The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespearean Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

The Study Guide is published by the Utah Shakespearean Festival, 351 West Center Street; Cedar City, UT 84720. Bruce C. Lee, publications manager and editor; Clare Campbell, graphic artist.

Copyright © 2018, Utah Shakespearean Festival. Please feel free to download and print The Study Guide, as long as you do not remove any identifying mark of the Utah Shakespearean Festival.

For more information about Festival education programs: Utah Shakespearean Festival
351 West Center Street
Cedar City, Utah 84720
435-586-7880
www.bard.org.

Cover Art by Cully Long.
The Merchant of Venice

Contents

Information on William Shakespeare
Shakespeare: Words, Words, Words 4
Not of an Age, but for All Mankind 6
Elizabeth's England 8
History Is Written by the Victors 10
Mr. Shakespeare, I Presume 11
A Nest of Singing Birds 12
Actors in Shakespeare's Day 14
Audience: A Very Motley Crowd 16
Shakespearean Snapshots 18
Ghosts, Witches, and Shakespeare 20
What They Wore 22

Information on the Play
About The Merchant of Venice 23
Synopsis 24
Characters 25

Scholarly Articles on the Play
A Thought-Provoking, Equivocal, Problematic Play 27
Neither Comedy, Tragedy, Nor Romance 30
A Romantic Comedy 32
The Enigmatic Shylock 33
A Tale of Outsiders 35
Family Relationships 37
The Sins of the Father . . . 39
My Daughter, My Ducats: Love and Money 41
Mercy or Monkeys? 43

Classroom Materials
Shakespeare's Words 45
Shakespeare's Language 48
The Merchant of Venice in Modern Terms 50
The Globe Theatre 51
William Shakespeare 52
Shakespeare's Plays 54
Shakespeare's Audience and Audiences Today 56
Famous Lines and Passages 54
Suggested Activities 57
Discussion Question for Middle and High School Students 59
Discussion Question for Elementary School Students 60
Three Scenes, Three Societies, Three Shylocks: Lesson Plans 60
The Merchant of Venice Family Relationships 70
Neither Comedy, Romance, not Tragedy 72
Recommended Reading 74
Works Cited 75
Shakespeare: Words, Words, Words
By S. S. Moorty

“No household in the English-speaking world is properly furnished unless it contains copies of the Holy Bible and of The Works of William Shakespeare. It is not always thought that these books should be read in maturer years, but they must be present as symbols of Religion and Culture” (G.B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare*. Rev. & Exp. [New York: Penguin Books, 1991], 11).

We, the Shakespeare-theater goers and lovers, devotedly and ritualistically watch and read the Bard’s plays not for exciting stories and complex plots. Rather, Shakespeare’s language is a vital source of our supreme pleasure in his plays. Contrary to ill-conceived notions, Shakespeare’s language is not an obstacle to appreciation, though it may prove to be difficult to understand. Instead, it is the communicative and evocative power of Shakespeare’s language that is astonishingly rich in vocabulary—about 29,000 words—strikingly presented through unforgettable characters such as Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, Othello, Rosalind, Viola, Iago, Shylock, etc.

In the high school classroom, students perceive Shakespeare’s language as “Old English.” Actually Shakespeare’s linguistic environment, experience, and exposure was, believe it or not, closer to our own times than to Chaucer’s, two hundred years earlier. Indeed, the history and development of the English language unfolds as follows: Old English, 449-1100; Middle English 1100-1500; and Modern English 1500-present. Shakespeare was firmly in the Modern English period.

At the time Shakespeare wrote, most of the grammatical changes from Old and Middle English had taken place; yet rigid notions about “correctness” had not yet been standardized in grammars. The past five centuries have advanced the cause of standardized positions for words; yet the flexible idiom of Elizabethan English offered abundant opportunities for Shakespeare’s linguistic inventiveness. Ideally it is rewarding to study several facets of Shakespeare’s English: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, wordplay, and imagery. The present overview will, however, be restricted to “vocabulary.”

To Polonius’s inquisitive question “What do you read, my lord?” (*Hamlet*, 2.2.191) Hamlet nonchalantly and intriguingly aptly replies: “Words, words, words” (2.2.192). This many-splendored creation of Shakespeare’s epitomizes the playwright’s own fascination with the dynamic aspect of English language, however troubling it may be to modern audiences and readers. Shakespeare added several thousand words to the language, apart from imparting new meanings to known words. At times Shakespeare could teasingly employ the same word for different shades of thought. Barowne’s single line, “Light, seeking light, doth light of light beguile” (*Love’s Labour’s Lost*, 1.1.77), as Harry Levin in his General Introduction to *The Riverside Shakespeare* (9) explains, “uses ‘light’ in four significations: intellect, seeking wisdom, cheats eyesight out of daylight.”

Another instance: Othello as he enters his bedroom with a light before he smothers his dear, innocent Desdemona soliloquizes: “Put out the light, and then put out the light” (*Othello*, 5.2.7) Here ‘light’ compares the light of Othello’s lamp or torch to Desdemona’s ‘light’ of life.

In both instances, the repeated simple ordinary word carries extraordinary shades of meaning. “Usually such a tendency in a Shakespeare play indicates a more or less conscious thematic intent.” (Paul A. Jorgensen, *Redeeming Shakespeare’s Words* [Berkeley and Los Angeles; University of California Press, 1962], 100).

Living in an age of the “grandiose humanistic confidence in the power of the word” (Levin 9),
Shakespeare evidently felt exuberant that he had the license to experiment with the language, further blessed by the fact that “there were no English grammars to lay down rules or dictionaries to restrict word-formation. This was an immeasurable boon for writers” (Levin 10). Surely Shakespeare took full advantage of the unparalleled linguistic freedom to invent, to experiment with, and to indulge in lavishly.

However intriguing, captivating, mind-teasing, beguiling, and euphonious, Shakespeare's vocabulary can be a stumbling block, especially for readers. “In the theater the speaking actor frequently relies on tone, semantic drive, narrative context, and body language to communicate the sense of utterly unfamiliar terms and phrases, but on the page such words become more noticeable and confusing” (Russ McDonald, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents* [Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996], 184).

Unlocking the meaning of Shakespeare's vocabulary can prove to be an interesting challenge. Such words include those which “have dropped from common use like ‘bisson’ (blind) or those that the playwright seems to have created from Latin roots . . . but that did not catch on, such as conspectuities’ (eyesight or vision) or ‘unplausible’ (doubtful or disapproving). Especially confusing are those words that have shifted meaning over the intervening centuries, such as ‘proper’ (handsome), ‘nice’ (squeamish or delicate), ‘silly’ (innocent), or ‘cousin’ (kinsman, that is, not necessarily the child of an aunt or uncle” (McDonald 184).

Because of semantic change, when Shakespeare uses ‘conceit,’ he does not mean ‘vanity,’ as we might understand it to be. Strictly following etymology, Shakespeare means a ‘conception’ or ‘notion,’ or possibly the ‘imagination’ itself.

Perhaps several Shakespeare words “would have been strange to Shakespeare's audience because they were the products of his invention or unique usage. Some words that probably originated with him include: ‘auspicious,’ ‘assassination,’ ‘disgraceful,’ ‘dwindle,’ ‘savagery.’” Certainly a brave soul, he was “ a most audacious inventor of words.” To appreciate and understand Shakespeare's English in contrast to ours, we ought to suspend our judgment and disbelief and allow respect for the “process of semantic change, which has been continually eroding or encrusting his original meaning” (Levin 8).

Shakespeare’s vocabulary has received greater attention than any other aspect of his language. Perhaps this is because it is the most accessible with no burdensome complications. Whatever the cause, Shakespeare's language will forever be challenging and captivating.
Not of an Age, but for All Mankind

By Douglas A. Burger

After an enormous expenditure of money and effort, Shakespeare’s Globe Theater has risen again, four centuries later, on London’s south bank of the Thames. Designed as a faithful reconstruction of the original, it uses the building methods of the time and traditional materials (oak timbers, plaster walls, wooden pegs, water-reeds for thatching the roof). From above, the shape seems circular (actually, it is twenty-six sided) with three covered tiers of seats surrounding a central area which is open to the sky. There the “groundlings” may stand to see the action taking place on the stage, which occupies almost half of the inner space. There are no artificial lights, no conventional sets, no fancy rigging.

Seeing a Shakespeare play in the afternoon sunlight at the new Globe must come very close to the experience of those early-day Londoners, except, of course, that we in the twentieth-century behave better. We don’t yell insults at the actors, spit, or toss orange peels on the ground. We also smell better: the seventeenth-century playwright, Thomas Dekker, calls the original audience “Stinkards . . . glied together in crowds with the Steames of strong breath” (Shakespeare’s Globe: The Guide Book [London: International Globe Center, 1996], 42). And we are safer. The first Globe burned to the ground. The new theater has more exits, fire-retardant insulation concealed in the walls, and water-sprinklers that poke through the thatch of the roof.

That hard-headed capitalists and officials would be willing, even eager, to invest in the project shows that Shakespeare is good business. The new Globe is just one example. Cedar City’s own Utah Shakespearean Festival makes a significant contribution to the economy of southern Utah. A sizable percentage of all the tourist dollars spent in England goes to Shakespeare’s birthplace, Stratford-on-Avon, which would be a sleepy little agricultural town without its favorite son. The situation seems incredible. In our whole history, what other playwright could be called a major economic force? Who else—what single individual—could be listed along with agriculture, mining, and the like as an industry of a region?

Why Shakespeare?

The explanation, of course, goes further than an attempt to preserve our cultural traditions. In an almost uncanny way, Shakespeare’s perceptions remain valuable for our own understandings of life, and probably no other writer remains so insightful, despite the constantly changing preoccupations of audiences over time.

The people of past centuries, for example, looked to the plays for nuggets of wisdom and quotable quotes, and many of Shakespeare’s lines have passed into common parlance. There is an old anecdote about the woman, who on first seeing Hamlet, was asked how she liked the play. She replied, “Oh, very nice, my dear, but so full of quotations.” She has it backwards of course. Only the King James Bible has lent more “quotations” to English than Shakespeare.

Citizens of the late nineteenth century sought in the plays for an understanding of human nature, valuing Shakespeare’s character for traits that they recognized in themselves and in others. The fascination continues to the present day as some of our best-known movie stars attempt to find new dimensions in the great characters: Mel Gibson and Kenneth Branagh in Hamlet, Lawrence Fishburn in Othello, Leonardo de Caprio in Romeo + Juliet, to name just a few.

Matters of gender, class, and race have preoccupied more recent audiences. Beatrice sounds a rather feminist note in Much Ado about Nothing in her advice to her cousin about choosing a husband: Curtsy to your father, but say “Father, as it please me.” Coriolanus presents a recur-
ring dilemma about class relations in its explorations of the rights and wrongs involved in a
great man’s attempt to control the masses. Racial attitudes are illuminated in Othello, where the
European characters always mark the hero by his race, always identify him first as the “Moor,”
are always aware of his difference. London’s new/old Globe is thus a potent symbol of the plays’
continuing worth to us. The very building demonstrates the utter accuracy of the lines written
so long ago that Shakespeare is not “of an age” but “for all time.”
Elizabeth's England

In his entire career, William Shakespeare never once set a play in Elizabethan England. His characters lived in medieval England (*Richard II*), France (*As You Like It*), Vienna (*Measure for Measure*), fifteenth-century Italy (*Romeo and Juliet*), the England ruled by Elizabeth's father (*Henry VIII*) and elsewhere—anywhere and everywhere, in fact, except Shakespeare's own time and place. But all Shakespeare's plays—even when they were set in ancient Rome—reflected the life of Elizabeth's England (and, after her death in 1603, that of her successor, James I). Thus, certain things about these extraordinary plays will be easier to understand if we know a little more about Elizabethan England.

Elizabeth's reign was an age of exploration—exploration of the world, exploration of man's nature, and exploration of the far reaches of the English language. This renaissance of the arts and sudden flowering of the spoken and written word gave us two great monuments—the King James Bible and the plays of Shakespeare—and many other treasures as well.

Shakespeare made full use of the adventurous Elizabethan attitude toward language. He employed more words than any other writer in history—more than 21,000 different words appear in the plays—and he never hesitated to try a new word, revive an old one, or make one up. Among the words which first appeared in print in his works are such everyday terms as "critical," "assassinate," "bump," "gloomy," "suspicious," "and hurry," and he invented literally dozens of phrases which we use today: such un-Shakespeare expressions as "catching a cold," "the mind's eye," "elbow room," and even "pomp and circumstance."

Elizabethan England was a time for heroes. The ideal man was a courtier, an adventurer, a fencer with the skill of Tybalt, a poet no doubt better than Orlando, a conversationalist with the wit of Rosalind and the eloquence of Richard II, and a gentleman. In addition to all this, he was expected to take the time, like Brutus, to examine his own nature and the cause of his actions and (perhaps unlike Brutus) to make the right choices. The real heroes of the age did all these things and more.

Despite the greatness of some Elizabethan ideals, others seem small and undignified, to us; marriage, for example, was often arranged to bring wealth or prestige to the family, with little regard for the feelings of the bride. In fact, women were still relatively powerless under the law.

The idea that women were "lower" than men was one small part of a vast concern with order which was extremely important to many Elizabethans. Most people believed that everything, from the lowest grain of sand to the highest angel, had its proper position in the scheme of things. This concept was called "the great chain of being." When things were in their proper place, harmony was the result; when order was violated, the entire structure was shaken.

This idea turns up again and again in Shakespeare. The rebellion against Richard II brings bloodshed to England for generations; Romeo and Juliet's rebellion against their parents contributes to their tragedy; and the assassination in Julius Caesar throws Rome into civil war.

Many Elizabethans also perceived duplications in the chain of order. They believed, for example, that what the sun is to the heavens, the king is to the state. When something went wrong in the heavens, rulers worried: before Julius Caesar and Richard II were overthrown, comets and meteors appeared, the moon turned the color of blood, and other bizarre astronomical phenomena were reported. Richard himself compares his fall to a premature setting of the sun; when he descends from the top of Flint Castle to meet the conquering Bolingbroke, he likens himself to the driver of the sun's chariot in Greek mythology: "Down, down I come, like glist'ring Phaeton" (3.3.178).
All these ideas find expression in Shakespeare’s plays, along with hundreds of others—most of them not as strange to our way of thinking. As dramatized by the greatest playwright in the history of the world, the plays offer us a fascinating glimpse of the thoughts and passions of a brilliant age. Elizabethan England was a brief skyrocket of art, adventure, and ideas which quickly burned out; but Shakespeare’s plays keep the best parts of that time alight forever.

(Adapted from “The Shakespeare Plays,” educational materials made possible by Exxon, Metropolitan Life, Morgan Guaranty, and CPB.)
History Is Written by the Victors
From Insights, 1994

William Shakespeare wrote ten history plays chronicling English kings from the time of the Magna Carta (King John) to the beginning of England’s first great civil war, the Wars of the Roses (Richard II) to the conclusion of the war and the reuniting of the two factions (Richard III), to the reign of Queen Elizabeth’s father (Henry VIII). Between these plays, even though they were not written in chronological order, is much of the intervening history of England, in the six Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI plays.

In writing these plays, Shakespeare had nothing to help him except the standard history books of his day. The art of the historian was not very advanced in this period, and no serious attempt was made to get at the exact truth about a king and his reign. Instead, the general idea was that any nation that opposed England was wrong, and that any Englishman who opposed the winning side in a civil war was wrong also.

Since Shakespeare had no other sources, the slant that appears in the history books of his time also appears in his plays. Joan of Arc opposed the English and was not admired in Shakespeare’s day, so she is portrayed as a comic character who wins her victories through witchcraft. Richard III fought against the first Tudor monarchs and was therefore labeled in the Tudor histories as a vicious usurper, and he duly appears in Shakespeare’s plays as a murdering monster.

Shakespeare wrote nine of his history plays under Queen Elizabeth. She did not encourage historical truthfulness, but rather a patriotism, an exultant, intense conviction that England was the best of all possible countries and the home of the most favored of mortals. And this patriotism breathes through all the history plays and binds them together. England’s enemy is not so much any individual king as the threat of civil war, and the history plays come to a triumphant conclusion when the threat of civil war is finally averted, and the great queen, Elizabeth, is born.

Shakespeare was a playwright, not a historian, and, even when his sources were correct, he would sometimes juggle his information for the sake of effective stagecraft. He was not interested in historical accuracy; he was interested in swiftly moving action and in people. Shakespeare’s bloody and superb king seems more convincing than the real Richard III, merely because Shakespeare wrote so effectively about him. Shakespeare moved in a different world from that of the historical, a world of creation rather than of recorded fact, and it is in this world that he is so supreme a master.
Mr. Shakespeare, I Presume
by Diana Major Spencer From Insights, 1994

Could the plays known as Shakespeare’s have been written by a rural, semi-literate, uneducated, wife-deserting, two-bit actor who spelled him name differently each of the six times he wrote it down? Could such a man know enough about Roman history, Italian geography, French grammar, and English court habits to create Antony and Cleopatra, The Comedy of Errors, and Henry V? Could he know enough about nobility and its tenuous relationship to royalty to create King Lear and Macbeth?

Are these questions even worth asking? Some very intelligent people think so. On the other hand, some very intelligent people think not. Never mind quibbles about how a line should be interpreted, or how many plays Shakespeare wrote and which ones, or which of the great tragedies reflected personal tragedies. The question of authorship is “The Shakespeare Controversy.”

Since Mr. Cowell, quoting the deceased Dr. Wilmot, cast the first doubt about William of Stratford in an 1805 speech before the Ipswich Philological Society, nominees for the “real author” have included philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, playwright Christopher Marlowe, Queen Elizabeth I, Sir Walter Raleigh, and the earls of Derby, Rutland, Essex, and Oxford—among others.

The arguments evoke two premises: first, that the proven facts about the William Shakespeare who was christened at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564 do not configure a man of sufficient nobility of thought and language to have written the plays; and, second, that the man from Stratford is nowhere concretely identified as the author of the plays. The name “Shakespeare”—in one of its spellings—appears on early quartos, but the man represented by the name may not be the one from Stratford.

One group of objections to the Stratford man follows from the absence of any record that he ever attended school—in Stratford or anywhere else. If he were uneducated, the arguments go, how could his vocabulary be twice as large as the learned Milton’s? How could he know so much history, law, or philosophy? If he were a country bumpkin, how could he know so much of hawking, hounding, courtly manners, and daily habits of the nobility? How could he have traveled so much, learning about other nations of Europe in enough detail to make them the settings for his plays?

The assumptions of these arguments are that such rich and noble works as those attributed to a playwright using the name “Shakespeare” could have been written only by someone with certain characteristics, and that those characteristics could be distilled from the “facts” of his life. He would have to be noble; he would have to be well-educated; and so forth. On these grounds the strongest candidate to date is Edward de Vere, seventeenth earl of Oxford.

A debate that has endured its peaks and valleys, the controversy catapulted to center stage in 1984 with the publication of Charlton Ogburn’s The Mysterious William Shakespeare. Ogburn, a former army intelligence officer, builds a strong case for Oxford—if one can hurdle the notions that the author wasn’t Will Shakespeare, that literary works should be read autobiographically, and that literary creation is nothing more than reporting the facts of one’s own life. “The Controversy” was laid to rest—temporarily, at least—by justices Blackmun, Brennan, and Stevens of the United States Supreme Court who, after hearing evidence from both sides in a mock trial conducted September 25, 1987 at American University in Washington, D.C., found in favor of the Bard of Avon. Hooray for our side!
A Nest of Singing Birds
From Insights, 1992

Musical development was part of the intellectual and social movement that influenced all England during the Tudor Age. The same forces that produced writers like Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, John Donne, and Francis Bacon also produced musicians of corresponding caliber. So numerous and prolific were these talented and imaginative men—men whose reputations were even in their own day firmly established and well founded—that they have been frequently and aptly referred to as a nest of singing birds.

