond the Alps,
And, now the Guise is dead, is come from France
To view this land and frolic with his friends.
To some, perhaps, my name is odious,
But such as love me guard me from their tongues;
And let them know that I am Machiavel,
And weigh not men, and therefore not men's words.
Admir'd I am of those that hate me most.
Though some speak openly against my books,
Yet will they read me, and thereby attain
To Peter's chair; and when they cast me off,
Are poison'd by my climbing followers.
I count religion but a childish toy,
And hold there is no sin but ignorance.
Birds of the air will tell of murders past —
I am asham'd to hear such fooleries.
Many will talk of title to a crown:
What right had Cæsar to the empery?
Might first made kings, and laws were then more sure
When, like the Draco's, they were writ in blood.
Hence comes it that a strong-built citadel
Commands much more than letters can import;
Which maxim had Phalaris observ'd
H' had never bellowed, in a brazen bull,
Of great ones' envy. O' the poor petty wits
Let me be envi'd and not pitied!
But whither am I bound? I come not, I,
To read a lecture here in Britainy
But to present the tragedy of a Jew,
Who smiles to see how full his bags are cramm'd,
Which money was not got without my means,
I crave but this: grace him as he deserves,
And let him not be entertain'd the worse
Because he favors me.

[*Exit*]

Innocent Barabas

Alfred Harbage

A fair sample of the "Hail, horrors, hail!" school of criticism appears in an early work by Una Ellis-Fermor: in *The Jew of Malta* "we begin to recognize in Marlowe the man whose trenchant exposure of shams is revealed in the document known as the Baines libel.... The dauntless courage and ruthlessness of Machiavelli's doctrines seem at first to have made a strong appeal to Marlowe; and in *The Jew of Malta*, which may have been written in the first burst of this enthusiasm, he invest him with a certain poetic splendour of the Satanist warring on behalf of cold logic against a world-order of superstition, sentimentalism, and hypocrisy." This earnest rhetoric (richer in warm passion than "cold logic") ... expresses a view still widely held—that the play which purports to be an exposé of Machiavellianism was actually written in a "burst" of enthusiasm for it.

Source: Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare Without Words* (Harvard, 1972), 101-102.

Barabas as Machiavel

1. Read this prologue aloud. Does it have "a certain poetic splendour" for you?
2. What is blank verse? In the prologue, what effect does the blank verse create?
3. What shams does Machiavel expose?
4. Who were Guise, Cæsar and Draco? What did they have in common?
5. Does might make right? Why is 'might' supported by Machiavel?
6. Does Machiavel preach ('read a lecture') or tell it as it is?
7. How could Machiavel's prologue be used to support both Barabas and Shylock?

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Sources

Politics of Religion

Paul Whitfield White

Marlowe's portrayal of Barabas combines historical facts about famous Jewish merchants of his day with a heavy dose of stage-stereotyping and centuries-old prejudice, which included the beliefs that Jews poisoned wells and crucified children. The name Barabas derives from the biblical thief whom the Jews asked Pontius Pilate to release in place of Christ before his crucifixion.... Machiavel claims to be Barabas's mentor in the play's opening address. Machiavel is a caricature of the Italian political theorist, Niccolo Machiavelli, who was notorious in England for advocating, among other things, the use of religion, when necessary, as an instrument of state power. Calling religion 'a childish toy', Machiavel counts among his disciples the Guise, a French Catholic leader, and various popes for whom religion is a convenient mask behind which one murders one's way to high office. As he himself admits, Barabas is not after political power, but rather the accumulation of wealth which brings its own kind of authority and influence. If Marlowe gives Barabas a well-developed Jewish identity, Judaism itself is represented as a bogus religion, one in which the 'blessings promised' to Abraham are interpreted *not* as the spiritual rewards of faith in Christ (as the Protestantism of Marlowe's audience taught) but rather the worldly prosperity and economic superiority of God's chosen people. In other words, Marlowe implies, Jewish religion justifies the acquisitive drive, restless pursuit of riches, and usurious money practices exemplified by Jewish merchants such as Barabas. Of course, as a disciple of Machiavel Barabas himself does not take his own religion seriously; publicly, he professes it to his persecutors and to his fellow Jews, who take him to be their leader, but privately he admits to the audience, 'They say we are a scattered nation; I cannot tell', and deserts his co-religionists. His religious hypocrisy in the early scenes is matched by his pose as a Christian convert to trick the Friars later on.

Source: Paul Whitfield White, *Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe*, (Cambridge, 2004), 76.

BARABAS (II.3.179-190)

As for myself, I walk abroad a-nights
And kill sick people groaning under walls;
Sometimes I go about and poison wells;
And now and then, to cherish Christian thieves,
I am content to lose some of my crowns,
That I may, walking in my gallery,
See 'em go pinion'd along by my door.
Being young, I studied physic, and began
To practise first upon the Italian;
There I enrich'd the priests with burials
And always kept the sextons' arms in ure
With digging graves and ringing dead men's knells.