One such figure was Thomas Tallis, whose music has officially accompanied the Anglican service since the days of Elizabeth I; another was his student, William Boyd, whose variety of religious and secular compositions won him international reputation.

Queen Elizabeth I, of course, provided an inspiration for the best efforts of Englishmen, whatever their aims and activities. For music, she was the ideal patroness. She was an accomplished performer on the virginal (forerunner to the piano), and she aided her favorite art immensely in every way possible, bestowing her favors on the singers in chapel and court and on the musicians in public and private theatrical performances. To the great composers of her time, she was particularly gracious and helpful.

Singing has been an integral part of English life for as long as we have any knowledge. Long before the music was written down, the timeless folk songs were a part of our Anglo-Saxon heritage. The madrigals and airs that are enjoyed each summer at the Utah Shakespeare Festival evolved from these traditions.

It was noted by Bishop Jewel in 1560 that sometimes at Paul’s Cross there would be 6,000 people singing together, and before the sermon, the whole congregation always sang a psalm, together with the choir and organ. When that thundering unity of congregational chorus came in, “I was so transported there was no room left in my whole body, mind, or spirit for anything below divine and heavenly raptures.”

Religious expression was likely the dominant musical motif of the Elizabethan period; however, the period also saw development of English stage music, with Morley, John Wilson, and Robert Johnson setting much of their music to the plays of Shakespeare. The masque, a semi-musical entertainment, reached a high degree of perfection at the court of James I, where the courtiers themselves were sometimes participants. An educated person of the time was expected to perform music more than just fairly well, and an inability in this area might elicit whispered comments regarding lack of genteel upbringing, not only in the ability to take one’s part in a madrigal, but also in knowing the niceties of musical theory. Henry Peacham wrote in The Compleat Gentleman in 1662 that one of the fundamental qualities of a gentleman was to be able to “sing your part sure, and...to play the same upon your viol.”

Outside the walls of court could be heard street songs, lighthearted catches, and ballads, all of which indicates that music was not confined to the cathedrals or court. We still have extant literally hundreds of ballads, street songs, and vendors’ cries that were sung or hummed on the street and played with all their complicated variations on all levels of Elizabethan society.

Instruments of the period were as varied as the music and peoples, and the instrument and songbooks which remain in existence today are indicative of the high level of excellence enjoyed by the Elizabethans. Songbooks, mainly of part-songs for three, four, five, and six voices exist today, as do books of dance music: corrantos, pavans, and galliards. Records from one wealthy family indicate the family owned forty musical instruments, including twelve viols, seven recorders, four lutes, five virginals, various brasses and woodwinds, and two “great
organs.” To have use for such a great number of instruments implies a fairly large group of players resident with the family or staying with them as invited guests, and the players of the most popular instruments (lutes, virginals, and viols) would be playing from long tradition, at least back to King Henry VIII. In short, music was as necessary to the public and private existence of a Renaissance Englishman as any of the basic elements of life.

The Utah Shakespeare Festival musicians perform each summer on authentic replicas of many of these Renaissance instruments. The music they perform is authentic from the Elizabethan period, and the instruments are made available for audience inspection and learning.
Actors in Shakespeare’s Day

By Stephanie Chidester From Insights, 1994

The status of the actor in society has never been entirely stable but has fluctuated from the beginnings of the theatre to the present day. The ancient Greeks often considered actors as servants of Dionysus, and their performances were a sort of religious rite. Roman actors, often slaves, were seen as the scraps of society, only one step above gladiators. In medieval Europe, both the theatre and the actor, suppressed by the Catholic Church, were almost non-existent but gradually re-emerged in the form of the liturgy and, later, the Mystery plays. The actors of Shakespeare’s age also saw fluctuations in reputation; actors were alternately classified as “vagabonds and sturdy beggars,” as an act of Parliament in 1572 defined them, and as servants of noblemen.

As early as 1482, noblemen such as Richard, duke of Gloucester (later Richard III), the earl of Essex, and Lord Arundel kept acting companies among their retainers. But other than these select groups protected by nobles, actors lived lives of danger and instability because when they abandoned their respectable trades, they also left behind the comfort and protection of the trade guilds.

However, life soon became much more difficult for both of these classes of actors. In 1572, Parliament passed two acts which damaged thespians’ social status. In the first one, the Queen forbade “the unlawful retaining of multitudes of unordinary servants by liveries, badges, and other signs and tokens (contrary to the good and ancient statutes and laws of this realm)” in order to “curb the power of local grandees” (Dennis Kay, Shakespeare: His Life, Work, and Era [New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992], 88). One result of this was that some of the actors, now considered superfluous, were turned away.

To make matters even worse, these actors faced yet another impediment: the “Acte for the punishment of Vacabondes” (Kay, 88), in which actors were declared “vagabonds and masterless men and hence were subject to arrest and imprisonment” (Thomas Marc Parrott and Robert Hamilton Ball, A Short View of Elizabethan Drama [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1943], 46).

However, there were still nobles, such as the earl of Leicester and the earl of Sussex, who endorsed players; the protector would usually seek royal permission for these actors to perform in London or, less frequently, some other less prestigious town. Thus the actors were able to venture forth without fear of arrest. It is through these circumstances that Shakespeare ends up an actor in London.

There are many theories—guesses really—of how Shakespeare got into the theatre. He may have joined a group of strolling players, performed around the countryside, and eventually made it to London, the theatrical hub of Britain. Another theory suggests that he began as a schoolmaster, wrote a play (possibly The Comedy of Errors) and then decided to take it to London; or, alternately, he could have simply gone directly to that great city, with or without a play in hand, to try his luck.

An interesting speculation is that while he was young, Shakespeare might have participated in one of the cycles of Mystery plays in Stratford: “On one occasion the Stratford corporation laid out money for an entertainment at Pentecost. In 1583 they paid 13s 4d ‘to Davi Jones and his company for his pastime at Whitsuntide.’ Davi Jones had been married to Elizabeth, the daughter of Adrian Quiney, and after her death in 1579 he took as his wife a Hathaway, Frances. Was Shakespeare one of the youths who trimmed themselves for the Whitsun pastime?” (S. Schoenbaum, William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life [New York: New American Library, 1977], 111).
But however he got into the theatre and to London, he had made a very definite
impression on his competitors by 1592, when playwright Robert Greene attacked Shakespeare
as both actor and author: “‘There is an upstart Crow, beautified with our
feathers, that with his Tiger’s heart wrapt in a Player’s hide, supposes he is as well able
to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and . . . is in his own conceit the only
Shake-scene in a country’” (G. B. Harrison, Introducing Shakespeare [New York: Penguin Books,
Inc., 1947], 1).

We don’t often think of Shakespeare as primarily an actor, perhaps because most of what we
know of him comes from the plays he wrote rather than the parts he played. Nevertheless, he
made much of his money as an actor and sharer in his company: “At least to start with, his sta-
status, his security derived more from his acting skill and his eye for business than from his pen”
(Kay, 95). Had he been only a playwright, he would likely have died a poor man, as did Robert
Greene: “In the autumn of 1592, Robert Greene, the most popular author of his generation, lay
penniless and dying. . . . The players had grown rich on the products of his brain, and now he
was deserted and alone” (Harrison, 1).

While Shakespeare made a career of acting, there are critics who might dispute his acting tal-
et. For instance, almost a century after Shakespeare’s death, “an anonymous enthusiast of the
stage . . . remarked . . . that ‘Shakespear . . . was a much better poet, than player’” (Schoenbaum,
201). However, Shakespeare could have been quite a good actor, and this statement would still
be true. One sign of his skill as an actor is that he is mentioned in the same breath with Burbage
and Kemp: “The accounts of the royal household for Mar 15 [1595] record payments to
‘William Kempe William Shakespeare & Richarde Burbage seruantes to the Lord Chamberlain’”
(Kay, 174).

Another significant indication of his talent is the very fact that he played in London
rather than touring other less lucrative towns. If players were to be legally retained by
noblemen, they had to prove they could act, and one means of demonstrating their
legitimacy was playing at court for Queen Elizabeth. The more skilled companies obtained
the queen’s favor and were granted permission to remain in London.

Not all companies, however, were so fortunate: “Sussex’s men may not have been quite up to
the transition from rural inn-yards to the more demanding circumstances of court performance.
Just before the Christmas season of 1574, for example, they were inspected (‘perused’) by offi-
cials of the Revels Office, with a view to being permitted to perform before the queen; but they
did not perform” (Kay, 90). Shakespeare and his company, on the other hand, performed suc-
cessfully in London from the early 1590s until 1611.

It would be a mistake to classify William Shakespeare as only a playwright, even the
greatest playwright of the English-speaking world; he was also “an actor, a sharer, a member of
a company” (Kay, 95), obligations that were extremely relevant to his plays. As a man of the
theatre writing for a company, he knew what would work on stage and what would not and was
able to make his plays practical as well as brilliant. And perhaps more importantly, his theatrical
experience must have taught him much about the human experience, about
everyday lives and roles, just as his plays show us that “All the world’s a stage, / And all
the men and women merely players” (As You Like It, 2.7.149-50).
When Shakespeare peeped through the curtain at the audience gathered to hear his first play, he looked upon a very motley crowd. The pit was filled with men and boys. The galleries contained a fair proportion of women, some not too respectable. In the boxes were a few gentlemen from the royal courts, and in the lords’ box or perhaps sitting on the stage was a group of extravagantly dressed gentlemen of fashion. Vendors of nuts and fruits moved about through the crowd. The gallants were smoking; the apprentices in the pit were exchanging rude witticisms with the painted ladies.

When Shakespeare addressed his audience directly, he did so in terms of gentle courtesy or pleasant raillery. In *Hamlet*, however, he does let fall the opinion that the groundlings (those on the ground, the cheapest seats) were “for the most part capable of nothing but dumb shows and noise.” His recollections of the pit of the Globe may have added vigor to his ridicule of the Roman mob in *Julius Caesar*.

On the other hand, the theatre was a popular institution, and the audience was representative of all classes of London life. Admission to standing room in the pit was a penny, and an additional penny or two secured a seat in the galleries. For seats in the boxes or for stools on the stage, still more was charged, up to sixpence or half a crown.

Attendance at the theatres was astonishingly large. There were often five or six theatres giving daily performances, which would mean that out of a city of one hundred thousand inhabitants, thirty thousand or more spectators each week attended the theatre. When we remember that a large class of the population disapproved of the theatre, and that women of respectability were not frequent patrons of the public playhouses, this attendance is remarkable.

Arrangements for the comfort of the spectators were meager, and spectators were often disorderly. Playbills seem to have been posted all about town and in the theatre, and the title of the piece was announced on the stage. These bills contained no lists of actors, and there were no programs, ushers, or tickets. There was usually one door for the audience, where the admission fee was deposited in a box carefully watched by the money taker, and additional sums were required at entrance to the galleries or boxes. When the three o’clock trumpets announced the beginning of a performance, the assembled audience had been amusing itself by eating, drinking, smoking, and playing cards, and they sometimes continued these occupations during a performance. Pickpockets were frequent, and, if caught, were tied to a post on the stage. Disturbances were not infrequent, sometimes resulting in general rioting.

The Elizabethan audience was fond of unusual spectacle and brutal physical suffering. They liked battles and murders, processions and fireworks, ghosts and insanity. They expected comedy to abound in beatings, and tragedy in deaths. While the audience at the Globe expected some of these sensations and physical horrors, they did not come primarily for these. (Real blood and torture were available nearby at the bear baitings, and public executions were not uncommon.) Actually, there were very few public entertainments offering as little brutality as did the theatre.

Elizabethans attended the public playhouses for learning. They attended for romance, imagination, idealism, and art; the audience was not without refinement, and those looking for food for the imagination had nowhere to go but to the playhouse. There were no newspapers, no magazines, almost no novels, and only a few cheap books; theatre filled the desire for story.
discussion among people lacking other educational and cultural opportunities.

The most remarkable case of Shakespeare’s theatre filling an educational need is probably that of English history. The growth of national patriotism culminating in the English victory over the Spanish Armada gave dramatists a chance to use the historical material, and for the fifteen years from the Armada to the death of Elizabeth, the stage was deluged with plays based on the events of English chronicles, and familiarity with English history became a cultural asset of the London crowd,

Law was a second area where the Elizabethan public seems to have been fairly well informed, and successful dramatists realized the influence that the great development of civil law in the sixteenth century exercised upon the daily life of the London citizen. In this area, as in others, the dramatists did not hesitate to cultivate the cultural background of their audience whenever opportunity offered, and the ignorance of the multitude did not prevent it from taking an interest in new information and from offering a receptive hearing to the accumulated lore of lawyers, historians, humanists, and playwrights.

The audience was used to the spoken word, and soon became trained in blank verse, delighting in monologues, debates, puns, metaphors, stump speakers, and sonorous declamation. The public was accustomed to the acting of the old religious dramas, and the new acting in which the spoken words were listened to caught on rapidly. The new poetry and the great actors who recited it found a sensitive audience. There were many moments during a play when spectacle, brutality, and action were all forgotten, and the audience fed only on the words. Shakespeare and his contemporaries may be deemed fortunate in having an audience essentially attentive, eager for the newly unlocked storehouse of secular story, and possessing the sophistication and interest to be fed richly by the excitements and levities on the stage.
It is hard to get from the facts of Shakespeare’s life to any sense of what it must have been like to have lived it. He was born in 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon and died there in 1616. The day of his birth is not certain, but it may have been the same as the day of his death—April 23—if he was baptized, as was usual at the time, three days after he was born. He married Anne Hathaway in the winter of 1582-83, when he was eighteen and she was twenty-six. He became the father of three children. The first was Susannah, who was born around May 23, close enough to the date of the wedding to suggest that the marriage was not entirely voluntary. Shakespeare’s twins, Hamnet and Judith, were baptized on February 2, 1585. Hamnet died of unknown causes (at least unknown by us at this distance in time) in 1596. Shakespeare’s career as actor, theatre owner, manager, and, of course, playwright began in the vicinity of 1590 and continued for the rest of his life, though there are clear indications that he spent more and more time in Stratford and less and less in London from 1611 on. His work in the theatre made him wealthy, and his extraordinary plays brought him a measure of fame, though nothing like what he deserved or would posthumously receive.

It’s hard to get even the briefest sense of what Shakespeare’s life was like from such information. It is probably impossible ever to know what Shakespeare thought or felt, but maybe we can get closer to what he saw and heard and even smelled. Perhaps some snapshots—little close-ups—might help to bring us nearer to the world in which Shakespeare lived if not quite to the life he lived in that world. In Shakespeare’s youth, chimneys were a new thing. Before that, smoke was left to find its way out through a hole in the roof, often a thatched roof, and there were even some who maintained that this smoky atmosphere was better than the newfangled fresh air that chimneys made possible—along with a greater division of rooms and more privacy.

In the year of Shakespeare’s birth, Stratford had more trees than houses—“upwards of 400 houses as well as 1,000 elms and forty ashes” (Peter Thomson, Shakespeare’s Professional Career [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 1). Peter Levi says, “The town was so full of elm trees that it must have looked and sounded like a woodland settlement. For example, Mr. Gibbs’s house on Rothermarket had twelve elms in the garden and six in front of the door. Thomas Attford on Ely Street had another twelve. The town boundaries were marked by elms or groups of elms (The Life and Times of William Shakespeare [New York: Wings Books, 1988], 7). Shakespeare’s “Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang” becomes a far more majestic image with the picture of Stratford’s elms in mind. And the birds themselves had a sound which modern ears no longer have a chance to enjoy. “We must realize that it was ordinary for . . . Shakespeare to hear a dawn chorus of many hundreds of birds at once. . . . as a young man thirty years ago I have heard a deafening dawn chorus in the wooded Chilterns, on Shakespeare’s road to London” (Levi 10).

Exactly what Shakespeare’s road to London may have been or at least how he first made his way there and became an actor is much debated. He might have been a schoolmaster or fifty other things, but he may well have started out as he ended up—as a player. We can then, in John Southworth’s words, “Picture a sixteen-year-old lad on a cart, growing year by year into manhood, journeying out of the Arden of his childhood into ever more unfamiliar, distant regions, travelling ill-made roads in all weathers, sleeping in inns, hearing and memorising strange new dialects and forms of speech, meeting with every possible type and character of person; learning, most of all perhaps, from the audiences to which he played in guildhalls and inns” (Shakespeare the Player: A Life in the Theatre [Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2000], 30). At some time in his life—in fact, many times—Shakespeare must have known theatrical tours very like that.
In London itself, the new Globe, the best theatre in (or rather just outside of) the city, was in an area with a large number of prisons and an unpleasant smell. “Garbage had preceded actors on the marshy land where the new playhouse was erected: ‘flanked with a ditch and forced out of a marsh’, according to Ben Jonson. Its cost . . . included the provision of heavy piles for the foundation, and a whole network of ditches in which the water rose and fell with the tidal Thames” (Garry O’Connor, William Shakespeare: A Popular Life [New York: Applause Books, 2000], 161). The playgoers came by water, and the Globe, the Rose, and the Swan “drew 3,000 or 4,000 people in boats across the Thames every day” (161).

Peter Levi says of Shakespeare’s London, “The noise, the crowds, the animals and their droppings, the glimpses of grandeur and the amazing squalor of the poor, were beyond modern imagination” (49).

England was a place of fear and glory. Public executions were public entertainments. Severed heads decayed on city walls. Francis Bacon, whom Will Durant calls “the most powerful and influential intellect of his time” (Heroes of History: A Brief History of Civilization from Ancient Times to the Dawn of the Modern Age [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001], 327), had been “one of the persons commissioned to question prisoners under torture” in the 1580s (Levi 4). The opportune moment when Shakespeare became the most successful of playwrights was the destruction of Thomas Kyd, “who broke under torture and was never the same again,” and the death of Christopher Marlowe in a tavern brawl which was the result of plot and counterplot—a struggle, very probably, between Lord Burghley and Walter Ralegh (Levi 48).

Shakespeare, who must have known the rumors and may have known the truth, cannot have helped shuddering at such monstrous good fortune. Still, all of the sights, smells, and terrors, from the birdsongs to the screams of torture, from the muddy tides to the ties of blood, became not only the textures and tonalities of Shakespeare’s life, but also the information and inspiration behind his plays.
Some time in the mid 1580s, young Will Shakespeare, for reasons not entirely clear to us, left his home, his wife, and his family in Stratford and set off for London. It was a time when Elizabeth, “la plus fine femme du monde,” as Henry III of France called her, had occupied the throne of England for over twenty-five years. The tragedy of Mary Stuart was past; the ordeal of Essex was in the future. Sir Francis Drake’s neutralization of the Spanish Armada was pending and rumors of war or invasion blew in from all the great ports.

What could have been more exciting for a young man from the country, one who was already more than half in love with words, than to be headed for London!

It was an exciting and frightening time, when the seven gates of London led to a maze of streets, narrow and dirty, crowded with tradesmen, carts, coaches, and all manner of humanity. Young Will would have seen the moated Tower of London, looking almost like an island apart. There was London Bridge crowded with tenements and at the southern end a cluster of traitors’ heads impaled on poles. At Tyburn thieves and murderers dangled, at Limehouse pirates were trussed up at low tide and left to wait for the water to rise over them. At Tower Hill the headman’s axe flashed regularly, while for the vagabonds there were the whipping posts, and for the beggars there were the stocks. Such was the London of the workaday world, and young Will was undoubtedly mentally filing away details of what he saw, heard, and smelled.

Elizabethan people in general were an emotional lot and the ferocity of their entertainment reflected that fact. Bear-baiting, for example, was a highly popular spectator sport, and the structure where they were generally held was not unlike the theatres of the day. A bear was chained to a stake in the center of the pit, and a pack of large dogs was turned loose to bait, or fight, him. The bear eventually tired (fortunately for the remaining dogs!), and, well, you can figure the rest out for yourself. Then there were the public hangings, whippings, or drawing and quarterings for an afternoon’s entertainment. So, the violence in some of Shakespeare’s plays was clearly directed at an audience that reveled in it. Imagine the effect of having an actor pretend to bite off his own tongue and spit a chunk of raw liver that he had carefully packed in his jaw into the faces of the groundlings!

Despite the progressing enlightenment of the Renaissance, superstition was still rampant among Elizabethan Londoners, and a belief in such things as astrology was common (Ralph P. Boas and Barbara M. Hahna, “The Age of Shakespeare,” Social Backgrounds of English Literature, [Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1931] 93). Through the position of stars many Elizabethans believed that coming events could be foretold even to the extent of mapping out a person’s entire life.

Where witches and ghosts were concerned, it was commonly accepted that they existed and the person who scoffed at them was considered foolish, or even likely to be cursed. Consider the fact that Shakespeare’s Macbeth was supposedly cursed due to the playwright’s having given away a few more of the secrets of witchcraft than the weird sisters may have approved of. For a time, productions experienced an uncanny assortment of mishaps and injuries. Even today, it is often considered bad luck for members of the cast and crew to mention the name of the production, simply referred to as the Scottish Play. In preaching a sermon, Bishop Jewel warned the Queen: “It may please your Grace to understand that witches and sorcerers within these last few years are marvelously increased. Your Grace’s subjects pine away, even unto death; their color fadeth; their flesh rotteth; their speech is benumbed; their senses bereft” (Walter Bromberg,

Ghosts were recognized by the Elizabethans in three basic varieties: the vision or purely subjective ghost, the authentic ghost who has died without opportunity of repentance, and the false ghost which is capable of many types of manifestations (Boas and Hahn). When a ghost was confronted, either in reality or in a Shakespeare play, some obvious discrimination was called for (and still is). Critics still do not always agree on which of these three types haunts the pages of *Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Richard III,* or *Hamlet,* or, in some cases, why they are necessary to the plot at all. After all, Shakespeare's ghosts are a capricious lot, making themselves visible or invisible as they please. In Richard III there are no fewer than eleven ghosts on the stage who are visible only to Richard and Richmond. In Macbeth the ghost of Banquo repeatedly appears to Macbeth in crowded rooms but is visible only to him. In Hamlet, the ghost appears to several people on the castle battlements but only to Hamlet in his mother's bedchamber. In the words of E.H. Seymour: "If we judge by sheer reason, no doubt we must banish ghosts from the stage altogether, but if we regulate our fancy by the laws of superstition, we shall find that spectres are privileged to be visible to whom they will" (E.H. Seymour “Remarks, Critical, Conjectural, and Explanatory on Shakespeare” in *Macbeth A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare* [New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1963] 211).

Shakespeare's audiences, and his plays, were the products of their culture. Since the validity of any literary work can best be judged by its public acceptance, not to mention its lasting power, it seems that Shakespeare's ghosts and witches were, and are, enormously popular. If modern audiences and critics find themselves a bit skeptical, then they might consider bringing along a supply of Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief." Elizabethans simply had no need of it.
Shakespeare’s Day: What They Wore

The clothing which actors wear to perform a play is called a costume, to distinguish it from everyday clothing. In Shakespeare’s time, acting companies spent almost as much on costumes as television series do today.

The costumes for shows in England were so expensive that visitors from France were a little envious. Kings and queens on the stage were almost as well dressed as kings and queens in real life.

Where did the acting companies get their clothes? Literally, “off the rack” and from used clothing sellers. Wealthy middle class people would often give their servants old clothes that they didn’t want to wear any more, or would leave their clothes to the servants when they died. Since clothing was very expensive, people wore it as long as possible and passed it on from one person to another without being ashamed of wearing hand-me-downs. However, since servants were of a lower class than their employers, they weren’t allowed to wear rich fabrics, and would sell these clothes to acting companies, who were allowed to wear what they wanted in performance.

A rich nobleman like Count Paris or a wealthy young man like Romeo would wear a doublet, possibly of velvet, and it might have gold embroidery. Juliet and Lady Capulet would have worn taffeta, silk, gold, or satin gowns, and everybody would have had hats, gloves, ruffs (an elaborate collar), gloves, stockings, and shoes equally elaborate.

For a play like Romeo and Juliet, which was set in a European country at about the same time Shakespeare wrote it, Elizabethan everyday clothes would have been fine—the audience would have been happy, and they would have been authentic for the play. However, since there were no costume shops who could make clothing suitable for, say, medieval Denmark for Hamlet, or ancient Rome for Julius Caesar, or Oberon and Titania’s forest for A Midsummer Night’s Dream, these productions often looked slightly strange—can you imagine fairies in full Elizabethan collars and skirts? How would they move?

Today’s audiences want costumes to be authentic, so that they can believe in the world of the play. However, Romeo and Juliet was recently set on Verona Beach, with very up-to-date clothes indeed; and about thirty years ago, West Side Story, an updated musical version of the Romeo and Juliet tale, was set in the Puerto Rican section of New York City.

Activity: Discuss what the affect of wearing “special” clothes is—to church, or to a party. Do you feel different? Do you act different? How many kinds of wardrobes do you have? School, play, best? Juliet and Romeo would have had only one type of clothing each, no matter how nice it was.

Activity: Perform a scene from the play in your everyday clothes, and then in more formal clothes. Ask the participants and the spectators to describe the differences between the two performances.
About *The Merchant of Venice*

**The Play**

*The Merchant of Venice*, William Shakespeare's sixth comedy, is believed to have been penned between 1596 and 1597. It first appeared in print in a quarto dated 1600.

Although *The Merchant of Venice* is in the catalog of Shakespeare's comedies, it is truly a mixture of styles: comedy, tragedy, scathing social scandal, parable, and fairy tale. The key to comedic classification is the incorporation of three classic comic plot lines: the bond plot (a pound of flesh), the casket plot (for Portia's hand), and the ring plot (given to Bassanio and Gratiano). Other comedic elements include disguise, midnight escapes, revels, and marriages.

**Influences and Sources**

In February of 1594, a very public trial was held in England, charging Roderigo Lopez with high treason. Lopez was a Portuguese Jew (he professed Christianity) who became physician to Queen Elizabeth. The earl of Essex denounced him as a traitor, claiming he was attempting to poison the queen. Lopez was executed on June 7, 1594.

Meanwhile, Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* received great success and popular appeal, playing fifteen times between February 4 and the end of 1594.

Surely, the immediacy of the trial of Roderigo Lopez and the public success of Marlowe’s play influenced Shakespeare as he began to write *The Merchant of Venice*. But the closest literary source for *The Merchant of Venice* is found in Ser Giovanni’s *Il Pecorone*. It was written in Italian at the end of the fourteenth century and printed at Milan in 1558. It contains numerous similarities with *The Merchant of Venice*, including both the bond plot and the ring plot, the settings of Venice and Belmont, and characters in disguise. But in *Il Pecorone* there is no mention of the casket plot. Some scholars believe that in 1579, *The Jew*, an English version of *Il Pecorone* that incorporated the casket plot, once existed, but is now lost.
The Story of the Play

The fair, rich and virtuous Portia, the heiress of Belmont, has attracted the attention of many would-be suitors. Among these is the noble but penniless Bassanio, a Venetian gentleman. Certainly, he would have no hope of winning Portia's hand without adequate funds for wooing, so he borrows 3,000 ducats from his merchant friend Antonio. Unfortunately, Antonio's money is tied up in shipping and he must ask the Jewish moneylender Shylock for a loan.

Shylock and Antonio are not on friendly terms since Antonio detests usury, and he would never have had anything to do with Shylock were it not for the financial need of his friend. To Antonio's surprise, Shylock agrees to the loan interest free, but suggests "in merry sport" that Antonio sign a bond that will permit Shylock to slice a pound of flesh from Antonio's body if the loan is not repaid within three months. Certain that at least one of his merchant vessels will return before that time, Antonio signs the bond and turns the needed funds over to Bassanio, who leaves at once for Belmont with his friend Gratiano.

The matter of wooing Portia is more complicated than he knew, Bassanio soon learns. Her deceased father has decreed that all suitors must choose from a gold, a silver, or a lead casket (chest). If the suitor unlocks the casket containing Portia's portrait, she becomes his bride. Bassanio is the lucky suitor, to Portia's delight, and so she gives him a ring as a token of her love which he vows to wear forever. Likewise, Nerissa, her maid, gives a ring to Gratiano, who has successfully wooed her. Soon after, Lorenzo, another friend of Bassanio, arrives with Jessica, Shylock's daughter, who has deserted her father and eloped with Lorenzo, a Christian.

Alas, word soon comes that none of Antonio's ships has arrived, and Shylock is appealing to the Venetian courts for his pound of flesh. Bassanio and Gratiano return immediately to Venice to help Antonio.

Portia devises a plan of her own, and, disguising herself as a young male lawyer, with Nerissa as her clerk, arrives at court just as things are going very badly for Antonio. At first, she attempts to soften Shylock's heart with her famous speech on mercy. He is not to be moved, however. Portia changes her approach and instructs Antonio to bare his bosom in order that the agreed upon pound of flesh may be extracted. Shylock may take his pound of flesh, she agrees, but he is forbidden to spill even one drop of blood, upon pain of death. Outwitted, Shylock relents, but Portia quickly points out that he is liable to have his property confiscated and be executed by Venetian law for plotting the death of a Venetian citizen. He may live, the court agrees, and pay a fine, but Antonio is to have the use of half of Shylock's wealth, which shall go to Lorenzo upon Shylock's death. For added measure, Antonio insists that Shylock must also become a Christian.

As a test of the devotion of their intendeds, Portia and Nerissa, still disguised, insist upon the rings Bassanio and Gratiano were given as tokens of gratitude for their legal services. The two suitors reluctantly agree, and the two young women hurry back to Belmont where they await the return of their husbands. The two young wives demand proof that the rings were not given to rivals, but soon relent as they relate the story of the disguises and the trial and return the rings to their husbands.

Word soon comes that Antonio's rich cargo vessels have arrived, and the play ends happily for everyone except Shylock and perhaps poor Jessica who is left alone on stage wondering where she fits between the two worlds of Venice.
Who’s Who in *The Merchant of Venice*

**Shylock, a Jewish moneylender in Venice:** Angered by his mistreatment at the hands of Venice's Christians, particularly Antonio, Shylock schemes to eke out his revenge by ruthlessly demanding as payment a pound of Antonio’s flesh. Although seen by the rest of the play’s characters as an inhuman monster, Shylock at times diverges from stereotype and reveals himself to be quite human. These contradictions, and his eloquent expressions of hatred, have earned Shylock a place as one of Shakespeare’s most memorable characters.

**Portia, a wealthy heiress from Belmont:** Portia’s beauty is matched only by her intelligence. Bound by a clause in her father’s will that forces her to marry whichever suitor chooses correctly among three caskets, Portia is nonetheless able to marry her true love, Bassanio. Far and away the cleverest of the play’s characters, it is Portia, in the disguise of a young law clerk, who saves Antonio from Shylock’s knife.

**Antonio, a merchant in Venice:** The merchant whose love for his friend Bassanio prompts him to sign Shylock’s contract and almost lose his life, Antonio is something of a mercurial figure, often inexplicably melancholy and, as Shylock points out, possessed of an incorrigible dislike of Jews. Nonetheless, Antonio is beloved of his friends and proves merciful to Shylock, albeit with conditions.

**Bassanio, a gentleman of Venice and a kinsman and dear friend of Antonio:** Bassanio’s love for the wealthy Portia leads him to borrow money from Shylock with Antonio as his guarantor. An ineffectual businessman, Bassanio proves himself a worthy suitor, correctly identifying the casket that contains Portia’s portrait.

**Gratiano, a friend of Bassanio:** A coarse and garrulous young man, Gratiano is Shylock’s most vocal and insulting critic during the trial. While Bassanio courts Portia, Gratiano falls in love with and eventually weds Portia’s lady-in-waiting, Nerissa.

**Jessica, Shylock’s daughter:** Although she is Shylock’s daughter, Jessica hates life in her father’s house and elopes with the young Christian gentleman, Lorenzo. The fate of her soul is often in doubt: the play’s characters wonder if her marriage can overcome the fact that she was born a Jew, and we wonder if her sale of a ring given to her father by her mother is excessively callous.

**Lorenzo, a friend of Bassanio and Antonio:** Lorenzo is in love with Shylock’s daughter, Jessica. He schemes to help Jessica escape from her father’s house, and he eventually elopes with her to Belmont.

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

**Lancelot Gobbo, Bassanio’s servant:** A comical, clownish figure that is especially adept at making puns, Lancelot leaves Shylock’s service in order to work for Bassanio.

**The prince of Morocco, a Moorish prince who seeks Portia’s hand in marriage:** The prince of Morocco asks Portia to ignore his dark countenance and seeks to win her by picking one of the three caskets. Certain that the caskets reflect Portia’s beauty and stature, the prince of Morocco picks the gold chest, which proves to be incorrect.
The prince of Aragon, an arrogant Spanish nobleman who seeks Portia’s hand in marriage: Like the prince of Morocco, the prince of Aragon chooses unwisely. He picks the silver casket, which gives him a message calling him an idiot instead granting him Portia’s hand.

Salerio, a Venetian gentleman, and friend to Antonio, Bassanio, and Lorenzo: Salerio escorts the newlyweds Jessica and Lorenzo to Belmont and returns with Bassanio and Gratiano for Antonio’s trial. He is often almost indistinguishable from his companion Solanio.

Solanio, a Venetian gentleman, and frequent counterpart to Salerio

The duke of Venice, the ruler of Venice who presides over Antonio’s trial: Although a powerful man, the duke’s state is built on respect for the law, and he is unable to help Antonio.

Old Gobbo, Lancelot’s father, also a servant in Venice

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

Balthasar, Portia’s servant
A Thought-Provoking, Equivocal, Problematic Play
By Diana Major Spencer

Nobody actually dies, the villain is dispatched, and three couples tie the knot; therefore, The Merchant of Venice is a romantic comedy, placed by Heminges and Condell between A Midsummer Night’s Dream and As You Like It among the comedies in the First Folio. The average interval between stagings at the Utah Shakespeare Festival is slightly less than six seasons; therefore, the play must be very popular. Yet the frequency of its production might suggest greater audience satisfaction than viewers actually feel.

Shylock, surely the villain, though usually played for pathos, is provoked by kicking and spitting Christians into maximizing his opportunity for revenge, then stripped inchmeal of everything that sustains his life (including his religion), even though the duly notarized bond owed him is forfeit. At trial, the defaulter Antonio, rather than gratefully accepting his release, joins the sentencing frenzy to condemn Shylock to a Christian baptism. As a final thrust, the lovely heroine Portia goads him into hopelessly groaning, “I am content” (4.1.394) before he leaves the stage. Is this a satisfying resolution to “the Jewish problem”—and thus the play?

The Festival bills this year’s Merchant as “Shakespeare’s controversial tragicomedy” and “a thought-provoking masterpiece.” Harold Bloom in Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human, labels it “Shakespeare’s grand, equivocal comedy” (171), then concludes, “However problematic, The Merchant of Venice essentially is a romantic comedy” (180). David Bevington puts it this way: “Perhaps no Shakespeare play raises more painful issues today for us to think hard about than The Merchant of Venice” (185). No other play proclaims the vast social distance between our time and Shakespeare’s than The Merchant of Venice.

Bloom identifies “the problem” in the opening sentence of his chapter on The Merchant of Venice: “One would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare’s grand, equivocal comedy . . . 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” (171).

In our politically correct twenty-first-century melting pot/salad bowl culture of expanded horizons, inclusive communities (we hope), and reluctance to hurt others’ feelings, and in our understanding that Shakespeare’s plays often give us greater understanding of the human condition than our holy books, the overwhelming hatred of (and toward) Shylock the Jew cannot be acknowledged as anti-Semitism, even though it namelessly focuses our attention and we attempt to justify it—somehow. We dare not speak of anti-Semitism, we cannot accept that Shakespeare would write it, and we certainly cringe when actors shove and spit on Shylock. So we try to explain away Shakespeare’s bad manners with history:

Jews as fellow humans were genuinely unknown to Shakespeare. English historical records mention only isolated individuals prior to the Norman Conquest (1066), but no communities. William the Conqueror encouraged Jewish merchants and artisans to accompany him from northern France, but succeeding monarchs were less welcoming, and Christian neighbors scapegoated them for crimes, vandaled their property, and—as Antonio et al. were wont—“did void your rheum upon my head / And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur” (1.3.115–16). Laws forbade land ownership to Jews, and though usury was permitted (as that sinful practice suited their sub-Christian status), their proceeds were heavily and increasingly taxed until 1275, when King Edward I banned usury. Trade and farming were still
possible livelihoods, but without access to guild membership, land ownership, or friendly Christian landlords, Jews became poorer and poorer until their inability to pay taxes “forced” Edward to expel them altogether (Jewish Virtual Library, The Virtual Jewish World, A Project of AICE, www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/united-kingdom-virtual-jewish-history-tour).

During the Tudor Age, a few notable Jews appeared in the records: Jewish scholars helped Henry VIII justify his divorce, a Jewish doctor first warned of the Spanish Armada, Rodrigo Lopez, a Jew, was publicly hanged, drawn and quartered in 1594—within a year or two of the composition of The Merchant of Venice—for allegedly attempting to poison the Queen. The accusation came from the lips of bad-boy Essex, who apparently took umbrage that Lopez, also his physician, had violated doctor-patient confidentiality regarding his venereal disease to share a few laughs with friends. Lopez was indeed exchanging secret messages with the Portuguese government, but at trial he resolutely defended his Christianity and his devotion to the Queen (David B. Green, “This Day in Jewish History, 1594: A Queen’s Doctor is Executed for Treason,” Haaretz (18 Jan 2018); https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/premium-1594-a-queen-s-doctor-is-executed-1.5275486).

The public spectacle of carving him limb from limb prompted a revival of Marlowe's The Jew of Malta, wherein Barabas is a thoroughly evil and torture-worthy murderer with no redeeming social value.

If your entire acquaintance with Jews consists of absolutely nothing beyond Old Testament stories (some with good guys, some with bad), attributions of Christ’s crucifixion to Jews (it was Roman soldiers, though Jews participated in goading and spitting), and an occasional medieval horror story of harvesting blood from slaughtered Christian babies to make Passover bread (charges were brought in five different English cities in the late 1100s)—perhaps we can understand that the label “Jew” might connote the terrifying equivalent of the troll under the bridge, the giant at the top of the beanstalk, an out-of-control robot or bullying space-alien, the most fearsome fictional threat imaginable. Might that uninformed and misinformed background, along with the revolting news of the false Jew among us getting that close to the life of our beloved Queen, invoke such a revulsion of a perversely hyperbolic Jew hell bent on anti-Christian revenge that we’d join in with Gratiano’s spitting and kicking and grabbing, then celebrate Portia’s merciless obliteration?