Barabas as Vice

Julia Reinhard Lupton

Marlowe fashioned Barabas out of the allegorical figure of the Vice, an archetype of villainy inherited from the stage devils of sacred drama and developed in the minimally secular morality plays of the sixteenth century.... Barabas loses rather than gains in individuality as the play progresses, falling back into his allegorical origins. His infamous autobiography of crimes [see above] gathers together a poisonous bouquet of generalized anti-Jewish stereotypes interwoven with Machiavellian motifs of policy and self-interest. During this period, the writings of the Italian political theorist were seen as the embodiment of corrupt political pragmatism and devious atheism; Marlowe famously begins his play with a prologue speech by 'Machiavel', resolutely inserting the theological discourse of anti-Judaism into the frame of modern politics, a fusion continued here in Barabas's allegorical autobiography. The speech ends with Barabas's triumphant self-accounting: 'But mark how I am blessed for plaguing them; / I have as much coin as will buy the town.' The infinite riches of the biblical concept of blessings have been contracted to the little room of self-interest, which in turn becomes an echo-chamber that traps, redoubles, and caricatures the history of Jewish survival in and as civil society.

Source: Julia Reinhard Lupton, *Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe.*, ed. Patrick Cheney (Cambridge, 2004), 149.

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Sources

The Fox and The Lion

You must know, then, that there are two methods of fighting, the one by law, the other by force: the first method is that of men, the second of beasts; but as the first method is often insufficient, one must have recourse to the second. It is therefore necessary for a prince to know well how to use both the beast and the man. … Achilles and many others of those ancient princes were given to Chiron the centaur to be brought up and educated under his discipline. The parable of the semi-animal, semi-human teacher is meant to indicate that a prince must know how to use both natures, and that the one without the other is not durable.

A prince being thus obligated to know well how to act as a beast must imitate the fox and the lion, for the lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognise traps, and a lion to frighten wolves. Those that wish to be only lions do not understand this. Therefore, a prudent ruler ought not to keep faith when by so doing it would be against his interest, and when the reasons which made him bind himself no longer exist. If men were all good, this precept would not be a good one; but as they are bad, and would not observe their faith with you, so you are not bound to keep faith with them. Nor have legitimate grounds ever failed a prince who wished to show colourable excuse for the non-fulfilment of his promise. Of this one could furnish an infinite number of modern examples, and show how many times peace has been broken and how many promises rendered worthless, by the faithlessness of princes, and those that have been best able to imitate the fox have succeeded best. But it is necessary to be able to disguise this character well, and to be a great feigner and dissembler; and men are so simple and so ready to obey present necessities, that one who deceives will always find those who allow themselves to be deceived.

Source: Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Mentor, 1952), 101-2.

Power

The Merchant of Venice is about power—being without it and wanting it. The ideal is to be wealthy, male, and Christian. Portia can successfully argues Antonio's case, but only when she's strengthened by male attire. Jessica begins the play poor, Jewish, and single and ends it rich, Christian and married. In the interim, during flight to Belmont, she inexplicably adopts masculine clothing. Through this gesture, Shakespeare seems to be saying that Jessica can acquire power, but only if she first "becomes" a man and a Christian.

Source: Norrie Epstein, *The Friendly Shakespeare* (Penguin, 1994), 102.

Politics of Power

1. "*The Merchant of Venice* is about power—being without it and wanting it" (see below). Find evidence in *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant* to support this statement.
2. Power politics often use stereotypes to exclude others from power. Why are Shylock and Barabas easy victims of that type of exclusion?
3. Exclusion may be based on convenient labels. Why is race often used for that purpose?
4. Why are gender and/or sexual orientation especially convenient labels for exclusion?
5. How can one acquire power and hold it?
6. Does wealth guarantee power?
7. Why does wealth alone not help Shylock and Barabas to achieve inclusion?
8. Is revenge the only option for them?
9. According to Machiavelli, how is power best maintained? (see opposite)
10. When should we be a lion, when a fox? Can a fox defeat a prejudicial lion?

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Final Considerations

Venetian Ducat

Jacques Le Goff

In transactions between Europe and the East, the Venetian ducat was by far the coin most used. In the East, even the Mamluks who ruled Egypt from 1425 struck ashrafi based on the ducat. The difference in value between superior gold, the silver used for normal transactions and the black money of daily exchanges was often very great. In Sicily, for example, in 1466, the gold reali were worth 20 good silver carlini, each of which were worth 60 black piccioli. The range was not generally so wide in Florence but the almost constant devaluation of coins used to pay the textile workers (which they called *lanaiuoli*, that is, 'woolmen', after their employers) was one of the principal reason for the social unrest which disturbed the town in the fourteenth century, and in particular during the famous revolt ('revolution') of the Ciompi in 1378-80. The worst problem for those who had to handle currencies was the constant instability of their value, which sometimes changed from one month to the next. The difference between the three levels of currency in circulation Venice was less great, due to the exploitation of the silver mines of nearby Serbia. In 1413, the ducat was worth 124 soldini, which meant that there was a much narrower gap between denominations than in Sicily or Florence.

"Only a small part of the population, such as merchants and financial administrators, were familiar with gold coins. The people in general used silver coins for major purchases alone, the only current money being billon or fractional money; most needs were satisfied by home production, the closed economy or barter."

—Jean Meuvret, on the subject of some observations made by the Bourgeois of Paris in his *Journal* in 1421

Source: Jacques Le Goff, *Money and The Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell (Polity Press, 2012), 121.



Venetian **Ducat**

Money and Class

Tim Parks

The purpose of any currency, you would have thought, is to offer a unit of wealth that, when multiplied or divided, will buy anything for sale within a given geographical area. This is at once the wonder and danger of money, that in different amounts it can be made equivalent to almost anything. Hence we have copper coins that can be added up to make silver coins, silver that can be added up to make gold, or, in our day, the banknote, one dollar, five, ten, twenty.....