“In Shakespeare’s time,” wrote G. B. Harrison, a leading Shakespeare scholar of the mid-twentieth century, “a Jew, especially on the stage, was a monster, capable of any cruelty towards a Christian; yet Shakespeare made him a man with real and bitter grievances enough to sour a saint. When the play was first acted there was little sympathy for him, and some surprise that he was let off so lightly” (Complete Works [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980], 582). With that attitude, a satisfying dramatic resolution is possible: The punishment would indeed fit the crime.

Bloom claims that his students rebuff his claims “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” (171). Structurally, Shylock occupies a position in his play similar to Jaques, Malvolio, Caliban, or Don John the Bastard in theirs—as comic misfits and villains who challenge the tranquility of Arden, Illyria, Messina or Belmont. Yet their malfeasance can be laughed off until later, until the weddings and reconciliations—and the play—conclude. Not so in Venice; after pulverizing whatever humanity Shylock might have had, the newlyweds in Belmont, seeming inhumane, peevish, and inconsequential, return to their romantic pursuits.

If Shylock could be played as an outrageously exaggerated caricature of super-evil villainy, however, we might concur that the trial is just, that a wrong has been righted, and that the wedding party deserves to celebrate. Shylock’s language can be made to justify such an interpretation if read.
in a thoroughly hateful, snarling tone and emphasizing that the “Hath a Jew eyes” speech actually justifies revenge rather than mercy. Better still if he wore a flamboyant red wig and fangs and long, knife-like nails and maybe Groucho glasses with dollar signs (ducat?) in the lenses.

But, no. The Festival would lose its audience, its reputation, and its shirt. Instead, we need to strike a careful balance between too much pathos for Shylock and not enough, too much nastiness from Antonio and not enough, too much preening about mercy from Portia and not enough (since she quickly turns merciless), and too much groveling from Shylock and not enough. Can Shylock retain a little dignity? Can Antonio develop a little humility? Can Portia extend her generosity beyond her Venetian friends?

Perhaps, but given the divergence between Shakespeare’s script and our expanded social reality, a perfectly satisfying resolution is out of reach. Our challenge is to see how close we can come.

in this world between appearance and reality, between words and deeds, between thought and performance. And thus we have the material for a second plot.
Neither Comedy, Romance, Nor Tragedy
By Patricia Truxler Coleman

Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* is neither comedy, romance, nor tragedy, and consequently defies easy classification. Although it dates to between 1595 and 1600 and thus belongs to that period of enormous productivity during which time Shakespeare composed, in addition, to this play, six romantic comedies, three histories, and two tragedies, *The Merchant of Venice* is more properly a “problem play,” one that raises far more questions than it answers. With its intricate triple plot—the Shylock-Antonio bond, the Portia-Bassanio romance, and the ring trick—this play is an already complicated story which turns on our understanding of the relationships of mercy to justice and love to honesty.

Thus, at the outset of this play, we are introduced to the melancholic Antonio, who “hold[s] the world but as the world, . . . / A stage where every man must play a part, / And [his] a sad one,” to Gratiano, who “speaks an infinite deal of nothing,” and to Bassanio, who has “much disabled [his] estate” by running up extraordinary debt. Into this world steps Shylock who hates Antonio “for he is Christian” and resents that he “lends out money gratis and brings down / the rate of usance here with us in Venice.” Here then we have the material for one plot: Bassanio needs money; Antonio has tied all his money up in his ventures at sea, and Shylock has money to lend.

Up to this point, the plot seems straightforward enough. But it is not, and what complicates the plot is simply the moral bankruptcy of the citizenry of Venice. Bassanio thinks little of the consequences of his indebtedness; in fact, he intends to borrow more money in order to pay back what he owes. Antonio thinks little of doing business—borrowing money—from his avowed enemy and even less of the moral consequences of his providing Shylock with business. After all, Shylock is in clear violation of the letter of the law by loaning money with advantage, and Antonio is in clear violation of the spirit of the law by providing this “sinner” with the opportunity to “sin” by borrowing money from him. Thus the play raises the old questions of the nature of sin and the relationship of the tempted to the tempter.

MORALLY SMUG. Furthermore, the apparently “holy” Antonio is so morally smug that he cannot fathom the possibility of nature conspiring against him by preventing the return of his three ships. So, while Antonio fancies himself the universal exception to the ordinary rules which govern man in the world, Shylock sees an opportunity to revenge himself on those complacent Christians in Venice who have, by their own definition, made all Jews unworthy “sinners.” Bassanio, in the meantime, is so self-absorbed that he allows his friend Antonio to enter into a potentially deadly bond with Shylock in order that Bassanio might woo the wealthy Portia and end both his unrequited romantic longings and his long-standing indebtedness.

In apparent direct contrast to the corrupt world of Venice is the world of Belmont, which on the surface seems pure and elegant. But even here, lurking beneath the hope of moral consistency, is a world of potential chaos. We are told, when we first meet Portia, that she “can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow [her] own teaching.” Further, it is she who gives shelter to Jessica, Shylock’s thieving and dishonest daughter, and her lover Lorenzo. If we do not see the world of Belmont as a world of potential tragedy, at least one person does—Portia’s father, who, though dead at the outset of the play, has conspired to control his daughter’s choice in marriage even from the grave. Clearly, Portia’s father understands the lack of congruence in this world between appearance and reality, between words and deeds, between thought and performance. And thus we have the material for a second plot.

But Portia and Bassanio do genuinely love one another, and so she manages to guide her suitors in their choices of the caskets. Bassanio, while clearly a flawed individual who is willing to risk the life of a
friend for the love of Portia, seems to understand the nature of real romantic love. He chooses the casket bearing the inscription to “give and hazard all” because he seems to understand that the only love that can be guaranteed is that in which the lovers are prepared to do just that—to give and hazard all. Of course, it may be argued that Bassanio isn’t “hazarding” much, at least financially, as his presence in Belmont is the direct result of Antonio’s generosity. But he is, nevertheless, willing to “give and hazard all” in more than merely monetary ways. So while Bassanio may succeed in alienating us in the first act, he redeems himself, at least in part, with us and with Portia when he demonstrates that he understands the nature of lasting love. (This season’s Utah Shakespearean Festival production of The Merchant of Venice, directed by Eli Simon, offers a different, and interesting, interpretation of Bassanio. —Editor)

LACKS MORAL SOPHISTICATION. Still, the worlds of Venice and Belmont are doomed to collide, and they do this through both Shylock and Portia. When Antonio’s ships do not return and he is incapable of paying the debt he owes to Shylock, the Jew demands justice—a pound of Antonio’s flesh. As in nearly all of Shakespeare’s romantic comedies and romances, it is the heroine—here Portia—who is intellectually sophisticated enough to solve the problem, a problem which is typically a male invention and which the heroine must be in male guise to solve. But, unlike Shakespeare’s other romantic heroines, Portia lacks moral sophistication. When, in the guise of a man, she cautions Shylock to show mercy, she reminds both him and us that “earthly power doth then show likest God’s / When mercy seasons justice.” And yet, having caught Shylock in a bind—he is due his pound of flesh, but not one drop of blood—she proceeds in her humiliation and destruction of Shylock, seasoning none of hers or Christian Venice’s justice with mercy. Apparently, for the citizens of Venice and Belmont, that mercy which “is an / attribute to God himself” is the just due only of those who are like them in appearance, behavior, beliefs, and values.

But, of course, Shylock is like them, and like us. He asks: “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?” (3.1.62+)

And our answer must be “yes.” For we see Shylock suffer—at the hands of his daughter who betrays him by stealing the only thing of sentimental value to Shylock and by eloping with a Christian and turning her back on all that her father has valued; at the hands of Antonio, who is so completely able to separate his public and private selves that he will do business with Shylock but will not respect him; at the hands of Portia and the court of Venice, which will commend mercy to Shylock as a way of handling Antonio but which will show him none themselves; and at the hands of a system of Christian justice which teaches us on the one hand to love our enemy and on the other to strip him of his faith.

Furthermore, for all her intellectual sophistication, Portia lacks a certain softness of nature where love is concerned. While it may be amusing to her to trick Bassanio and Gratiano into parting with their wedding rings, it is certainly not amusing to the gentlemen. Here we have the material for the third plot. For even if only for a brief time, Portia and Nerissa have mercilessly trapped their husbands in a lie and made the men think that they might have been cuckolded. Thus, The Merchant of Venice ends in a final collision of the worlds of Venice and Belmont. For all that we may have hoped otherwise, we must conclude that Venice and Belmont have at least one thing in common: things are not as they seem. Once again, Shakespeare has reminded us of the perpetual incongruence, where people are concerned, between appearance and reality and of our capacity to be better at knowing what is good to do than we are at doing it.
A Romantic Comedy

From Insights, 1992

*The Merchant of Venice* is one of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, probably written in 1596 and 1597, and forms one of a group of such comedies, along with *The Two Gentlemen of Verona, As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*.

Romantic comedy was a popular and much-preferred type in Elizabethan theatre, and all the trappings of such are present in *The Merchant of Venice*. First, the romantic involvement is represented not by one couple only, but by three (Portia and Bassanio, Gratiano and Nerissa, and Jessica and Lorenzo). Also Elizabethans expected in their romantic comedies certain characters and situations and a certain kind of plot development: the chief element and central motive was love; the heroine was frequently disguised as a man through part of the play, thus providing opportunities for comic misunderstanding; and comedy was also provided by the wit of the heroine herself, who was always more clever than the men in the play.

In a romantic comedy the necessary conflict is between the lovers on one hand and some barrier to the fulfillment of their love on the other. In *The Merchant of Venice* the barrier is, of course, Shylock's hold over Antonio, which in turn involves his friend Bassanio. The resolution of a romantic comedy consists in overcoming the barrier, usually bringing about marriages.

Shakespeare follows this closely but has complicated the basic pattern in *The Merchant of Venice*, wherein he skillfully weaves together four separate stories, all interconnected.

The bond story links Bassanio and Portia to Shylock through Antonio, the merchant. Bassanio needs money in order to woo Portia, and his friend Antonio is that source, even though he must borrow from the usurer Shylock, giving as surety a “pound of flesh.” This bond is agreed upon in such away that there is question whether Antonio or Bassanio take the condition seriously.

However, it is plain to the audience that Shylock does indeed intend to take his pound “nearest the heart.” Culmination of the bond story provides the second great crisis of the play.

The casket story has to do with Portia, the “lady richly left,” and the stipulation in her father’s will that the suitor who wins her hand can only do so by choosing the right one of three caskets. Bassanio faces this task, and it provides the first great crisis of the play.

The elopement story is the first of two minor plots which fill out the action. Lorenzo, a friend of Bassanio’s and Antonio’s, elopes with Jessica, Shylock’s daughter, thus affecting Shylock’s attitude and behavior and contributing to the atmosphere at the end of the play.

The ring story is the fourth complication—most minor of all—in which Portia and Nerissa wear disguises and force their lovers to give up their wedding rings. The mirth of this confusion is pleasing to the viewers, who know the joke. Among other things, the ring story serves the function of allowing the play to end on a comic note.

The play is set in Venice, Italy, and provided Elizabethans a return to the land of the classics which held such glamour and excitement for Englishmen interested in learning new and worldwide culture. The play was acted many times previous to its presentation before King James I in 1605. He enjoyed it so much that it was again presented at court two days later. We have no record of its being performed again for almost one hundred years. From 1701 to 1741 Shylock was presented as a comic, farcical rogue; after 1741 he achieved status and depth at the hands of more perceptive interpreters. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries his role has been coveted by great Shakespearean actors. *The Merchant of Venice*, romantic comedy that it is, has been most popular, both with audiences and actors. Traditionally its appeal has not been questioned; why it appeals is still a matter of controversy.
The Enigmatic Shylock
Compiled by Gwen Sandberg
From Insights, 1992

_The Merchant of Venice_ is one of Shakespeare's best known plays. It is the play most frequently taught in schools and the one most people read first. Even so the play is a difficult one for modern audiences because of the enigmatic nature of Shylock. Is he comic or tragic? Are we to take him seriously or laugh at him? Should modern liberal attitudes influence our response to Shylock, or should we continue to remember the stereotypes of earlier centuries and vaudevillian depictions of Jews? Characterization of Shylock has troubled thoughtful students of Shakespeare, and several theories have been brought forth to explain the inscrutable money lender.

One theory holds that _The Merchant of Venice_ arose from a melancholy occasion. In 1594 Queen Elizabeth's chief physician, Roderigo Lopez, who was descended from a Spanish Jewish family, was accused by Essex of participating in a Spanish plot against the queen's life, was found guilty, and sentenced to death.

After some weeks of delay in which Elizabeth seems to have considered mercy, the efforts of Essex prevailed, and in June the sentence was carried out in the spectacular manner of the time. The Rose Theatre capitalized on these events by reviving Marlowe's _The Jew of Malta_, wherein Barrabas tries to poison a whole city full of Christians and is finally plunged, to the delight of any contemporary audience, into a boiling cauldron. Apparently, so this theory goes, Shakespeare's company thought it necessary to offer a competing attraction, and Shakespeare was asked to provide a script. He looked around for a story on which he could impose a grotesque and dangerous Lopez, and, finding a fourteenth century plot which had the necessary elements, all ensued much as we have it in the play.

This theory has some difficulties, as pointed out in the Folger Shakespeare Edition of the play, which maintains there is little substantiation for the Lopez theory. (Lopez, for example, was a convert, and if he suffered from prejudice at his trial it is reflected in the normal Elizabethan prejudice against foreigners, particularly Latins, and was possibly not a result of his Jewish blood.) The Folger theory offers instead the idea that in Elizabethan England the Biblical Judas had evolved into a low-comedy part, with Judas inevitably dressed in a red wig, red beard, and huge nose. At the high point in the play, children might beat him off the pageant wagon and send him roaring through the streets, where he and his devils in the drama engaged in much comic buffoonery. With the English public conditioned to this representation of Judas, Marlowe, in wanting to portray a character of consummate evil, created Barrabas; and Shakespeare was influenced by Marlowe's concept.

Shakespeare, however, was an artist of extraordinary power, and he was not content to present Shylock merely as a symbol of evil. Under Shakespeare's pen the Jewish money lender (and we must remember that usury was forbidden to Christians by the church of the Middle Ages and was the only occupation the law allowed Jews), became a man who had suffered much, whose hatred is explained by the treatment he and his whole race had to endure, and who is needed in the play to provide a contrast to Portia.

On stage, it is Shylock who makes the play, and almost all great actors of English and continental stage have attempted the role. Interpretations have varied with the taste and judgement of the actors. On the early stage Shylock was played as a thoroughgoing villain. It is said that Macklin, in the eighteenth century, played Shylock "as so grotesque, sinister, and ferocious a villain that George II spent a sleepless night after attending a performance." Through the nineteenth century Shylock’s portrayal became increasingly dignified and approached tragic dimensions. Edmund Kean played Shylock with such pathos that spectators wept over his great "hath not a Jew eyes" speech. Sir Henry Irving is said to have
played Shylock as “the aristocrat of an ancient race and religion, looking down with malevolent dignity on the occidental upstarts.”

Even in his folk characterizations Shakespeare was unable to prevent himself from seeing real human beings, and where his audiences expected only a comic villain they got Shylock, a human, although not an admirable character. Nowhere in literature has been found a more moving plea for the abolition of racial or religious discrimination than in Shylock’s powerful speech. From the strong case Shakespeare makes for Shylock, it is evident that his sympathy is with him. In this and the knowledge Shakespeare displays of human nature and its melancholy prejudices, he was centuries ahead of his time, and the final lesson we carry away from the play is a realization of the complexity of human nature.
A Tale of Outsiders

By Ace. G. Pilkington

From Souvenir Program, 1992

Kenneth Myrick says, “The Merchant of Venice is the earliest of three superb comedies in which Shakespeare has set a generous and clear-sighted woman in sharp contrast to a no less unusual, but markedly unsocial man. From beginning to end, Portia and Shylock—like Rosalind and Jaques in As You Like It and Viola and Malvolio in Twelfth Night—remain poles apart” (Introduction to The Merchant of Venice [New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1965], xxi).

Shylock, the Outsider of Venice, is most precisely fixed within the structure of the play by his confrontation with that other outsider, Portia of Belmont, and she is, in turn, illuminated by the obstinate opposite she faces. Their conflicts and contiguities (for they have those as well) focus the issues of the entire play. Shylock has paid three thousand ducats to feed his revenge, to purchase the death of the man he hates; Portia offers more than thrice that sum to deface his deadly bond, to rescue her dear bought husband’s dearest friend.

Both Portia and Shylock are using money as a means, but to very different ends. Portia uses money as Antonio has used it, to secure the happiness of those around her: her wealth now sustains the prodigal Bassanio, and her house shelters both Shylock’s thrown-away servant and his runaway daughter. Portia’s wealth means an expansion of possibilities, a musical movement through life that may at times catch brief echoes (even in “this muddy vesture of decay”) of that purer music which sounds in the heavens.

Shylock’s Puritan attitudes link him to Jaques and Malvolio (not to mention Angelo in Measure for Measure), and for Shakespeare’s theatre audience mark him more clearly as a villain than his Jewishness does. His puritanical thrift means shutting up the self in a dark house where friendship, festival, love, and music find their way only as intruders, garish masks glimpsed in the streets or discordant noises heard from far away.

But just for a moment before Shylock’s final discomfiture, we are given a chance to see the similarities between the lady and the miser. They are, after all, tied together in several strange ways. Portia has obeyed her father’s will in a manner that Shylock would certainly approve and by means which he has indirectly supplied. His money made her combination of obedience and happiness possible. There is a curious circle here: Antonio’s bond and Shylock’s ducats freed Portia from her bond; now she comes in her turn to release both Antonio and Shylock.

Indeed, in her role as Balthasar she is closer to Shylock than to Antonio. She is an outsider in the society of Venice, an actress playing a new and unfamiliar part. And, more than that, she is an alien—a woman in a world of men, an intruder who has less right to be in the court than Shylock has. This is an aspect of the situation that a twentieth century auditor can easily miss, but surely an Elizabethan would have found the figure of a female judge more outlandish than any masculine intruder.

So, when Portia says, “Then must the Jew be merciful” (4.1.181), she is one alien speaking to another, appealing to their common humanity, pointing to the possible perils that may pierce it, and arguing that all such fragile souls stand in need of compassion. We do not, of course, expect Shylock to penetrate her disguise; even if his own blindness would permit it, the stage convention will not. We hope, however, that he will see through himself. But like Jaques in As You Like It, he responds only to those things which chime with his own unmusical pose. Like Malvolio, he insists on revenge. Balthasar is a wise young judge when he upholds the bond, but Shylock ignores him when he strays from that comfortable text. Instead, Shylock plunges on, to demand the letter of the law, to draw his deeds literally on his own head, and to be forced to accept what he refused to give—a grudging
mercy. Even the last act, with Shylock absent, continues the comparisons between the two. Portia for-
gives and loves Bassanio, aristocratic representative of a Christian patriarchal order that excludes her
in much the same way that it shuts out the Jew.
Family Relationships
By Stephanie Chidester
From Midsummer Magazine, 2000

The character of Shylock is so large and the themes of prejudice and justice and mercy so strong in Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice that secondary themes and characters are often overwhelmed. The play is much more than a study of the struggles between Christian and Jew; it is a rich tapestry threaded with love and self-sacrifice, hatred and revenge, friendship and marriage, divided loyalties, and bonds legal, financial and emotional. One subtle but interesting pattern in this tapestry that is sometimes overlooked is Shakespeare's examination of families and the relationships between father and child.