Not so in fifteenth-century Florence. Your silver coin , the *piccioli*, could not be added up to make a golden florin. They were separate currencies. The logic of this was that since the two coins were actually made of precious metals—indeed their worth depended on the intrinsic value of each mineral—the relationship between them could no more be fixed than the relationship between apples and oranges. *Piccioli* could only be changed into florins by bank at the going rate for changing silver into gold.

Thus the reasoning. The reality was that into the very element that potentially frees us from class—the element that allows the parvenu to pile up wealth and act as if his peasant family were as noble as mine—a radical divide was established. The *piccioli* was the currency of the poor, the salary of the worker, the price of a piece of bread. Luxury goods, wholesaling, international trade, these were the exclusive realm of the golden florin. By law....

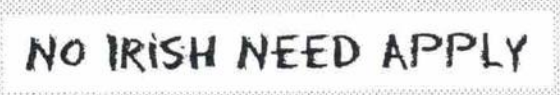
A man who dealt in *piccioli* had a long way to go.

Source: Tim Parks, *Medici Money* (Norton, 2005), 32.

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Final Considerations

Black Money

1. What is "black money"?
2. How do societal classes become established?
3. Why do privilege and entitlement become part of a class society?
4. Why would a parvenu not be guaranteed a place within the charmed circle (Belmont)?
5. How much is racial prejudice founded upon economic rivalry?
6. Is the main conflict between Antonio and Shylock an economic one? Comment.
7. Does class conflict become more intense when economic resources become scarce?
8. How does universal money make class society more fluid?
9. If your social position is threatened by the parvenu, what could you do about it?
10. Why is it always convenient for society to have a 'scapegoat' ready when needed?
11. 

    What other words have been used?
12. List other nations, races and religions that have found themselves in the place of the Irish in this American sign (above)?
13. What special emblems have been used for prejudicial markings? Why?
14. "Which is the merchant here? And which the Jew?" Apart from legal procedure, what may be the hidden implication of this question?
15. Why is prejudice more often directed at superficial features than at real substance?
16. Black money suggests 'black class': a muted prejudice against the anonymous poor. Yes?

Socialization

Sexuality in *The Merchant of Venice* is no less implicated in issues of socialization. Economics and social class are very much determinants of who feels what for whom. Bassanio's desired move from the Rialto to Belmont would, for an audience in England, represent a move up the social hierarchy from the new capitalist economy, in which rank was determined by the amount of money a man had amassed, to the traditional feudal economy, in which rank was determined by possession of land. Many capitalists in Shakespeare's England had made exactly such a move as a way of legitimizing their newly acquired wealth. Indeed, Shakespeare himself used the capital he earned as an actor and playwright to establish himself back in Stratford as a landlord....

Race and ethnicity also enter into the construction of sexual desire in *The Merchant of Venice.* Although a long roll-call of Portia's suitors is provided by Nerissa in the second scene, the suitors whom the audience actually sees and hears represent two political powers that Shakespeare's contemporaries feared most: the Muslims and the Spanish. Morocco and Aragon not only show themselves to be absolute fools; they are effectively castrated by the terms of Portia's father's will.... When [Morocco] is gone. Portia makes the racial point bluntly clear, in terms specific to Galenic medicine: 'Let all of his complexion choose me so'.... The casket test has turned the hot blood of Muslims to cold frost and eliminates them as sexual predators. Aragon, in his capitulation, is equally aware of the sterility to which he has condemned himself....

The embroilment of race and ethnicity in sexual desire is displayed most prominently, however, in scapegoating Shylock. The man derided in the courtroom scene in a single contemptuous syllable, 'Jew', becomes the repository of the flesh, filth, and fetishization of money that the Christians would rather forget....

Source: *Shakespeare: An Oxford Guide*, eds. Stanley Wells and Lena Cowen Orlin (Oxford, 2003), 446-8.

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Final Considerations

Is *The Merchant of Venice* an an anti-Semitic work?

Harold Bloom's View

One would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work. Yet every time I have taught the play, many of my most sensitive and intelligent students become very unhappy when I begin with that observation. Nor do they accept my statements that Shylock is a comic villain and that Portia would cease to be sympathetic if Shylock were allowed to be a figure of overwhelming pathos. That Shakespeare himself was personally anti-Semitic we reasonably can doubt, but Shylock is one of those Shakespearean figures who seem to break clean away from their plays' confines. There is an extraordinary energy in Shylock's prose and poetry, a force both cognitive and passional, which palpably is in excess of the play's comic requirements. More even than Marlowe's Barabas, Jew of Malta, Shylock is a villain both farcical and scary, though time has worn away both qualities. ...

Shakespeare's comedy is Portia's play, and not Shylock's, though some audiences now find it difficult to reach that conclusion. Antonio, the title's merchant, is the good Christian of the play, who manifests his piety by cursing and spitting at Shylock. For many among us now, that is at least an irony, but clearly it was no irony for Shakespeare's audience. I have never seen *The Merchant of Venice* staged with Shylock as comic villain, but that is certainly how the play should be performed. Shylock would be very bad news indeed if he were not funny; since he doesn't provoke us to laughter, we play him for pathos, as he has been played since the early nineteenth century, except in Germany and Austria under the Nazis, and in Japan. I am afraid that we tend to make *The Merchant of Venice* incoherent by portraying Shylock as being largely sympathetic. Yet I myself am puzzled as to what it would cost (and not only ethically) to recover the play's coherence....