Shakespeare serves up three parent-child relationships in the play—two father-daughter pairings and one comic father-son. Portia's relationship with her father, though not perfect, was probably the most healthy of the three, even though she presently resents her father's method of securing her happiness. Portia's father constructed his will to protect her from fortune hunters and to ensure that she married a man who would value everything Portia is and not merely her money and beauty; however, it is also possible to see in his actions a lack of faith in Portia's good sense—he doesn't trust her to make a wise choice on her own: “So is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none?” (The Signet Classic Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice, Kenneth Myrick, Ed. [New York: Signet, 1965], 1.2.23–26).

Portia is obedient and loyal to her father even after his death, though, undeniably, she feels frustration and resentment, which she vents by insulting her suitors when they are out of earshot. Nevertheless, she honors her father’s wishes even when the quality of her suitors tempts her to use sabotage. When faced with “the young German, the duke of Saxony’s nephew” as a marital prospect, Portia asks Nerissa: “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” (1.2.94–97). Fortunately, Portia is not put to the test, since this troublesome suitor leaves without venturing a guess at the caskets, and whenever Portia considers rebellion (as she does when she says, “And the worst fall that ever fell, I hope I shall make shift to go without him” [1.2.88–90] and “I will do anything, Nerissa, ere I will be married to a sponge” [1.2.97–98]), Nerissa is there to remind her of her duty: “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” (1.2.91–93). Portia is later strongly tempted to cast a few hints in Bassanio’s direction about the correct casket, but she refuses to dishonor herself and disobey her father even though she risks losing the only suitor she can stand. Verbalizing her faith in her father’s wisdom, she tells Bassanio, “If you do love me, you will find me out” (3.2.41).

Jessica, in contrast, is the least loyal of the children in the play, meeting secretly with Lorenzo and allowing him to court her, lying to her father, abandoning him, and stealing from him; she’s hardly the docile, obedient daughter that Shylock takes her for. Although she feels some pangs of guilt (“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” [2.3.16–19]), Jessica rejects her father, his way of life, and his religion—though not, interestingly, his wealth, a great deal of which she takes along with her.

Jessica’s behavior is not altogether surprising when one considers Shylock’s treatment of her. Shylock shows his daughter little affection or kindness—she is his flesh and blood and therefore an extension of himself, not a person in her own right. Days after she has run away, he exclaims in disbelief, “My own flesh and blood to rebel!” (3.1.32). In her first scene, Jessica laments, “Our house is hell” (2.3.2), and Launcelot’s descriptions as well as Shylock’s actions seem to bear this out. Shylock,
stingy and puritanical, keeps Jessica locked up and attempts to isolate her from the world, but he
doesn’t think to distrust her any more than he would distrust his ducats: “Hear you me, Jessica: /Lock up my doors; and 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 upon Christian fools with varnished faces; / . . . Let not the sound of shallow fopp’ry enter / My sober house” (2.5. 28–36). He assumes he has her obedience and doesn’t give it a second thought, being much too busy contemplating his money (“I did dream of moneybags tonight” [2.5.18]) and his revenge (“I’ll go in hate, to feed upon / The prodigal Christian” [2.5.14–15]). “There are my keys,” he says to Jessica, “Look to my house” (2.5.12, 16).

When Shylock discovers that Jessica has fled, it becomes clear that he is just as upset that his
valuables have disappeared with her. “My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter! / Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats! / Justice! The law! My ducats and my daughter! / A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats, / Of double ducats, stol’n from me by my daughter! / And jewels—two stones, two rich and precious stones, / Stol’n by my daughter! Justice! Find the girl! / She hath the stones with her, and the ducats!” (2.8.15–22). And it is equally apparent which of the two he values more: “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!” (3.1.83–85).

The relationship between Launcelot Gobbo and his father is neither as tempestuous as that of
Jessica and Shylock nor as caring as that of Portia and her father. Launcelot shows a lack of respect
for his father when he jests, “Well, my conscience . . . says very wisely to me, ’My honest friend
Launcelot, being an honest man’s son”—or rather an honest woman’s son, for indeed my father did
something smack, something grow to, he had a kind of taste” (2.2.13–18). In addition, Launcelot,
unlike Portia, has very little faith in his father’s wisdom, perhaps with some justification—Old
Gobbo quite literally doesn’t know his son. Not only does he fail to recognize Launcelot when he
meets him on the street (he is, after all, nearly blind), but he also fails to recognize his son’s voice and
personality. The only thing of which Old Gobbo is certain about his son is his social status—he is no
“Master Launcelot” but plain Launcelot, a servant, and Old Gobbo is not to be fooled on that count.

However, Launcelot is unnecessarily cruel, teasing his father by referring to himself in the
third person as “Master Launcelot” and then telling his father that “Master Launcelot . . . is indeed
deceased, or as you would say in plain terms, gone to heaven” (2.2.60–65). Old Gobbo, on the other
hand, seems fond of his son, even if he doesn’t have the sense to recognize him: When he thinks
Launcelot is dead, he says, “The boy was the very staff of my age, my very prop” (2.2.66–67), and
when Launcelot makes the request, Old Gobbo very obligingly assists him in acquiring a new posi-
tion away from Shylock.

The three family relationships in The Merchant of Venice have remarkable similarities, yet they
vary widely in success. Portia’s father, in his way, is just as controlling as Shylock; after all, he insists
on choosing his daughter’s mate, even from the grave. Yet Portia, one of the strongest-minded indi-
viduals in the play, respects his wishes while Jessica betrays and abandons her father. Old Gobbo,
though affectionate, is an adequate parent at best, because—like Shylock—he does not truly know or
understand his offspring.

Shylock, the least successful parent, combines the other two fathers’ worst characteristics without
any of their redeeming ones—he is a domineering yet oblivious father who fails to show his daughter
the love she needs. The message that emerges from these strands of The Merchant of Venice’s tapestry
is that parental control is best paired with loving concern and that a good parent not only loves and
cares for his child but also knows and understands him or her; ideally, the bond between parent and
child should consist of more than duty, more than love, though both are important; it should also
include a healthy measure of wisdom and understanding.
The Sins of the Father: 
Parent-Child Relationships in 
The Merchant of Venice 

By Michael Flachmann 
From Insights, 2000

After the tragic death of his only son, Hamnet, in 1596, Shakespeare began an extensive theatrical study of the relationships between parents and children during the rest of his career. Although Hamlet, King Lear, The Winter's Tale, and The Tempest are the most notable plays devoted to this theme, The Merchant of Venice, written less than a year after his son died, offers rich and varied insights into the issue of paternity in Shakespeare's scripts. The topic is particularly germane this season because of the emphasis director Ina Marlowe has placed upon “the love of children” in her production of the play.

The first and most obvious paternal relationship is between the Jewish moneylender, Shylock, and his daughter, Jessica. Devastated by the death of his wife, Leah, many years earlier, Shylock has kept the house in mourning out of respect for her, and this deification of her image has created distance between Shylock and his daughter, who can never understand the great love her parents shared and still feels anger at her mother for deserting her.

Antonio, the “merchant” of the title, also fulfills a paternal role in the play through his foolishly indulgent friendship with Bassanio, who eventually wins the beautiful and affluent Portia by solving the riddle of the gold, silver, and lead caskets. Acting as a father figure to the young man, Antonio borrows money from Shylock, pledging in the process the infamous pound of flesh as security, so that Bassanio can travel to Belmont to court his love. Antonio’s great devotion to his friend, however, is in ironic contrast to the bigotry and prejudice he has showered upon Shylock prior to signing their “merry” bond.

This same theme of father-child relationships resurfaces in the comic subplot of the play through the kinship between Old Gobbo and his son, Launcelot, who is first a servant to Shylock, then later to Bassanio. Old Gobbo’s physical blindness echoes the spiritual myopia of the first two father figures in the play, Shylock and Antonio, and implies that clarity of vision is an important metaphorical ingredient in religious as well as paternal disputes. In addition, the genuine loving rapport between this aged father and his son helps to betray the inadequacy of the relationships between Shylock and Jessica and between Antonio and Bassanio.

The fourth and final parent-child association in The Merchant of Venice features Portia, the wealthy heiress, and her deceased father who set up the stratagem of the caskets prior to his death. A paternalistic and controlling figure in the play, Portia’s father reaches out from the grave in his attempt to protect his daughter from her own innate xenophobia and from the greed and duplicity of the world around her. By requiring her various suitors to seek out the truth beneath the appearance of each of the caskets, he hopes that Portia’s eventual spouse will see her personal value clearly through the highly polished surface of wealth and privilege. In this fashion, he can bequeath her directly from father to husband as if she were inherited property being handed down from one generation to the next, in much the same way Shakespeare must have presided over the lives of his two surviving daughters.

Ironically, neither Portia nor Jessica has a living mother with whom to identify. Although the absence of female parents in the script may have much to do with the limited number of boy actors available to play the women’s parts in Shakespeare’s company, the lack of feminine role models in The
Merchant of Venice requires that Portia and Jessica must instinctively disguise themselves as males to find independence within their respective worlds. Abandoned by their parents, they can only discover romance by denying their proper gender and adopting the masculine identity of their dominant fathers. Viewed in this fashion, the two women usurp parental control in order to take charge of their own lives.

Shakespeare’s emphasis upon the importance of parenting in the play pales in significance, however, when contrasted with the immense power of religion and ethnicity to corrupt humankind. Despite the best attempts of Shylock, Antonio, Old Gobbo, and Portia’s father to inoculate their children against the evils that surround them, the indignities of racism and bigotry infect everyone in the play. In fact, the only hope for the future comes not from the parents, but from the children themselves. For example, Portia and Bassanio, who are less encrusted by the weight of social tradition than their father-figures, have the opportunity to begin new lives by fusing together the play’s awkward geographical dichotomy. Through their amorous union, Portia represents the female-dominated, magical, harmonious, nighttime world of Belmont, while Bassanio symbolizes the male-dominated, mercantile, discordant, daytime world of Venice.

Joined together in marriage, these two fragmented Jungian halves of the play evolve into a complete and well-balanced universe for the lovers to inhabit.

Likewise, Jessica and her lover, Lorenzo—two children of opposing religions—bring together Judaism and Christianity through an inter-faith marriage that achieves the social symmetry so alien to Shylock and Antonio, mortal enemies who are inextricably entwined in their hatred for each other. Listening to the “sweet harmony” of the spheres in Act 5, Scene 1, the two lovers help us forget for a precious moment the religious discord that mars both Shakespeare’s world and our own, thereby transporting us to a heavenly future where such prejudice will be merely a distant memory. Through their relationship, Shakespeare seems to be saying that the journey will be a hard passage for such odd companions as Lorenzo and his “Jew’s daughter,” who is still struggling with unresolved issues concerning her parents and her own religious loyalties. Although the sins of the fathers are indeed visited upon their children, each generation marks an improvement over those who have gone before. Perhaps, as Shakespeare suggests, the child of such a union offers our best hope for success. This is the playwright’s legacy of happiness for parents and their offspring—forgotten in his own life due to the death of his son, yet proclaimed eternally through his theatrical genius.
My Daughter, My Ducats: Love and Money in The Merchant of Venice

By Michael Flachmann
From Insights, 2006

More than in any other Shakespearean play, affection and avarice are uneasy bedfellows in The Merchant of Venice (1600). When Solanio mimics Shylock's anguished cries of “My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!” in Act 2, Scene 8, his lines suggest one of the principal motifs of this intriguing script: Money may placate the flesh, but only love can enrich and satisfy our souls. Part of a rich fabric of themes and images in the play, this central truth is immediately apparent in the preoccupation with finance displayed throughout the script.

In the opening scene, for example, Bassanio describes Portia as “a lady richly left, / And she is fair” (1.1.160–161). Wealth first, then beauty seems to be his principal motivation. Similarly, the Jewish moneylender Shylock admits in an aside in 1.3 that he hates Antonio because he is a Christian, but more so since “He lends out money gratis, and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice” (35–36), an assertion suggesting that finance is stronger than both love and hate. Later in that same scene, Shylock distorts the Biblical story of Jacob and Laban (Genesis 27) to help justify the relatively new practice of charging interest on loans—a necessary evil for entrepreneurs like Antonio during this period of rapid mercantile expansion in Renaissance Italy. Although the roots of usury go back to the early Greeks, where money was described as “barren,” the ancient word for “interest” (tokos) meant “child,” which betrayed a deep ambivalence over the ethical and moral propriety of earning money without the slightest hint of physical labor. Nowhere is this paradox more clearly articulated than in the playwright’s own Timon of Athens (1606), where the title character’s naiveté about the compounding of interest drives him to financial ruin.

Although Antonio and Portia give lip service to the commonplace adage that money can’t buy happiness, both characters, like Bassanio, are obsessed with wealth. Antonio’s avaricious pursuit of foreign markets stretches his fleet of ships to the breaking point, while Portia, newly won in the casket stratagem, declares to Bassanio that she wishes to be trebled twenty times myself,

A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times
More rich, that only to stand high in your account
I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends,
Exceed account (3.2.153–157).

Later, when she learns of Antonio’s peril at the hands of Shylock, Portia blithely tells her new husband to double payment of the bond, then double that sum again, then “treble that, / Before a friend of this description / Shall lose a hair through Bassanio’s fault” (3.2.298–301). As interest compounds in the play, so too does love.

Unfortunately for the Christians, Shylock’s affection is not so easily bought as Bassanio’s. When offered twice the sum in court, the usurer claims that “If every ducat in six thousand ducats / Were in six parts, and every part a ducat, / I would not draw them; I would have my bond” (4.1.84–86). As this cruel arithmetic implies, the dramatic arc of Shylock’s character has evolved greatly from the beginning of the play, where “monies” was his only “suit” (1.3.111). Devastated by his daughter’s elopement with a Christian and her theft of so much of his hard-earned wealth, Shylock begins to understand that human relationships are more precious and ephemeral than the pursuit of riches.
When his friend Tubal tells him earlier that Jessica had traded his deceased wife’s ring for a monkey, Shylock replies in anguish that he “would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys” (3.1.96–97). In contrast, Bassanio and Gratiano cavalierly offer their wedding rings to the disguised Portia and Nerissa after Antonio’s acquittal. No amount of money can bring back Shylock’s wife and daughter, just as nothing but Antonio’s death can compensate for years of anti-Semitic scorn and ridicule. In his Old Testament world of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” Shylock reasons that only the death of a Christian can compensate for the loss of his Jewish child.

Shylock’s attempt to cut out Antonio’s heart nicely parallels Shakespeare’s own artistic effort to pluck hatred out of his Christian audience. Though cloaked in such admirable virtues as romantic love, devotion to close friends, and the attempt to move upward on the social and economic ladder, the Christians of Shakespeare’s play, like Antonio’s “goodly apple” (1.3.93), are rotten at the core. When Portia returns home after her victory in the trial scene and likens the conquest of Shylock to “a good deed” shining brightly “in a naughty world” (5.1.91), her words prefigure the abhorrent ethnic cleansing of later cultures and the religious myopia so prevalent in today’s society. The dearth of any normative role models in the play, save perhaps Portia’s deceased father, means that audiences will always have difficulty identifying with characters whose bigotry and xenophobia consistently betray their lack of moral integrity.

This Christian hypocrisy is only apparent, however, if we, as Portia’s suitors are invited to do, look beneath surface appearances to find a deeper reality in the world around us. Shakespeare’s play, like a dramatic “casket,” hides many truths within its glittering exterior of loving Christians triumphing over a greedy Jewish moneylender, one of which is that Shylock is the only person in the script who truly evolves from his obsession with wealth to a more profound understanding of the importance of humanity. Part of Shakespeare’s genius is that he ironically chooses his antagonist, the “evil” blocking character, as the sole exemplum of change within the play. Because all the other characters remain static in their pursuit of love and money, Shylock must be excised as an alien presence in their midst since he is a constant reminder of their avarice and cruelty towards those different from themselves. Like Roderigo Lopez, the Portuguese Jewish physician convicted of plotting to poison Queen Elizabeth just prior to the play’s initial performance at the Globe Theatre, Shylock is a scapegoat figure whose defeat at the end of the play signals a return to social homogeneity and wedded bliss, as opposed to the discord and conflict so apparent earlier in the script.

If any hope exists for the Christians in the play and in Shakespeare’s own society, it lies in the union of Jessica and Lorenzo, two characters from very different worlds who, like the dissimilar geographic locations of Venice and Belmont, must come together in concord for the play to end happily. As Lorenzo explains while tutoring his wife in the mysteries of Christian theology, God’s “harmony” exists within our perfect souls, but we cannot hear it while the “muddy vesture” of our bodies “Doth grossly close it in” (5.1.63–65).

A multitude of stars, like a wilderness of monkeys, look down upon us as audience members, each promising that God’s blessings will be conferred on those who strive for more perfect lives free of hatred, prejudice, and the lust for money. Only love, which sits at the center of the universe, will ennoble us all, Christians and Jews alike.
Mercy or Monkeys? Minor Characters with Major Influence in Shakespeare  

By Cheryl Hogue Smith  

Often in Shakespeare’s plays, minor characters with little stage time radically alter the course of action onstage. Without these interesting and unexpected theatrical detours, the major events of the play would not occur as they do. One especially memorable example is Margaret in *Much Ado about Nothing*, without whom Claudio would never have “witnessed” the liaison in Hero’s window that temporarily derails Hero and Claudio’s wedding. Or imagine Othello devoid of Iago’s wife, Emilia, without whom Iago would never have gotten Desdemona’s kerchief in order to set Othello up for his tragic fall. *The Merchant of Venice* has such a minor character in Shylock’s friend and fellow Jew, Tubal. Without Tubal’s brief goading of Shylock in 3.1 (all references are from The Riverside Shakespeare), the play would not have veered towards its tragic-comic conclusion in which Antonio’s life and the marriage between Portia and Bassanio were put in serious jeopardy.  

This crucial scene in the play begins with Solanio and Salarion taunting Shylock about his daughter’s elopement and Antonio’s bond. The middle of this short scene ends with Shylock’s famous “Hath not a Jew eyes?” speech (3.1.59), which attempts to show Solanio and Salarion that Christians and Jews are, in essence, no different from one another. In fact, this speech is often cited as an argument against the charge that the play and its author are anti-Semitic. Dramatically and rhetorically, it is surely one of the most eloquent and persuasive moments of the play, commanding the sympathy of any audience and constituting even beyond the performance of this play one of the most powerful anti-racist speeches in the history of literature.  

Because of this memorable eighteen-line speech, audiences may not really notice that what comes afterwards is actually a pivotal section that sets up the emotional outcome of the entire play. In fact, the short dialogue that follows between Shylock and Tubal pushes Shylock into his notoriously unmerciful state.  

It’s important to set this scene in context in the play: Jessica has just run off with the gentile Lorenzo. Not only is Shylock wounded by his daughter’s escape, but he is enraged that she took so much of his wealth during her escape. Act 3, scene 1 begins with Solanio and Salarion deriding Shylock, and just at the moment when Shakespeare allows audiences to feel sympathy for Shylock, Tubal then appears to ensure that audiences don’t feel sympathy for long. For the remainder of this short scene, Tubal manipulates the conversation so that it fluctuates between Jessica’s betrayal and Antonio’s indebtedness, and, by doing so, Tubal ensures that Shylock’s rage galvanizes him into plotting Antonio’s death.  

The exchange begins on the subject of Jessica:  

Shylock:  How now, Tubal! what news from Genoa? Hast thou found my daughter?  

Tubal:  I often came where I did hear of her, but cannot find her.  