Source: Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (Riverhead Books, 1998), 171-172.

Norrie Epstein's View

The play is not pro-Jewish, as some would have it, but it's not pro-Christian, either. It all depends on how you—or the director—choose to look at it. Admittedly, the character of Shylock is a Christian invention: dressed in greasy gabardine, he has the obligatory red hair (associated with the devil) and a big nose that quivers at the smell of pork. A crafty loan shark who preys upon the poor, he treats his daughter like a servant and his servant like a slave. He speaks in the Elizabethan equivalent of the singsong rhythm of the stereotyped ethnic Jew—quite unlike the patrician tones of the Gentiles. Most damning of all is his reaction to his daughter Jessica's elopement and theft. Shylock doesn't know what to lament first, his daughter or his ducats....

Shakespeare gave his audience the cartoon Jew they loved to ridicule and to hate. In Elizabethan England, a Jewish character was a major draw, promising diabolical deeds and bizarre cruelties. Yet embedded within this caricature there's a real human being, and every so often Shakespeare lets him out. Shylock still mourns his dead wife, Leah, and respects and honors the traditions of his ethnic group. He's a lonely, pitiful old man imprisoned by greed. He's like a survivor of the Great Depression who grows valuing money more than love. Although Shakespeare was a man of his time, he was capable of stepping outside of his age's prejudices and presenting the world from the alien's perspective....

Just as we are laughing at this ludicrous man, Shakespeare turns around and gives him a speech ["I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?"] that makes laughter impossible. Cited by those who don't want to see the play as anti-Semitic, this speech is frequently taken out of context; it also here that Shylock commits himself to revenge. As the director John Barton points out, the speech is not simply an impassioned plea for racial tolerance but also Shylock's defense for murdering Antonio ["And if you wrong us, ... revenge?"].

Source: Norrie Epstein, *The Friendly Shakespeare* (Penguin, 1994), 98-99.

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Money and Morality

Harold C. Goddard

Choose—it says—at your peril. This play anti-Semitic? Why, yes, if you find it so. Shakespeare certainly leaves you free, if you wish, to pick the golden casket. But you may thereby be revealing more of yourself than of his play.

And what is true of an individual is true of an age. Poetry forever makes itself over for each generation. *The Merchant of Venice* seems expressly written for a time like our own when everywhere the volcano of race hatred seems ready to erupt. But even when we see this we may still be taking it too narrowly. Its pertinence for us is no more confined to the racial aspect than are our hatreds and exclusions. What inspired Shakespeare to introduce into this gay entertainment, with all its frivolity and wedding bells, prototypes of those two giants of the twentieth century, Trade and Finance (each so different at heart from its own estimation of itself), to let them look in each other's eyes, and behold — their own reflections?

Which is the merchant here and which the Jew?

How came he to inject so incongruously into it the haunting figure that has grown steadily more tragic with the years until it has thrown his supposed comedy quite out of focus? More sinned against than sinning, this villain-victim now strikes us as more nearly the protagonist, a far-off forerunner of King Lear himself. Beside him, the gentleman-hero of the piece shrinks to a mere fashion-plate, and his sad-eyed friend to a mere shadow. It is as if, between the passing darkness of feudalism and the oncoming darkness of capitalism, the sun broke forth briefly and let the poet store up truth for the future. When the Old Corruption goes, there is always such a glimpse of clear sky before the New Corruption assumes the throne. Not that Shakespeare was interested in economic evolution or foresaw its course. Poetic prophecy does not work in that way. Goethe reveals its secret rather when he says: "If a man grasp the particular vividly he also grasps the general without being aware of it at the same time, or he may make the discovery long afterward." It is in this sense that Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* for us even more than for his own age. Its characters are around us everywhere. Its problems still confront us—on an enormously enlarged scale.

At a time like our own when economic problems sometimes threaten to eclipse all others, their relation to moral and spiritual problems gets forgotten. But to divorce the two is to leave both insoluble. *The Merchant of Venice* not only does not make this error itself, it corrects it for us. It offers precisely the wisdom that we need, a wisdom the goes deeper than the doctrine of any economic school or sect. Shylock made his money by usury, Antonio his by trade, Portia got hers by inheritance, Bassanio by borrowing and then by marriage, Jessica by theft and later by judicial decree. The interplay of their lives makes enthralling drama. But to those not content to stop with story it propounds questions that have a strangely contemporary ring: How are these various modes of acquiring and holding property related? Are they as unlike as they seem? And, coming closer home: Am I myself possibly, thanks to one or more of them, living in a golden world?

Those who might be compelled to answer "yes" to this question will generally be protected from asking it. Some instinct of self-preservation—or fear of death—will keep them from seeking where they might discover, could they understand them, grounds sounder, in their opinion, than its supposed anti-Semitism for withdrawing *The Merchant of Venice* from the schools....

The author of *The Merchant of Venice* knew what he was doing when he named his play and when he made its merchant the victim of melancholia so intense it verged on the suicidal.

"God won't ask us whether we succeeded in business."

Source: Harold Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, Volume I (Phoenix Books, 1951), 115-116.

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Final Activities

Critical Fragments

All but a few fragments of critical comments remain of a thematic assessment of *The Merchant of Venice*. They have been listed below. Rank order them according to your interpretation of the play. Then select the highest one as your topic for a short essay: (Also, see theme section, pages 73-77.)

_____ "The theme of *The Merchant* is the interdependence of human beings in civilized society — an inviolable interdependence." —**Max Plowman**

_____ "Tempests have leagued with Shylock, both equally forces of tragedy to set against love, music, and Portia." —**G. Wilson Knight**

_____ "The contrast between harmony and hate, love and discord, is here complete, and Shakespeare for the time being is content to resolve it in comedy." —**Mark Van Doren**

_____ "Idealized traditional values of the aristocracy and medieval morality triumph, and the play dissolves, appropriately, in the exquisite love-scene under the moon at Belmont." —**E.C. Pettet**

_____ "The theme of his play … is very plainly set forth as Justice and Mercy; the law and love that is the fulfilling of the law, the gold of Venice, and the gold of Belmont." —**M.C. Bradbrook**

_____ "Now the blindness in human beings is the blindness with which we all are afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves." —**William James**

Source: Casebook Series: *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. John Wilders (Macmillan,1969).

Ways of Wisdom

Explain the wisdom of the following statements, and select one for a creative response:

1. Nature hath framed strange fellows in her time. —SOLANIO
2. Superfluity comes sooner by white hairs, but competency lives longer. —NERISSA
3. It is a wise father that knows his own child. —LANCELET
4. All things that are, / Are with more spirit chased than enjoyed. —GRATIANO
5. But love is blind, and lovers cannot see / The pretty follies that themselves commit. —JESSICA
6. A golden mind stoops not to shows of dross. —PRINCE OF MOROCCO
7. The world is still deceived with ornament. —BASSANIO
8. Hates any man the thing he would not kill? —SHYLOCK
9. How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none? —DUKE
10. So shines a good deed in a naughty world. —PORTIA



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Final Activities

A Ledger for Love



You have 3000 ducats to spend on your courtship of a potential mate. Consider that a ducat is worth between $50 and $100 in today's money. List the items that you would consider in order to impress your wooed prospect. Estimate the cost of Bassanio's items in today's marketplace. Then estimate the cost of items that Portia would need to match her suitor's costs.

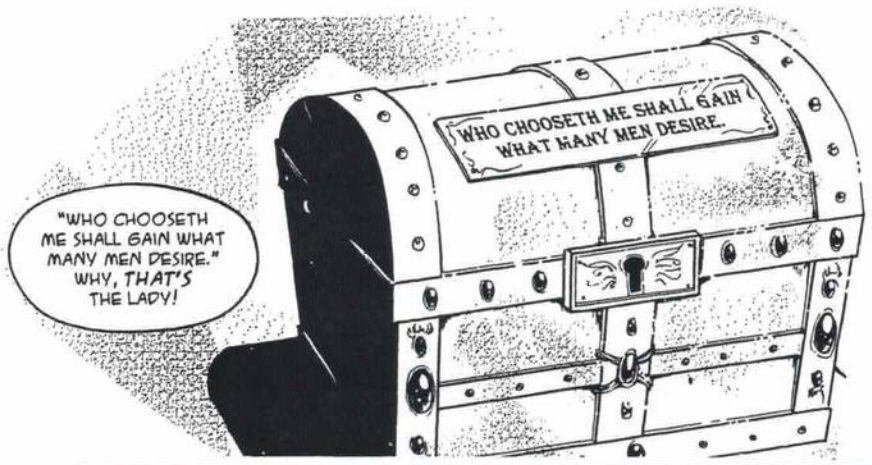
Male (Bassanio)	
Item	**Cost**
gondola (limo rental for a month)	
livery (tuxedo)	
servants (how many for new livery?)	
gifts for all	
hotel costs	
other items	

Female (Portia)	
Item	**Cost**
caskets (preparing them)	
coiffure and gown	
servants (how many?)	
reception (with gala banquet)	
musicians	
other items	

Guarding the Family Purse

Consider the pros and cons of keeping fortune-hunters (male or female) from taking advantage of innocent victims in marriage scams. Feel free to add other strategies.

Arranged marriage	Private detective	Pre-nuptial agreement
Large dowry	Dating websites	Professional matchmakers
A lottery	Conceal the family fortune	I.Q test (or a predator test)
		Disinheritance (no money upon marriage)
		Matching wealth (ducat for ducat)
		Class requirement (member of same class)
		Make children street-smart
		Trust the child's intuition



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Final Activities



Good News, Bad News

Imagine yourself in Venice at the time of the play (*circa* 1595). Using a modern media format, report several events that would be considered significant or sensational news today. If you decide to use a newspaper format, here are a few headlines you might use for starters:

a) **PIRATES THREATEN VENETIAN TRADE**

b) **ALIENS ORDERED TO WEAR MARKERS**

c) **NO GHETTO CONDITIONS IN BELMONT**

d) **DUKE DEMANDS PAYMENT IN DUCATS**

e) **VERBAL ABUSE ON THE RIALTO**

f) **RELIGIOUS BIGOTRY BREAKS OUT**

Venetian Cruises



Janus & Co. invites you to join us on a tour of **Venice** and its **trade routes**. Our company is the only one that can offer you a look in all directions. In fact, we can have you looking backwards in time, and forward to your good fortune. All early subscribers will be given the last chance to find the lost ducats of Belmont. Participate in the excavations at our exciting stop-overs along the route from Spain to Asia Minor.