Shylock:  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 sighs but o’ my breathing, no tears but o’ my shedding. (3.1.79-96).
During this dialog, as Shylock and Tubal discuss the actions of Shylock’s daughter, audiences can see that Shylock is clearly more incensed that his daughter stole from him than he is about her marrying a Christian. Sensing Shylock’s rage about his loss of wealth, Tubal brilliantly changes the subject to Shylock’s enemy, Antonio:

Tubal: Yes, other men have ill luck too. Antonio, as I heard in Genoa—
Shylock: What, what, what? Ill luck, ill luck?
Tubal: Hath an argosy cast away, coming from Tripolis.
Shylock: I thank God, I thank God! Is it true, is it true?
Tubal: I spoke with some of the sailors that escaped the wreck.
Shylock: I thank thee, good Tubal. Good news, good news! Ha, ha! Heard in Genoa? (3.1.97-107)

Tubal then brings up “Genoa” to move the discussion back to Jessica and her lavish waste of Shylock’s money:

Tubal: Your daughter spent in Genoa, as I heard, one night fourscore ducats.
Shylock: Thou stick’st a dagger in me. I shall never see my gold again. Fourscore ducats at a sitting, fourscore ducats! (3.1.108–112)

This exchange ends with another reference to Antonio’s fate and Jessica’s betrayal, ending with Jessica’s cavalier sale of her mother’s wedding ring:

Tubal: There came divers of Antonio’s creditors in my company to Venice that swear he cannot choose but break.
Shylock: I am very glad of it. I’ll plague him; I’ll torture him. I am glad of it.
Tubal: One of them showed me a ring that he had of your daughter for a monkey.
Shylock: Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.
Tubal: But Antonio is certainly undone.
Shylock: Nay, that’s true, that’s very true. Go, Tubal, fee me an officer; bespeak him a fortnight before. I will have the heart of him if he forfeit, for were he out of Venice I can make what merchandise I will. Go, Tubal, and meet me at our synagogue; go, good Tubal, at our synagogue, Tubal. (3.1.113–130)

To look at this scene closely is to see that Tubal deftly stokes Shylock’s rage to make him more resentful about his lost money than his daughter’s elopement with a Christian. We will, of course, never really know what motivates Tubal to act as Shylock’s torturer or know whether Shylock could have been merciful had his emotions about Antonio not been tied to Jessica’s betrayal.

Shylock is a flawed character, and this fact heightens the drama of this play. But 3.1, from “Hath not a Jew eyes” to “I will have the heart of him,” shows audiences the depths of emotion Shylock is capable of feeling. Shylock is deeply wounded and acts out in the only way he can—through demanding the forfeiture of Antonio’s bond and the merchant’s immediate death.

Audience members often ask, “Why wasn’t Shylock merciful?” or “Why would Shylock care more about ‘a pound of flesh’ than the tenfold amount of money he could have collected?” The answers lie within this scene and bring us to perhaps a more constructive question: “Why does Tubal use Jessica to provoke and manipulate Shylock into making the choices he does?” This relatively “minor” character is responsible for an immense change in the direction of this play, yet he also helps audiences better understand Shylock’s fury: The quality of mercy may not be strained, but it’s easy to see why it was traded away for a wilderness of monkeys.
Shakespeare’s Words
Vocabulary

Since The Merchant of Venice was written, many words in English have changed their meaning, and some are no longer used. If you remember the slang you used a few years ago, it seems dated. Who now uses the word “groovy”? Shakespeare used the rich vocabulary of his day within his plays. When reading Shakespeare read the line in context of the scene. Try translating the lines into your own words, use today’s vernacular.

Argosies/Portly: large merchant ships/swelled by the wind, majestic
“Your mind is tossing on the ocean, There, where your argosies with portly sail” (Salerio, 1.1.8–9).
Meaning: Your mind is focused on the ocean, where your merchant ships are sailing with full sails.

Strange: reserved, becoming strangers
“You grow exceeding strange. Must it be so?” (Bassanio, 1.1.70)
Meaning: You are not treating me as a friend. Why are you like this?

Warranty: privilege
“To you, Antonio, I owe the most in money and in love, And from your love I have a warranty To unburden all my plots and purposes” (Bassanio, 1.1.134–37).
Meaning: I owe both money and love to you, Antonio. Because of your love I have your help and privilege which aids my plans.

Ducat: Venetian gold, money worth about $7
“Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound” (Shylock, 1.3.10).
Meaning: Bassanio is asking for a loan of approximately $20,000.

Fearful: untrustworthy
“See to my house, left in the fearful guard Of an unthrifty knave, and presently I’ll be with you” (Shylock, 1.3.177–79).
Meaning: Go to my house now, which is left in the hands of an untrustworthy person, and I will be with you soon.

Varnish'd faces: masks or painted faces
“Clamber not you up to the casements then, Nor thrust your head into the public street To gaze on Christian fools with varnish'd faces” (Shylock, 2.5.31–33).
Meaning: Do not look out into the street to look at Christians who are celebrating carnival, wearing masks, and acting like fools.

A carrion of Death: death’s head, a skull
“O hell! What have we here? A carrion of Death within whose empty eye There is a written scroll!” (Prince of Morocco, 2.7.63–65)
Meaning: What do we have here? A skull, which has a scroll in its empty eye.

Election: choice
“The Prince of Arragon hath ta’en his oath,/And comes to his election presently” (Nerissa, 2.9.3–4).
Meaning: The Prince of Arragon has taken his pledge and now he is coming to make his choice.
Cozen: cheat
   “For who shall go about
   To cozen fortune and be honourable
   Without the stamp of merit?” (Prince of Arragon, 2.9.38–40)
Meaning: Who will go about and try to cheat fortune and be admirable without the appearance of honor?

Complexion: natural disposition
   “And Shylock, for his own part, knew the bird was fledged; and then it is the complexion of them all to leave the dam” (Solanio, 3.1.25–26).
Meaning: Shylock knew that his daughter was grown up and that it is in children's natural disposition to leave home.

Counterfeit: portrait, picture
   “Fair Portia’s counterfeit! What demi-god
   Hath come so near creation?” (Bassanio, 3.2.118–19)
Meaning: The beauty of Portia's picture is comparable to her own beauty.

Ceremony: anything held sacred
   “What man is there so much unreasonable,
   If you had pleas’d to have defended it
   With any terms of zeal, wanted the modesty
   To urge the thing held as a ceremony?” (Portia, 5.1.219–22)
Meaning: What type of man would not defend something that is sacred to him?

Double: two-fold and deceitful
   “Mark you but that!
   In both my eyes he doubly sees himself,
   In each eye, one: swear by your double self,
   And there’s an oath of credit” (Portia, 5.1.261–64).
Meaning: See that I am the lawyer too.

Charge us there upon inter’gatories: question under oath
   “Let us go in;
   And charge us there upon inter’gatories,
   And we shall answer all things faithfully” (Portia, 5.1.319–22).
Meaning: Let us go in where you can question us and we will answer truthfully.
Figurative Language

In addition, Shakespeare uses figurative language as he speaks with metaphors, similes, and personification. Recognizing when his characters are speaking figuratively helps in understanding the play.

A **metaphor** is the application of a word or phrase to somebody or something that is not meant literally but to make a comparison. For example: Solanio compares a baby bird leaving the nest to a daughter leaving her family:

“And Shylock, for his own part, knew the bird was fledged; and then it is the complexion of them all to leave the dam” (3.1.25–26).

A **simile** is a figure of speech that draws comparison between two different things using the word “like” or “as.” For example: Bassanio compares stairs made of sand to the hearts of false men.

“How many cowards, whose hearts are all as false
As stairs of sand, wear yet upon their chins
The beards of Hercules and frowning Mars;
Who, inward searched, have livers white as milk!” (3.2.77–80)

**Personification** occurs when human attributes or qualities are applied to objects or abstract notions. For example: Shylock compares covering your ears to closing up the windows of his house.

“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” (2.5.31–34).

Symbols

Lastly, Shakespeare uses symbols throughout his plays, for example the three caskets in the contest for Portia’s hand. The gold, silver, and lead caskets resemble the cultural and legal system of Venice in some respects. Like the Venice of the play, the casket contest presents the same opportunities and the same rules to men of various nations, ethnicities, and religions.

Also like Venice, the hidden bias of the casket test is fundamentally Christian. To win Portia, Bassanio must ignore the gold casket, which bears the inscription, “Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire” (2.7.5), and the silver casket, which says, “Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves” (2.7.7). The correct casket is lead and warns that the person who chooses it must give and risk everything he has. The contest combines a number of Christian teachings, such as the idea that desire is an unreliable guide and should be resisted, and the idea that human beings do not deserve God’s grace but receive it in spite of themselves. Christianity teaches that appearances are often deceiving, and that people should not trust the evidence provided by the senses—hence the humble appearance of the lead casket. Faith and charity are the central values of Christianity, and these values are evoked by the lead casket’s injunction to give all and risk all, as one does in making a leap of faith. Portia’s father has presented marriage as one in which the proper suitor risks and gives everything for the spouse, in the hope of a divine recompense he can never truly deserve. The contest certainly suits Bassanio, who knows he does not deserve his good fortune but is willing to risk everything on a gamble.

Another symbol in *The Merchant of Venice* is the pound of flesh that Shylock seeks. This symbol lends itself to multiple interpretations: it emerges most as a metaphor for two of the play’s closest relationships, but also calls attention to Shylock’s inflexible adherence to the law. The fact that
Bassanio’s debt is to be paid with Antonio’s flesh is significant, showing how their friendship is so binding it has made them almost one. Shylock’s determination is strengthened by Jessica’s departure, as if he were seeking recompense for the loss of his own flesh and blood by collecting it from his enemy. Lastly, the pound of flesh is a constant reminder of the rigidity of Shylock’s world, where numerical calculations are used to evaluate even the most serious of situations. Shylock never explicitly demands that Antonio die, but asks instead, in his numerical mind, for a pound in exchange for his three thousand ducats. Where the other characters measure their emotions with long metaphors and words, Shylock measures everything in far more prosaic and numerical quantities.

Leah’s ring which was given to Shylock in his bachelor days by a woman, who is most likely Shylock’s wife and Jessica’s mother, gets only a brief mention in the play, but it is still an object of great importance. When told that Jessica has stolen it and traded it for a monkey, Shylock very poignantly laments its loss: “I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.” The lost ring allows us to see Shylock in an uncharacteristically vulnerable position and to view him as a human being capable of feeling something more than anger. Although Shylock and Tubal discuss the ring for no more than five lines, the ring stands as an important symbol of Shylock’s humanity, his ability to love, and his ability to grieve.

Shakespeare’s Language

Many students—and adults for that matter—find Shakespeare difficult to read and hard to understand. They accuse him of not speaking English and refuse to believe that ordinary people spoke the way his characters do. However, if you know more about his language, it is easier to understand. One idea that may help is to remember that his plays are written in two forms: prose and verse. In The Merchant of Venice prose and verse are both used extensively.

Prose

Prose is the form of speech used by common people in Shakespearean drama. There is no rhythm or meter in the line. It is everyday language. Shakespeare’s audience would recognize the speech as their language. Characters such as murderers, servants, and porters use prose. However, many important characters can also speak in prose. The majority of The Merry Wives of Windsor is written in prose because it deals with middle-class.

Launcelot Gobbo from The Merchant of Venice speaks in prose. For example:
“To be ruled by my conscience, I should stay with the Jew my master who (God bless the mark!) is a kind of devil; and, to run away from the Jew, I should be ruled by the fiend, who (saving your reverence) is the devil himself” (2.2.20–23).

Launcelot Gobbo, a servant of Shylock, debates with himself in humorous terms whether to seek a new employer, because he dislikes Shylock and his practices. Because there is no rhyme or rhythm, and the text flows without concern of where the line ends on the page, we recognize the passage as prose. Consequently, we can tell that Launcelot is a commoner who speaks with the language of an Elizabethan audience member.

Verse

The majority of Shakespeare’s plays are written in verse. A character who speaks in verse is a noble or a member of the upper class. Most of Shakespeare’s plays focused on these characters. The verse form he uses is blank verse. It contains no rhyme, but each line has an internal rhythm with a regular rhythmic pattern. The pattern most favored by Shakespeare is iambic pentameter.
pentameter is defined as a ten-syllable line with the accent on every other syllable, beginning with
the second one. For example:

“The pound of flesh which I demand of him
Is dearly bought. ‘Tis mine, and I will have it” (Shylock, 4.1.101–102).

The accent occurs on every other syllable, and the natural accent of each word is placed in that
position on the line.

At times Shakespeare found it necessary to take a vowel out of a word so that the rhythm of the
line would not be interrupted. For example, strain’d and bless’d is
pronounced as one syllable, as in the following speech by Portia:

“The quality of mercy is not strain’d,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice bless’d;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes” (4.1.189–92)

Shakespeare used this style of writing as a form of stage direction. Actors today can tell by “scan-
ning” a line (scansion) what words are most important and how fast to say a line. When two charac-
ters are speaking one character may finish the ten syllable line started by the other character, showing
that one line must quickly come on top of another. This is called a shared line or a split line. For
example:

Portia: You stand within his danger, do you not?
Antonio: Ay, so he says.
Portia: Do you confess the bond?
Antonio: I do.
Portia: Then must the Jew be merciful (4.1.183–87).

Trochaic Verse

On some special occasions Shakespeare uses another form of verse. He reverses the accent and
shortens the line. The reversed accent, with the accent on the first syllable is called trochaic. He uses
this verse frequently in A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Macbeth where magic or ritual is involved.
The witches in Macbeth speak in trochaic verse, which is different from the earthly mortals, giving
them an unnatural sound. For example:

Witch: “Round about the cauldron go;
In the Poisoned entrails throw” (4.1.4–5).

When reading or acting a Shakespearean play, count the syllables in the lines. You will be sur-
prised at Shakespeare’s consistency. Then circle the syllables where the accent appears. You will
notice that he places the most important words on the accent. Words like “the,” “is,” and “and” that
do not carry the meaning are on the unaccented portion of the lines. In the Globe Theatre where
there were no microphones, the more important words would carry and an audience member would
still know what was going on because the important words were heard. Iambic pentameter has been
called a “heart beat,” and each of Shakespeare’s lines contains that human beat.
Activity: Have the students translate the speech below into their own words, encouraging the use of slang, colloquialisms, or regional jargon.

Portia: “The quality of mercy is not strain’d,
   It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
   Upon the place beneath: it is twice bless’d;
   It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
   ‘Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
   The throned monarch better than his crown;
   His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
   The attribute to awe and majesty,
   Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
   But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
   It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
   It is an attribute to God himself;
   And earthly power doth then show likest God’s
   When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
   Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
   That, in the course of justice, none of us
   Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
   And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
   The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
   To mitigate the justice of thy plea;
   Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
   Must needs give sentence ‘gainst the merchant there” (4.1.184–205)
The Globe Theatre

The theatre where audiences watched Shakespeare’s company perform many of his plays was called the Globe, situated on the south side of London.

It is thought that the stage was several feet above the ground where the people who paid a penny stood, and that it extended into the audience from the backstage wall. This was a model for construction of the Adams Shakespearean Theatre at the Utah Shakespearean Festival (see photo), with the difference being that all the audience is seated and no one has to stand.

As you can see in the photo, there is a center section near the back which is somewhat inset from the outer stage; this is called the inner below and is the area of the stage where bedchambers and intimate scenes with only two people were staged, so that a curtain could be drawn in front of it, while another scene begins on the stage closer to the audience. At the back of the inner below is a space for a curtain.

Two columns support the level above the inner below, providing a balcony called the above. You can see that there is space behind the balcony where actors can walk, and that is called the inner above.

The stage has four possible entrances on the main floor and three entrances on the second floor, so the whole court scene could enter at the same time.

All the main architectural features in the photo are permanent; some plays add various kinds of staircases to get from the first level of the stage to the balcony, and some plays separate the balcony completely from the main floor, so that actors have to go up or down stairs which are hidden backstage.

What can change are the curtains or doors at the front of the inner below, which can be of several different colors and can be open or closed; the kinds of doors, which can be plain wood, or decorated, or replaced with iron gates; and the various kinds of furniture which can be brought onto the stage.
William Shakespeare (1564–1616)

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in England on April 23, 1564. His father was John Shakespeare, a well-to-do general storekeeper. Shakespeare went to a good school, very much like yours, except he studied some Latin and Greek and became familiar with Greek and Roman plays and poetry.

We don’t know much about his early life, since no one wrote a biography of him while he was alive, but we do know that he married Anne Hathaway in 1582 when he was eighteen, and that they had three children: Susanna, Hamnet, and Judith. Nothing is known of why he decided to go to London, but the next mention we have of him is in 1594, when he was a member of the Lord Chamberlain’s men, a professional acting company. Through looking at some of the records of the theatre, we can find out that his first play was probably The Comedy of Errors, written in 1591, and that The Merchant of Venice was written probably about 1598.

Shakespeare died on his birthday, April 23, in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. His only son, Hamnet, had died at the age of eleven, and his wife died seven years after her husband’s death. Although his two daughters married and had children, the line died out, so there aren’t any descendants of Shakespeare alive today.

What are still alive are his plays, which are still being performed after almost 400 years, in countries all over the world—in German, French, Russian, and Japanese. Every ten years or so, the film industry “redisCOVERS” Shakespeare and makes lavish movies of some of his most famous plays.

Michael Radford directed a film version of The Merchant of Venice in 2004, which starred Al Pacino as Shylock and Jeremy Irons as Antonio. The text of the play is stripped down a bit in the production, but the reactions and responses of the characters have helped to portray the missing lines. The editing of the play has created a gripping movie—not just a film of the play. The themes are still present and gripping.

**Question:** Can you name some of Shakespeare’s plays, which have been made into movies recently, and some famous actors in them?

**Answer:** Hamlet with Kenneth Branagh; another Hamlet with Mel Gibson; Richard III with Ian McKellen; Twelfth Night with Nigel Hawthorne, Much Ado about Nothing with Kenneth Branagh, Emma Thompson, and Michael Keaton; Henry V with Kenneth Branagh; Romeo and Juliet with Clare Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio; Othello with Laurence Fishburne and Kenneth Branagh; Love’s Labour’s Lost with Alicia Silverstone, Nathan Lane, and Kenneth Branagh; and A Midsummer Night’s Dream with Kevin Kline, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Rupert Everett.
Shakespeare’s Plays

Comedies
The Comedy of Errors
The Taming of the Shrew
The Two Gentleman of Verona
A Midsummer Night’s Dream
Love’s Labour’s Lost
The Merchant of Venice
As You Like It
Much Ado About Nothing
Twelfth Night
The Merry Wives of Windsor
All’s Well That Ends Well
Measure for Measure

Histories
Henry IV Part One
Henry IV Part Two
Henry V
Henry VI Part One
Henry VI Part Two
Henry VI Part Three
Richard II
Richard III
King John
Henry VIII

Tragedies
Titus Andronicus
Romeo and Juliet
Julius Caesar
Hamlet
Troilus and Cressida
Othello
King Lear
Macbeth
Timon of Athens
Antony and Cleopatra
Coriolanus

Romances
Pericles
Cymbeline
The Winter’s Tale
The Tempest
Shakespeare’s Audience and Audiences Today

Seating

Shakespeare’s audience for his outdoor plays was the very rich, the upper middle class, and the lower middle class. The lower middle class paid a penny for admittance to the yard (like the yard outside a school building), where they stood on the ground, with the stage more or less at eye level—these spectators were called groundlings. The rich paid two pennies for entrance to the galleries, covered seating at the sides. The rich paid three pennies to sit in the higher galleries, which had a better view. The best seats were in the lords’ rooms, private galleries closest to the stage.

How Much Did It Cost?

To get an idea of the cost of a ticket in today’s terms, consider that the average blue collar worker earned five to six pennies a day; bread for his midday meal cost a penny, ale cost another penny, and if he were lucky enough to have chicken for dinner, it cost two pennies. His rent was often a shilling (twelve pennies) a week, so there wasn’t much money left over for playgoing, nor would he have been able to take time off from work to go and see a play in the middle of the day, when they were usually performed.

Activity: Ask the students to set the space with room to sit on the floor (for the one penny seats), a semi-circle of chairs on the floor (for two-penny seats), and tables behind the chairs for three-penny seats. Depending on the size of the class, a second rank of tables with chairs on them may be set up as lords’ rooms.

Before the students decode what seating area they wish to be in, have them cost out the price of a ticket, using their allowances or earnings as a base for comparison with Elizabethan ticket prices and deducting amounts for rent and food,

Example: A student gets an allowance of $5 a week. He gets 500 pennies, as compared to the Elizabethan worker’s 36 pennies per week. Therefore, 14 of the student’s pennies equal one of the worker’s pennies. From his weekly allowance he must deduct his food and lodging, which would be 33 pennies Elizabethan (12 pennies for lodging and 3 pennies times 7 days for food). The worker has 3 pennies left for entertainment or extra chicken or ale. Let the student work out how much he has left for entertainment, and whether he will see one play with a very comfortable seat, or several, standing in the yard.

How Was Seeing a Play in Shakespeare’s Time Different from Seeing a Play Today?

Shakespeare’s audience was perhaps not as well behaved as you are. Since the play was so long, people would leave their seats and go looking for food to eat and ale to drink during the performance, or perhaps go visit with their friends. Some playgoers, especially those who had saved up money to come and see the play, were extremely annoyed if they were unable to hear the actors and would tell rowdy audience goers to quiet down.

Later in Shakespeare’s career, his acting company was invited to perform in noble houses and royal courts; the audience there was a good deal more polite, and focused on the play as you do.
Today’s Audience

Today, you have a lot of entertainment to choose from, not including the ones you provide yourselves, such as sports or putting on your own shows. Today’s audiences can choose television, movies, or stage shows, and there is a different kind of behavior that is right for each one.

Television audiences are the most casual; they don’t have to dress up, they don’t have reserved seats, and they can talk or go to the fridge whenever they want.

Movie audiences sometimes think they’re at home. Have you ever been annoyed by someone who sat behind you and kicked your chair or talked loudly so you couldn’t hear the movie? And you paid good money to go and see it, too! Then there are the people who can’t decide where to sit, and keep getting up in front of you so you can’t see the screen. What other behaviors have you seen which ruin your enjoyment?

People who go and see theatre (like you) usually pay more for a ticket than they would for a movie, and are most often annoyed by any disturbance. A theatre performance is not something you put on tape and play back on your VCR—it’s like seeing a basketball game live—there aren’t any instant replays. It requires your full attention, and you don’t want to be interrupted by other people talking and moving.

The actors who put on a show for you also want your attention—they’ve worked for a long time to develop a good production, and you can see them concentrating extremely hard to get the best meanings out of all they have to say and do. If you’ve seen any golf on television, you know that when the golfer is lining up his shot, even the announcers stop talking. What other situations can you think of where you need quiet and full concentration?

Activity: Take a four- or eight-line speech from the play and ask the students to memorize it while you provide some aural distraction (loud music, some of the students talking, you asking questions). Then have them write down what they remember. Take another speech of the same length, provide an environment with no distractions, and ask the students to study it. Then have them write down what they remember. The third method is to have the students study a speech in units of two or three, keeping the groups as far apart as possible, and keeping voices at a low level. This shows that interplay between actors helps memorization.
Famous Lines and Passages

“In sooth, I know not why I am so sad.”
—Antonio, 1.1.1

“Let me play the fool.”
—Gratiano, 1.1.83

“If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages princes' palaces.”
—Portia, 1.2.9

“God made him, and therefore let him pass for a man.”
—Portia, 1.2.59

“How like a fawning publican he looks!
I hate him for he is a Christian.”
—Shylock, 1.3.42

“If I can get him once upon the hip,
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.”
—Shylock, 1.3.47

“The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.”
—Antonio, 1.3.99

“It is a wise father who knows his own child.”
—Lancelot Gobbo, 2.1.83

“But love is blind, and lovers cannot see
The pretty follies that themselves commit.”
—Jessica, 2.6.36

“The portrait of a blinking idiot.”
—Aragon, 2.9.54

“Let him look to his bond.”
—Shylock, 3.1.51

“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?”
—Shylock, 3.1.60–70

“The quality of mercy is not strained.”
—Portia, 4.1.189

“How far that little candle throws his beams!
So shines a good deed in a naughty world.”
—Portia, 5.1.117–118
Suggested Activities

Shakespeare understood the universal nature of man. This is why we can relate to him today. As humans, our psychology is just like it was in his day. Teenagers today rebel against their parents’ wishes just like they do in Romeo and Juliet. Jealousy can eat at and destroy relationships like it does in Othello. Prejudice, attitudes towards money, and love are all universal themes in The Merchant of Venice. Religious intolerance and prejudice play a destructive role in the play. Money enables and destroys, and love occurs in many forms.

1. Have students place the story The Merchant of Venice in another time period. The students must draw the costumes of three main characters, design the set, and write a one-page paper on their concept and present it orally to the class.

2. Have students divide into groups and stage various sections of the play. For example, the could stage the lending scene, the casket scenes, or the trial scene.

3. Pick a monologue within the play, and have the students translate it into modern speech. Have the students perform both speeches for the class, one following another. They will easily understand the speech. Translate and perform a variety of monologues so each student has a different speech.

4. Divide the class into groups, and have each group write a number of news stories focusing on the events in Venice. Have them include headlines and quotes; let each group present its new stories to the class. Examples of headlines and story ideas could be “Suitor Fails in Quest for Maid,” “Antonio’s Ships Lost at Sea,” or “Trial of the Century Demands Pound of Flesh!”

5. Have individual groups create a five-minute show based on an event in The Merchant of Venice. Models for these shows can be The People’s Court, a modern talk show with guests (Jay Leno to Jerry Springer), a game show (Jeopardy, The Dating Game, etc.), or a soap opera. Have the students prepare scripts and visual aids and present them to the class.

6. Have students pick a character from one scene and assess the character based on some of the follow questions: Describe your character from the point of view of the audience. What is your character’s relationship, specifically, with the other people on the stage? What does your character want out of life and out of this scene? Describe (from your imagination) what your character might reasonably have done immediately before his or her entrance onto the stage for this scene? What is your character’s mood when he or she arrives on stage? How would your character show this? If you could ask your character any questions, what would they be? How might the character respond?

7. As a study of character, write a scene which occurs in the play but in Shakespeare’s text takes place offstage, between scenes, or removed from the central action of the scene. Examples could include Antonio hearing the news of his first losses, Gratiano’s wooing of Nerissa even as Bassanio wins Portia, Shylock’s plea to the duke to search Bassanio’s ship for Jessica and Lorenzo, Portia meeting with the suitors she described to Nerissa.

8. Have a short discussion about how the gestures of the hands, arms, shoulders, eyes, and so on show the mood or characteristics of the person making the gestures. Brainstorm out loud about some specific gestures and what they might convey. Explain the concept of dumb shows, silent performances that rely entirely on gesture to show what happens. Divide students into performance groups, and assign each group a different scene from The Merchant of Venice, to be kept secret from the other groups. Students will have fifteen minutes to prepare a dumb show based on their scene, which the rest of the class will later try to guess while the scene is being performed.
9. Define stereotypes and discuss with students what types of stereotypes exist in their school and community. Then analyze stereotypes in *The Merchant of Venice* including Shakespeare’s characterization of Portia’s suitors, religious stereotypes, and gender stereotypes.

10. Part of producing a play is determining how to “market” the show—how to catch people’s attention in the media, by way of mouth, or by other means, and how to interest them in buying tickets to see the show. Design a poster for the play which you think will attract patrons. If you like, include a “tagline” —what you think the most important line of the play is to share and attract an audience to see the show. Include images from the play, pictures or silhouettes of important characters, or other aspects of design (including the font of the title).

11. Have students write a poem fourteen lines long in iambic pentameter, (ten syllables, accent on the second syllable). Have the students read their poems in front of the class.
Discussion Questions for Middle and High School Students

1. Discuss the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. What does their friendship reveal about their characters?

2. Examine Shylock’s rhetoric. Pay special attention to the quality of his language—his use of metaphor and repetition, for instance. How do his speeches reflect his character as a whole?

3. Discuss the relationship between Jessica and Shylock. Are we meant to sympathize with the moneylender’s daughter? Does Shakespeare seem ambivalent in his portrayal of Jessica?

4. Compare and contrast Venice and Belmont. What is the significance of these distinct settings in the play?

5. Analyze the way that time passes in The Merchant of Venice, paying special attention to conflicts between time in Venice and Belmont. Are there any inconsistencies, and, if so, how does the play handle them?

6. To what extent is Shylock defined by his Jewishness? To what extent is he defined by his profession?

7. Discuss Portia’s character. How does she compare to the men around her? Is Bassanio a worthy husband for her?

8. All three women in the play (Portia, Nerissa, and Jessica) disguise themselves as men for specific reasons. What does each of their disguises accomplish? Could they have chosen another female disguise to reach their goal, or not?

9. Discuss how the trial scene reveals a conflict between justice and mercy. Is the conflict resolved? If so, how?

10. In one respect, The Merchant of Venice is a play about bonds and debts. What kinds of bonds are there between characters? What debts are incurred? Cite specific examples—from monetary exchanges to the debt incurred by oaths and promises.

11. Look at Act 3, Scene 2, especially lines 73–185. Find specific examples in which the language of commerce is used to describe the value of exchange of love. Discuss why you think Shakespeare chose the imagery of commerce as the major poetic device in this scene.

12. Discuss Shylock’s dramatic function in The Merchant of Venice. What do critics mean when they suggest that Shylock is “too large” for the play? Does he fulfill or exceed his role?

13. In the end, how comic is The Merchant of Venice? Does the final act succeed in restoring comedy to the play?
Discussion Questions for Elementary Schools

1. In *The Merchant of Venice* many of the problems occur because people are unforgiving and intolerant of one another. What crises could have been averted if the characters would have been more understanding of one another?

2. If you had a good friend would you be willing to help him or her? What types of things would you do for a good friend? Bassanio, Antonio, Portia, Nerissa, and Gratiano all show their friendship in different ways. What are some of the ways that they show their friendship?

3. Forgiveness is a key theme in *The Merchant of Venice*. Some characters in the play forgive and others do not. Site three examples of forgiveness or a lack of forgiveness in the play.

Three Scenes, Three Societies, Three Shylocks

From *Shakespeare: A Magazine for Teachers and Enthusiasts*, Spring 1997 (www.shakespearemag.com); used with permission

By Mary Ellen Dakin

Shakespeare can be scary.

I don’t mean three-witches scary, or strange-words-and-convoluted-grammar scary. I mean how you feel when you place a troubling text into the hands of high school students whose sensitivity to the -isms that still plague us (racism, sexism, ageism, anti-Semitism) may in fact be more in keeping with an Elizabethan audience than your own.

Unlike my experiences with the more familiar fare of *Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Hamlet,* and *Macbeth,* I have yet to reach a comfort zone with *The Merchant of Venice.* I had not read the play since college, and when I returned to it two years ago at the “Teaching Shakespeare Institute,” all the old ghosts were still there to mock my absence. There was the brooding merchant, Antonio, so free with his ducats and his Christian self-righteousness; the enigmatic Portia, whose mercy somehow seemed strained; and Shylock, literature’s “Jew,” tottering on the wire of a stereotype, then falling (or was he pushed?) away from his own humanity.

Why bother with such a play? And why, above all, drag such a jagged bundle into a high school classroom?

For weeks and months I struggled with these questions, and though in the process I have formulated several concrete objectives for this project, I offer you the struggle itself as the preeminent reason for incorporating *The Merchant of Venice,* or parts of it, into the high school curriculum. This play is worth doing for the very reasons it is easier to omit.

The central conflict is common enough, and decidedly the stuff of romantic comedy—a young man borrows money to finance his pursuit of a beautiful and wealthy woman. But the devil is in the details, and the details of this play are troubling, ambiguous, and risky. The borrower is a Christian; the moneylender, a Jew. The “merry bond,” a pound of flesh, has overtones of the crucifixion of Christ, and in a Venetian courtroom, justice and mercy get so entangled that the final verdict seems neither just nor merciful.
Was Shakespeare anti-Semitic? His audience most certainly was, and this play pleased his audience. But have all audiences, all directors, all casts, and all critics throughout this play’s venerable history been anti-Semitic as well? A reasonable answer is no, so one is left with the fact that a play which at times pleases anti-Semites pleases their moral antagonists as well. But how?

Determining how is the central challenge of the project, which I developed for my seniors in English IV. Over a period of about fifteen class days, we set out to discover the ways in which this play has been a reflection of its audiences, both shaming and entertaining them, often at the same time.

Curtain opens on three caskets

We do not begin at the beginning. Nor do we begin with explanations of the plot or characters. Finally, and oddly enough, we do not begin with the three scenes chosen for this project.

Scattered throughout Acts Two and Three is the ritual of the gold, silver, and lead caskets, a sort of moral lottery devised by Portia’s deceased father to test the values of her suitors. I determined that our participation in this ritual would be a vivid way to draw my students into the world of the play, but I thought this ritual could also function as a revolving door back to our own world. In asking the students to read the inscriptions and to choose from among the three caskets, the shadow of Portia’s dead father would fall upon us all.

And so, one Monday morning in January, I set the stage. As my world-weary seniors trudged into class, I arranged three desks at the front of the room, and placed upon each a “casket” in the form of a cigar box. Each casket was color-coded with gift ribbons and “engraved” with Shakespeare’s verse:

- Gold—“Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.”
- Silver—“Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.”
- Lead—“Who chooseth me must give and hazard all.”

On the blackboard, I wrote Italy, 1598, an aristocratic family estate. Then I listed the “cast call” on the board: Suitor 1, Suitor 2, Suitor 3, Portia (Lady of Belmont and the “prize”), Venetian society (the rest of you). Hands went up, we cleared a space down the middle of the room, and the ritual of the three caskets was underway.

I asked the three suitors to assemble at the rear of the class, and to approach the caskets separately and on cue. Inside each casket I had placed a scroll with the appropriate inscription. Then I handed Portia an index card, and stationed her by the caskets. Portia read from the card, “You have traveled a great distance and passed many tests to be standing in the presence of three caskets. You must choose one. If you choose the right casket, you will win a beautiful, intelligent, rich young woman (groans and whistles from the groundlings here) and all her possessions. If you choose the wrong casket, you will never be allowed to marry, or to have children.” At this point, Venetian society seemed fully engaged in the game-show dilemma.

The first suitor went directly for the lead casket, and when all three had chosen, I took a quick poll of the audience—“Hands up if you think the gold/silver/lead casket contains the prize!” Venetian society leaned in favor of the gold, so fraught with modern connotations of victory and wealth. I then asked the “gold” suitor to read his scroll:

“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 infold. 
Had you been as wise as bold, 
Young in limbs, in judgment old, 
Your answer had not been inscrolled.
Farewell, your suit is cold” (2.7.65–73).
The audience became suspicious—“It’s a trap!” Then the “silver” suitor unscrolls his fate:
“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 be gone: you are sped” (2.9.66–72).
“Hey, wait a minute—I thought he couldn’t have a wife,” someone in the audience objected.
“Maybe Shakespeare means a common-law wife?” someone else offered, and we went on.
The winning suitor, who also happened to choose first, read aloud:
“You that choose not by the view,
Chance as fair and choose as true!
Since this fortune falls to you,
Be content and seek no new.
If you be well pleased with this,
And hold your fortune for your bliss,
Turn you where your lady is
And claim her with a loving kiss” (3.2.132–38).
Then he ungraciously swept Portia off her feet and exited, stage left.
When the desks were pushed back into place, I asked the “lead” suitor what prompted him to
choose the least impressive casket.
“I’m a risk-taker, and I figured that people who are willing to ‘give and hazard all’ for someone
or something they love deserve to win, you know, at least in a play.” In light of all the risk-taking that
goes on in The Merchant of Venice, a resonant chord had just been plucked.
Following up quickly on this introduction to the project, I handed the class a plot
outline in tabloid newspaper format, advising them to read it tonight. Precious class
time was now needed for the activity at the bottom of the tabloid, which reprinted each
inscription and challenged the students to interpret what now appeared to be a moral
code embedded in the play.
The directions were simple: “Read each inscription. Explain what each choice revealed about the
chooser in the mind of Portia’s father.” While they reflected upon this task, I wrote the words GOLD,
SILVER, and LEAD on the blackboard. About ten minutes later, the columns were filled with their
ideas:
**GOLD**
- greedy people
- people fooled by flashy outward appearances
- materialistic people
- people who sell out for luxury
- people who take without giving

**SILVER**
- cautious people
- wannabees—people who try to be something they’re not
- people who make compromises for comfort
- people who sacrifice spiritual health for material wealth

**LEAD**
- risk-takers
- People not fooled by appearances
- spiritual, intellectual people
- people not deceived by false values
- people who give more than they get
Finally, I gave them their first assignment: “Think of a person from the world of politics, entertainment, sports, history, or your own life who would make a good candidate for the gold, silver, or lead casket. Write a short poem that describes your candidate and measures his/her worth within the context of the three caskets.” Then I read to them my own entry:

“Gold am I, my name is Trump,
A few years back, I hit a slump;
Some even dared call me corrupt
But business is better since I went bankrupt.”

Tomorrow would reveal a provocative gallery of candidates couched in some very choppy verse.

Three Scenes

Prefacing their poetry with warnings like “This is really bad, but I’ll read it anyway,” my students seemed uncharacteristically eager to share their poems. Gold candidates included several pro athletes and a former one, O.J. Simpson (“Simpson’s his name, / and he is still Gold. / Send him $29.95 to hear his story told. / Please buy his tape; be ever so giving, / As he needs to continue to make a good living”). Another gold went to Leona Helmsley (“Gold I am, my name’s Leona, / To be certain I’m no organ dona’ . . . ”).

Earning two silvers was Colin Powell, who had recently announced that he would definitely not be running for president (“You won’t take a stand on heated topics; / Yet silver and green fill up your pockets . . . ”). Echoing the “silver” themes of caution and compromise were two other poems about President Clinton (“Without the public on my side, / Behind Hillary I must hide”).

The spectrum of lead candidates ranged from our principal to Mother Theresa to Bill Cosby. But the most persuasive verse was penned in honor of a Massachusetts businessman named Aaron Fuerstein: “Your Malden Mills burnt to the ground, / Your employees’ jobs nowhere to be found. / In the cold winter months of Christmas time, / You showed a heart of ‘lead,’ sensitive and kind. / You paid your employees for months without work, / So that their tables would not go without bread and pork. / In a time when businessmen are frigid and tough, / There’s no doubt about it, you’re a diamond in the rough.”

We spent the remainder of the second day reviewing what we knew and organizing what we were about to know. Then I handed out three scenes which I had reproduced from a CD-ROM produced by Creative Multimedia entitled “Shakespeare”:

• Act One, Scene Three (The Conditions of the Loan)
• Act Three, Scene One (Antonio’s Loss, Shylock’s Loss)
• Act Four, Scene One (The Trial)

Footnote-free, these scenes would require some pretty active reading, and I instructed my students to highlight or underline any words or phrases, which they didn’t understand. Through discussion, an examination of context clues, and the use of a Shakespearean lexicon dictionary, we would reach an understanding of the scenes.