In **Venice**, you can cross the Bridge of Sighs (*Ponte dei Sospiri*), buy gold on the Rialto, glide on the canals guided by a handsome gondolier, and stop at the Doge's Palace. Tell us from your reading of *The Merchant of Venice*, what other features (past or present) you would like to see added to your trip. You might consider some of the following:

a) tour the ghetto where Shylock lived

b) bank on the Rialto in foreign currency

c) visit famous churches and synagogues

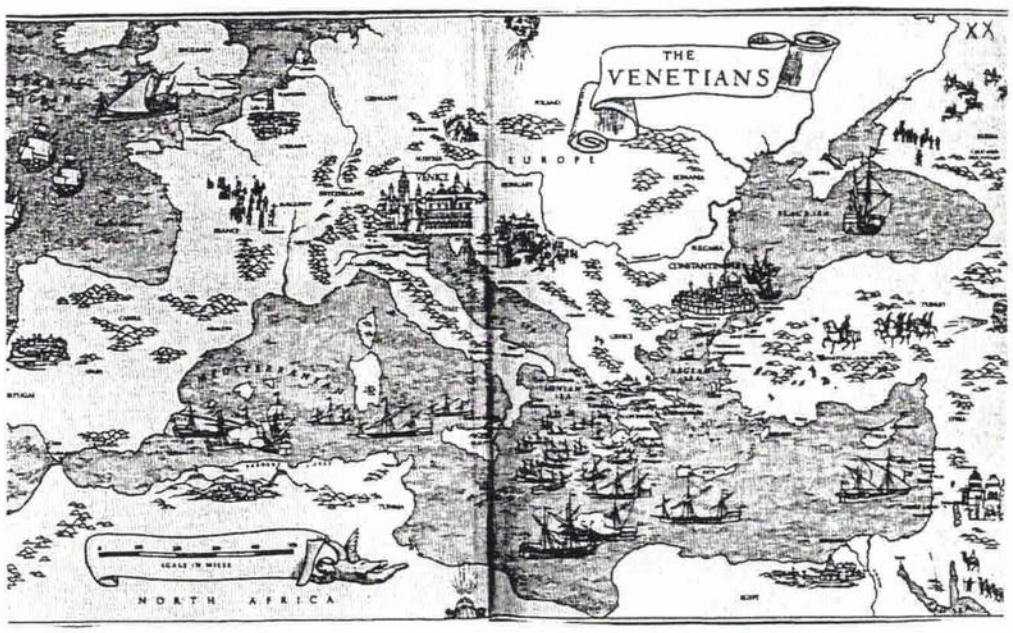
d) visit warehouses of silks and spices

e) meet aristocrats (Bassanio and friends)

f) mingle with merchants (like Antonio)

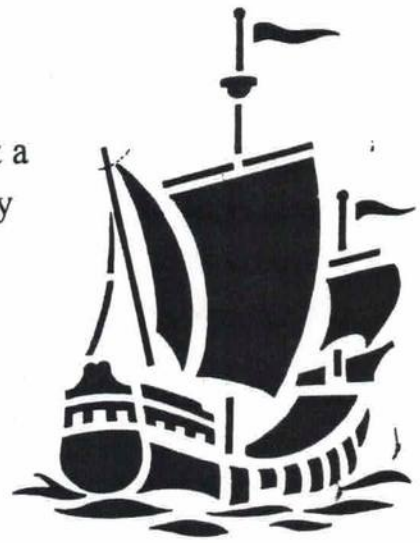
g) hear the music played in their past

h) wear Venetian costumes and masques



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Final Activities



Trip Preparation

Now that you have signed on to travel with us, may we suggest a few guide books to prepare you for your Venetian trip. You may wish to begin research on some of the special sights that you have suggested as your primary interests.

Ackroyd, Peter. *Venice: Pure City*. Chatto & Windus, 2009
Parks, Tim. *Medici Money*. Norton, 2005
McNeill, W.H. *Venice: The Hinge of Europe*
Morris, Jan . *The Venetian Empire: A Sea Voyage*
Horodowich, Elizabeth. *Venice: A New History of the City and Its People*. Robinson, 2009
Burckhardt, Jacob. *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Harper, 1958 (originally 1929)
Portable Renaissance Reader, The. Eds. James B. Ross & Mary M. McLaughlin. Viking, 1953

Consider interesting ways to present your research to your group or fellow travellers.

Wheel of Fortune

Your chances of winning any wager can be reduced to a matter of mathematical probability. And if you fail to learn at least the principles of probability theory, you will never win consistently. Basically, probability theory is a set of principles used to predict the outcome of future chance events. The most important principle to remember is that probability theory states what is *expected* to happen, not what is *inevitable*. There is no specific guarantees.

The second principle to remember is that each and every chance event occurs independently without any relation to previous events....

Luck is the biggest trap, and the folly of every gambler since gambling began. Some skeptics point out rationally, that the chances of winning don't change for "lucky" or "unlucky" gamblers. What *does* chance from player to player is their skill and knowledge of the game. And yet, no one can prove that Lady Luck doesn't exist—and no one can give a better explanation for the occasions when the theory of probability seems to go haywire.

Source: A.J Berger and Nancy Bruning, *Lady Luck's Companion* (Harper & Row, 1979), 22-23.



The Lucky Ones

Place the following characters on the wheel of fortune at the end of each specified act of *The Merchant of Venice* (**H** for high; **L** for low).

	Acts 1	2	3	4	5
Antonio at the end of act four and act five					
Shylock at the end of act two and act four					
Bassanio at the end of act one and act three					
Portia at the end of act one and act five					
Jessica at end of act two and act five					
Morocco and Arragon at end of act two					

Did they all earn their luck?

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Final Activities

Your Play

The Merchant of Venice has appeared on television, in films, and at festivals. Below are snippets of a few reviews of some of those productions. After having read them, decide how you would produce that play. Perhaps your first decision would be to justify why such a controversial play should be produced at all. Assuming that you will go ahead with the production, consider all the other matters: time, location, actors, costumes, music, script (changes and modifications to the play) etc.

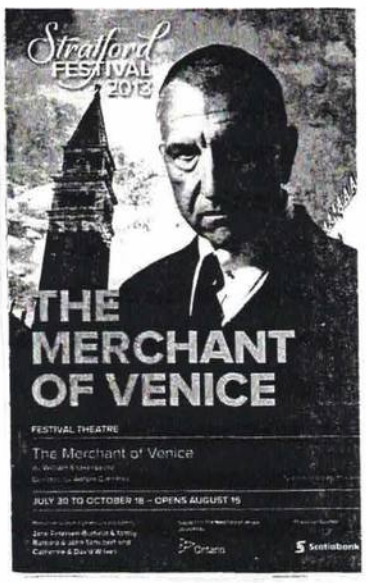
Stratford Festival

The Merchant of Venice (2013)

Starring: Scott Wentworth as *Shylock*
Michelle Giroux as *Portia*

Review

Richard Ouzounian (*Toronto Star*) on August 16, 2013



Antoni Cimolino's production of *The Merchant of Venice* shares all the ups and downs of Shakespeare's play itself.

The first half looks like a series of scenes from different shows that stubbornly refuse to come together but, after intermission, the triumphant trial sequence unites everything with some breathtaking drama, while a perfectly realized final sequence offers bittersweet romance, rueful laughter and an emotionally gripping last image.

Let's be honest: *The Merchant* is not an easy play to produce or even to attend. Is it a romantic comedy with the venomous serpent of racism hidden coiled in its centre? Or is it a melodramatic saga of ethnic hatred run rampant, which happens to have a series of love plots swirling around it like satellite moons?

Some productions downplay the racism, others boost the romance, but Cimolino has the intelligence and honesty to largely play it as it lays....

Is there such a thing as a perfect production of *The Merchant of Venice*? In a post-Holocaust world, I highly doubt that's possible. But the one now on view at Stratford gets enough things right to make you ultimately forgive the ones that are wrong.

BBC Television

The Merchant of Venice (1973)

Starring: Laurence Olivier as *Shylock*
Joan Plowright as *Portia*

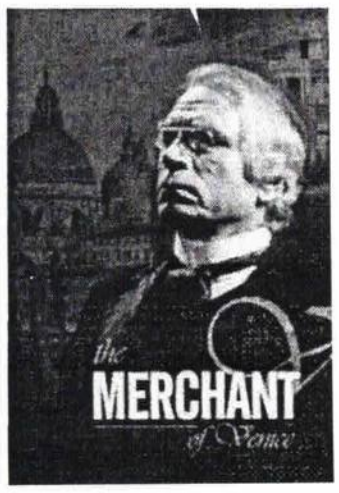
Review

Alexander Arsov on November 3, 2012

Put briefly, the main attraction of the movie is Laurence Olivier's subtle and only very occasionally marred portrayal of Shylock as a tragic victim of Christian cruelty. And the main snag is the absolutely horrendous production that transfers the play to the Victorian era, tall hats and all. Great as the former is, the latter makes for a really dismal visual experience. If the Victorian setting is not enough (how exactly does it enhance the drama?), the play is shot in the worst soap-opera "style" and in the drabbest possible "colours". It is a made-for-TV production and the direction is consistently inferior. The supporting cast is excellent: Antony Nicholls is a dignified Antonio, Jeremy Brett an intense Bassanio, and Portia's suitors are deliciously over the top (Morocco is especially hilarious). The greatest disappointment, oddly enough, is Joan Plowright: her Portia is rather on the dull side.

An indispensable film for fans of either Olivier or *The Merchant.* But a truly painful ordeal for the eyes.

Source: Google



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Final Activities

Movie

The Merchant of Venice (2005)

Starring: Al Pacino as *Shylock*
Jeremy Irons as *Antonio*
Lynn Collins as *Portia*

Review

Roger Ebert on January 20, 2005

Thinking to read *The Merchant of Venice* one more time, I took down the volume of Shakespeare's tragedies, only to be reminded that this dark and troubling play is classified with comedies. Its two natures come from different spheres; sunny scenes of romance alternate with sadness, desperation and guile. When Jessica, Shylock's daughter, steals his fortune and leaves his home to marry Lorenzo, it's as if she's escaping from one half of the play to the other.

Michael Radford's new production is, incredibly, the first theatrical film of the play in the sound era. There were several silent versions, and it has been done for television, but among the most important titles in Shakespeare's canon this is the play that has been sidestepped by not only Hollywood but every film industry in the world. The reason is plain to see: Shylock, the money-lender who demands repayment with a pound of flesh, is an anti-Semitic caricature; filmmakers turn away, and choose more palatable plays.

Yet Shylock is an intense, passionate character in a great play, and Radford's film does them justice. Although Shylock embodies anti-Semitic stereotypes widely held in Shakespeare's time, he is not a one-dimensional creature like Marlowe's Jew of Malta, but embodies, like all of Shakespeare's great creations, a humanity that transcends the sport of his making. Radford's Shylock, played with a rasping intensity by Al Pacino, is not softened or apologized for — that would deny the reality of the play — but he is seen as a man not without his reasons....

The film is wonderful to look at, saturated in Renaissance colors and shadows, filmed in Venice, which is the only location that is also a set. It has greatness in moments, and is denied greatness overall only because it is such a peculiar construction; watching it is like channel-surfing between a teen romance and a dark abysm of loss and grief. Shylock and Antonio, if they were not made strangers by hatred, would make good companions for long, sad conversations punctuated by wounded silences.



Source: Google

Play Into Film

1. This 2005 film of the "*Merchant* is, for the most part, faithful in letter and spirit to its source material." —A.O. Scott, movie reviewer
   Having viewed this film, give your reasons for supporting (or not) the above statement.
2. What are the changes to Shakespeare's play?
3. Several of the comic scenes (such as the scene with Lancelet and his father) are removed. In your production would you remove them?
4. This film was set in Venice in the year 1596. What is the advantage of keeping the original time and place?
5. "Too many productions of Shakespeare's plays ... either push them into a contrived modern setting or chase after an irrelevant ideal of authenticity." —A.O. Scott
   Do you agree/disagree? Why?
6. My theatre experiences (Olivier's *Hamlet* and Guinness's *Richard III*), not school, converted me to Shakespeare. Did school get me ready?
7. How should Shakespeare be experienced in school without spoiling a love for his plays?

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Final Reflection

David Suchet

David Suchet, an associate artist of the Royal Shakespeare Company, played Shylock in the RSC production of The Merchant of Venice *in 1981. He is probably best known to [us] as Hercule Poirot in the television series "Mystery!"*

Norrie Epstein interviews David Suchet

NE: *How did you prepare for the role of Shylock?*

DS: I studied the history of how the Jew was portrayed in English drama. Up to that point he had always been represented as the devil with red hair. Until *The Merchant of Venice*, no Jew on stage had ever been given a reason for his diabolical actions. No one can say that Shylock is right to seek the life of anybody, even in revenge. But because you are dealing with a marvelous writer who knows about people, he gives Shylock a motive, and the motive is the loss of his daughter. The humor is that here is a man who at one moment doesn't know what's more important to him, his daughter or his ducats.

NE: *Doesn't that make us hate Shylock?*

DS: No, he's very sympathetic. He's an old man, a man who is confused, a man who doesn't know his values anymore. He's a man who ultimately learns his values. If you look at the scene where he is bewailing his daughter and his money, it might seem like an anti-Semitic, silly thing, but if you look at it again, if you see him as a human being, then Shakespeare is asking, What is more important in life? People, family, or money? It's a very subtle scene.

I disagree with every critic who says it is an anti-Semitic play. Shakespeare would never have done that—not with Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta* playing down the road, which *is* very anti-Semitic. With *The Merchant*, Shakespeare gives two fingers to *The Jew of Malta*. And Shylock is redeemed at the end of the play.

NE: *Why? Because he is now a Christian? Many people find that scene very offensive.*

DS: We must not judge *The Merchant of Venice* in terms of the Holocaust! We must not! We must go back four hundred years and look at what Shakespeare was doing. By making Shylock convert at the end, Shakespeare is saving his soul, because the Elizabethans believed that the Jewish soul went to hell.

NE: *But he's a reluctant Christian.*

DS: That doesn't matter! We can't look at it in modern terms. It was quite a common punishment. We can only react to how the play was written and keep an open mind.

NS: *But don't the Christians in the play come off as rather bland and callow?*

DS: Yes, the Christians in the play come off terribly badly, and Shakespeare is very keen to make sure that the last scene is not just a happy reunion.

NE: *But what about Portia, the so-called heroine?*

DS: Portia is a totally confused, money-governed person, desperately wishing to find human values. The whole play has to do with money, not racism. Shylock comes on and his first line is "Three-thousand ducats, well." Everybody wants to marry Portia because she is so wealthy. She has to find love in the play. That's what Shakespeare is saying throughout *Merchant:* the real value is in people, not money.

Source: Norrie Epstein, *The Friendly Shakespeare* (Penguin, 1993), 105-107.



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"The Merchant"

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Intelligent, frequently riveting adaptation of Shakespeare's tale.... Exceedingly well acted, particularly by Pacino (despite his New York accent). —*Leonard Maltin's Movie Guide*

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Related Reading

On racial or cultural prejudice, see suggestions in the HBJ Shakespeare Series (Teacher's Guide 1988) of *The Merchant of Venice* for titles of contemporary novels, biographies, and autobiographies.

On the subject of money and values, see the bibliography of *Money and the Meaning of Life* by Jacob Needleman (A Currency Book, 1991) for titles.

On love and money, consider the following novels: *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen; *Washington Square* by Henry James; and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

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ISBN 978-0-9937264-0-8