I chose these three scenes because Shylock is a central character in each one. A partial reading of any play or novel is bound to sacrifice something, and my victims included Nerissa, Portia’s lady-in-waiting, who in Act One, Scene Two nearly upstages her mistress with her wisdom; and of course, Lancelot Gobbo, the ne’er-do-well servant whose Beckett-esque clownsmanship injects a ludicrous quality to the tension that exists between the generations, the sexes, and the ethnic groups within this play.

But the greatest loss comes with the exclusion of Jessica, who in a succession of scenes throughout Act Two provides a fascinating dimension both to the play and to her father, Shylock. Her rela-
tionship with him is ambiguous at best, but I suspect that most teenagers would respond forcefully and dramatically to her situation, and to the choices that she makes. As it stands, it is a necessity to preface the second reading (Act Three, Scene One) with a summary of Jessica’s elopement in Act Two, Scene Six.

Three societies, three audiences

Throughout the course of their final year of high school, we ask our seniors to examine their personal values and their future responsibilities as citizens of the world. This emphasis upon romantic individualism in the classical context of social responsibility makes *The Merchant of Venice* an ideal vehicle for exploration and reflection.

Also, since a formal research paper is a traditional senior requirement, this project gave me the opportunity to introduce a new facet of research to my English classes, that of performance history. Though Shakespearean scholars have long been familiar with the delights of this branch of research, few high school teachers and even fewer high school students have ever been exposed to this activity. One enchanted summer at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. had sparked my interest in this brand of research, and left me determined to incorporate it into a student project.

Because the central objective of this project is to determine how *The Merchant of Venice*, in spite of and at times because of its anti-Semitic elements, has managed to appeal to audiences universally for almost 400 years, I decided to frame each scene in a distinct historical era. I was interested in experimenting with shifting perspectives.

Just how much of what we perceive as true and good is influenced by the society in which we live? How different would each of us be if we had been born in another time and place? How difficult is it to be an outcast, unaccepted by your own family or society? Though I didn’t expect *The Merchant of Venice* to offer any conclusive answers to these questions, I certainly hoped it would fuel some intense reflection.

The criteria I used for the three societies I chose was based partly on their separation by time and place, but I also considered the varying degrees of anti-Semitism at work in each. I felt it appropriate to frame one scene in Britain’s golden age, Elizabethan England, and another in what one American critic has termed the American Renaissance, the nineteenth century of Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, and Thoreau. The third frame seemed ugly but inescapable in light of the project, and after much hesitation I devised a sign-up sheet for these three productions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene</th>
<th>Society</th>
<th>Cast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Act One, Scene Three</td>
<td>London, 1598</td>
<td>Bassanio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(178 lines; the conditions of the loan)</td>
<td>(Elizabethan England)</td>
<td>Shylock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Antonio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act Three, Scene One</td>
<td>Berlin, 1936</td>
<td>Solario</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(123 lines; Antonio’s loss,</td>
<td></td>
<td>Salarino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shylock’s loss)</td>
<td>(The Nazi Era)</td>
<td>Shylock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tubal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Choosing the Elizabethan era for one production seemed both natural and useful, since students would be learning something about the author’s society, and perhaps about the author himself. Furthermore, my limited knowledge of that era lead me to view it as a “silver” society, one which walked a middle line in its measured tolerance of Jews. Since our students study American literature in the tenth grade, I very much wanted to set another era on our own shores, giving students the opportunity to research an era of remarkable literary and philosophical activity. With shamefully little knowledge of the social history of Boston in the mid-nineteenth century, I imagined that our “lead” society would be found among the intellectuals who so celebrated freedom, individuality, and man’s spiritual self. My third choice seemed unavoidable, though as a research assignment, the Nazi era would provide the least challenge to students. Needless to say, this era would most definitely be our “gold” society. I scheduled a field trip to the Boston Public Library and encouraged them to hunt down different editions of the play, knowing that editors often include provocative information about the performance history of the play in their introductions.

In this, the research component of the project, it would be their responsibility to learn everything they could about how the play had been adapted to its audiences in the past, and to familiarize themselves with the era in which they would be performing. Even for seniors, a few hours in the BPL can amount to information overload, so I armed my students with a few essential questions: What were the social levels of that society? How did people most often rise to prominence in that society (through education, honest labor, inherited wealth and titles, aggression and intimidation, etc.)? How did people in each level of society dress? What were their distinct symbols of power and justice, shame and derision? To what extent was anti-Semitism accepted in their society?

Three Shylocks

According to my calendar, we had read three scenes and visited the library, all in a period of eight class days. But throughout this time, my students and I had engaged in daily activities designed to examine and manipulate the ambiguities of Shakespeare’s script.

Dialogue is central in drama. From what the characters do and say, we infer their natures. During the reading of Act One, Scene Three, I asked my students to fill a chart with quotes spoken by Antonio and Shylock, which reveal important character traits. More often than not, my students found themselves at odds over the interpretations of key lines.

When Bassanio invites Shylock to dinner, “If it please you to dine with us—”, Shylock replies, “Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into. I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you” (1.3.26–31). Several students felt that these lines revealed a deeply religious man, someone whose personal standards would not be debased for monetary gain. But other students found in these lines a bitter man whose
distaste for his neighbors’ lifestyle extended to a physical revulsion. “He’s a bigot himself,” someone said.

These instances of disagreement provided the opportunity to begin building the third, most compelling, component of this project, and the complexity of character. To those students who found in these lines a deeply religious Shylock, I asked how they, as actors, would show this. How would their interpretation of these lines manifest itself in the voice, the body, and the face? How would their Shylock dress? What colors would he wear? How would his religious demeanor influence the other two actors on-stage at that time, Antonio and Bassanio? And finally, how would you expect your audience to respond to this Shylock? The same challenge was then put to the students who discovered a bitter Shylock, driven by hate. The final extension of these exercises is to have students volunteer to put these two interpretations on their feet, and to have the rest of the class/audience analyze what they saw and heard and felt.

After we had read all three scenes, I tried another approach to characterization intended to enlarge the scope of choices available to these budding actor/directors. On a handout I double-spaced the text of Shylock’s asides from Act One, Scene Three (lines 31–35; 38–49), “Yes, to smell pork”; “How like a fawning publican he looks”; and his famous speech from Act Three, Line One (lines 55–69), “Hath not a Jew eyes.” Telling my students that this activity would help to prepare them for their final performances, I broke them into groups of two to three and instructed them to use all the tools at their disposal—line editing (“Cross out up to fifty percent!”), instructions in the margins for vocal intonation, gesture, and props (“Props can be costumes, colors, lights, make-up, wigs, jewelry, weapons, sets, et cetera, et cetera!”). Then, to raise the difficulty factor, I told the Act One, Scene Three students, whose Shylock was in the process of venting his anti-Christian, anti-Antonio grudges, to create a more sympathetic Shylock. On the other hand, the Act Three, Scene One students, whose Shylock was delivering his eloquent speech for human understanding, were told to create a less sympathetic Shylock. Though time prohibited most of the groups from presenting their interpretations, every group was eager to express how they would have staged such scenes. Their deliveries were understandably awkward, but their ideas were exciting, and when on the following morning I showed them the courtroom scene (Act Four, Scene One) from the 1973 film production of *The Merchant of Venice*, produced by Jonathan Miller and featuring Laurence Olivier in the role of Shylock, they watched this performance as seasoned professionals.

At this point in the project, all things were ready—three groups had been assigned a scene and an era; it would now be their task to assemble a promptbook and a production.

**Assembling a promptbook**

Using the model from Shakespeare Set Free, Vol. 1, edited by Peggy O’Brien, I tailored a handout of specific instructions for the promptbook each group would need to hand in with its final performance.

1. **Title Page**
   
   Begin with a title page that includes the name of your acting company, the scene you will enact, and the era in which you will perform. List the names of every member of your company, and the responsibilities of each.

2. **Research Analyses** (3–5 paragraphs, double-spaced)
   
   In an opening statement of thesis, characterize the society, which you researched as most closely representative of a “gold,” “silver,” or “lead” society. Refer to the inscriptions on the caskets, and/or to the moral traits associated with each, in your opening statement.

   Then write the body of your report. Each paragraph should provide concrete information
gathered in your research on such topics as the performance history of the play, the social history of the era, and the observations and opinions of literary and historical experts.

Use parenthetical documentation throughout this part of your report. Be sure to include a “Works Cited” page at the end of this section of the promptbook.

3. Script
How did your research influence the editing of your script? Cut and paste a significant edited passage from the script and explain in one or two paragraphs how your knowledge of the era contributed to the decisions made in the editing, directing, and acting of this passage.

4. Character Analyses
Write a brief but insightful description of each character in your scene. How is your character being portrayed (greedy, hateful, proud, terrified, etc.) and why?
Whenever appropriate, refer to your historical research to show how it contributed to the portrayal of your character.

5. Costumes, Staging, and Props
Sketch or copy the ideal costumes for this scene (you are NOT expected to have them—just imagine them). Indicate the color schemes for each costume, with a sensitivity to the symbolism commonly attached to colors, and highlight individual ornamentations such as jewelry, weapons, wigs, beards, etc. Historical accuracy is a must!
Diagram the ideal stage for this production. Would your scene work best on a round stage? a thrust stage? a proscenium? Would it require a balcony or trap door?
What props (furniture, objects) would be required on-stage? What would the background include? Describe the use of lights and color. Where would your actors be standing/sitting?
Your sensitivity to the historical era is of paramount importance in these decisions, and your choices must reflect knowledge and understanding of the era in which it is set.

6. Music/Sound Effects
Select music to use as an introduction to your scene. Would you play it during the performance as well? Explain your choice of music. What sound effects, if any, would add to the dramatic effect of your scene?

This handout, along with a mini-review of MLA standards in research format, was distributed on Friday of the second week of our project, so that each group could coordinate the individual responsibilities of each group member, and take advantage of the weekend to get started.

Performance!
As I said in my introduction, Shakespeare can be scary. One of the risks inherent in this project is its freedom from teacher-imposed standards of decency and “correctness.” Staging this play for an audience which history tells us was somewhat, or overtly, anti-Semitic required a remarkable degree of trust in both my students and Shakespeare.

I needed to trust that my students would produce a scene, which would accurately reflect the era they had researched, but that they would learn from this how insidious a thing is prejudice. I wanted them to feel the pain of the outcast and the shame of a majority that abuses its power. As for Shakespeare, I hoped to witness a fluid script, alive in the hands of the many and distinct cultures which embrace him. I also hoped to view, as through a mirror darkly, a seed of redemption planted in the script wherein Shylock, Antonio, and Portia labored.

These were my hopes and fears. But on the day in which I handed out a sign-up sheet for the
three productions, the one student whom I most suspected of harboring anti-Semitic sentiments signed up for the role of Shylock in the “Berlin 1936” cast.

This situation prompted me to design a performance self-evaluation sheet, which I distributed to all my students a couple of days before performance. First, I asked them to list the details they wanted the audience to notice about their portrayal of character. This proved to be too general a request, so I found myself asking them more particular questions: “Will you be speaking with an accent? Walking with a limp? Will you stand up tall and look the world in the eye, or will you blink and stammer?” In all my questions, I hoped to make my students more sensitive to the vital connections between Shakespeare’s language and the language of their bodies and minds.

On the other side of the sheet, and with my Berlin Shylock very much in mind, I asked: “What aspects of your appearance and personality do you think are naturally suited to this role? Are there things about you that do not suit the role you must play? How will you compensate?” The responses to these questions were more heartfelt, and many students found in this writing activity the opportunity to express discomfort with the role they would play.

Quite unexpectedly, I learned that my Berlin Shylock had experienced an epiphany of sorts. During our visit to the Boston Public Library, he had examined a volume about the Third Reich, and in the faces of history’s Jews he had caught a glimpse of himself. “I’m not Jewish, but I look like the Jews in Hitler’s posters. If I were an actor in 1936 Berlin, I guess my appearance alone would get me the part of Shylock.” He admitted that it would be difficult for him to play “a nervous and groveling” Shylock. “I’d want to fight back,” he wrote, “but a Nazi audience wouldn’t accept that.”

Finally, on the fourteenth day of this project, we took up residence on the ramshackle stage in the gymnasium, and witnessed the performance of three scenes from The Merchant of Venice. Did I see three Shylocks? Yes. Parading, groveling, advancing across the stage that day, I saw Shylock as comic villain, victim, and threat.

The first group, performing Act One, Scene Three in London, 1598, showcased a mustache-twirling, comic villain. In their promptbook, they explained the reasons for this interpretation. From their research, they were surprised to learn that this play was considered a comedy; they also discovered that Shylock often appeared in a red wig and beard, harking back to the red-haired Judas Iscariot; and though Jews had been banned from England for several hundred years, they lived in relative peace as a segregated minority. These and other factors prompted them to characterize London in 1598 as a “silver” society, and to portray Shylock as a silent-film villain with a red wig, and exaggerated speech and gestures.

It was the second group’s task to stage Act Three, Scene One for an audience in 1936 Berlin. An awkward silence descended upon us, the audience. I found myself unwilling to play the part of a Nazi theater-goer, and was suddenly struck with the realization that, if history had chosen to put me there at that time, I would either have become a very different person, or an actress myself, orchestrating a double life of public/private dimensions. This was theater as I had never before experienced it.

In their promptbook, the second group wrote that their research had vividly reinforced what they already knew about the Nazis. Characterizing their society as “gold,” their thesis was that, in this society, things were not as they appeared, with the Nazis so clean and sharply dressed on the outside, but rotten within. So struck were they by the myriad symbols of power in Nazi Germany that they chose to dress the taunting Solario and Salarino in uniforms (long-sleeved, collared shirts with black chest-bands and military pins borrowed from grandfathers). Shylock and Tubal were hunched and dressed in rags, as befitting their theme of appearances and reality. Throughout the scene, Salerio and Solanio encircled the two old men, slowly tightening the ring and punctuating their words with pokes and shoves. A group of students silently gathered on the front-right corner of the stage, throwing pennies at the two old men. By omitting the stage directions for the mid-scene exit of Salerio and
Solanio, and by heavily editing Shylock’s conversation with Tubal, this group continued to outnumber the old men, whose conversation was cut short by an eruption of violence. Using cardboard tubes, which appeared out of nowhere, the gang of young Nazis attacked the two old men, hitting them and driving them from the stage. When I said that Shakespeare can be scary, I was engaged in understatement.

The third group was entrusted with the longest scene, Act Four, Scene One, and what I thought would be the most enlightened historical era, the American Renaissance of the mid-nineteenth century, set rather parochially by me in Boston, 1845. But the research performed by this group offered a more sobering conclusion—even the rarefied atmosphere of nineteenth-century Boston was polluted with the impurities of anti-Semitism.

They learned that Emerson, whose influence upon American attitudes extends well into our own era, denounced all organized religions, and that his perception of the Jewish faith was particularly negative. Another facet of their report took me quite by surprise—they learned that the social elite of Boston was finding itself engulfed by waves of immigrants, and, though the Jewish influx was small at this time, they concluded that a Brahmin audience would see in Shylock the threat of “foreign” invasion of their turf. They concluded that the Boston of 1845 was a “silver” society, and their courtroom scene, played against the elegant strains of Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons,” highlighted a firebrand Shylock whose suit threatened the status quo of American society and law. In this interpretation, Antonio was played by a tall, golden-haired young man in patriotic dress, and Shylock was played by an equally tall, black student wearing a yamalka on his head and a dagger taped conspicuously to his ankle. This Shylock spoke with a thick accent, and when he thought his flesh was about to be delivered, courtroom attendants “bolted” Antonio’s arms to an imaginary wall in the manner of a crucifixion.

Will your students make the same discoveries in their research? Will they apply those discoveries in the same ways to each scene? I doubt it. In fact, I suspect that for each year that I do this project, I will see differences in each scene, because the mix of personal values, scholarly research, and text interpretation encourage rather than inhibit simple and predictable responses from students.

Closure

A “Meet the Cast” improv, which I had scheduled for the next day, was canceled due to a snowstorm that closed schools for two days and gave us a very long weekend. Removed from the immediacy of the three performances, we needed a way to share what we had learned about Shakespeare, time, and ourselves. Above all, we needed to wonder aloud just what this play asks of us.

In the interim, I had reproduced the thesis statement from each promptbook, and when we met again five days later, I asked the three directors to teach us what they had learned about their particular time frame. Then I asked each group to arrange their seats in a different corner of the classroom, separating themselves in space if not in time, and based upon the thesis they had written, I gave each group a copy of the inscription which best characterized their historical era. The Berliners received their “gold” inscription: “Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.” Both the Londoners and the Bostonians received their “silver” inscription: “Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.” Then I instructed each member of the class to hand their paper in with the city and year of their production, to adapt their name to that time and place, and to write a fictional autobiography of the person they think they would have been in that theater at that moment in history. Time travelers linked by Shakespeare, our voyage had come full circle.

With no one to receive the “lead” inscription, I placed it upon my desk. “I guess there are no ‘lead’ societies,” someone wistfully observed. But then it occurred to me, as I reread the unclaimed verse, “Who chooseth me must give and hazard all,” that this was the challenge of both the project and the play itself. It is, I believe, what Shakespeare asks of us in The Merchant of Venice.
The character of Shylock is so large and the themes of prejudice and justice and mercy so strong in Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice that secondary themes and characters are often overwhelmed. The play is much more than a study of the struggles between Christian and Jew; it is a rich tapestry threaded with love and self-sacrifice, hatred and revenge, friendship and marriage, divided loyalties, and bonds legal, financial, and emotional. One subtle but interesting pattern in this tapestry that is sometimes overlooked is Shakespeare’s examination of families and the relationships between father and child.

Shakespeare serves up three parent-child relationships in the play—two father-daughter pairings and one comic father-son. Portia’s relationship with her father, though not perfect, was probably the most healthy of the three, even though she presently resents her father’s method of securing her happiness. Portia’s father constructed his will to protect her from fortune hunters and to ensure that she married a man who would value everything Portia is and not merely her money and beauty; however, it is also possible to see in his actions a lack of faith in Portia’s good sense—he doesn’t trust her to make a wise choice on her own: “So is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none?” (The Signet Classic Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice, Kenneth Myrick, Ed. [New York: Signet, 1965], 1.2.23–26).

Portia is obedient and loyal to her father even after his death, though, undeniably, she feels frustration and resentment, which she vents by insulting her suitors when they are out of earshot. Nevertheless, she honors her father’s wishes even when the quality of her suitors tempts her to use sabotage. When faced with “the young German, the duke of Saxony’s nephew” as a marital prospect, Portia asks Nerissa: “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” (1.2.94–97). Fortunately, Portia is not put to the test, since this troublesome suitor leaves without venturing a guess at the caskets, and whenever Portia considers rebellion (as she does when she says, “And the worst fall that ever fell, I hope I shall make shift to go without him” [1.2.88–90] and “I will do anything, Nerissa, ere I will be married to a sponge” [1.2.97–98]), Nerissa is there to remind her of her duty: “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” (1.2.91–93). Portia is later strongly tempted to cast a few hints in Bassanio’s direction about the correct casket, but she refuses to dishonor herself and disobey her father even though she risks losing the only suitor she can stand. Verbalizing her faith in her father’s wisdom, she tells Bassanio, “If you do love me, you will find me out” (3.2.41).

Jessica, in contrast, is the least loyal of the children in the play, meeting secretly with Lorenzo and allowing him to court her, lying to her father, abandoning him, and stealing from him; she’s hardly the docile, obedient daughter that Shylock takes her for. Although she feels some pangs of guilt (“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” [2.3.16–19]), Jessica rejects her father, his way of life, and his religion—though not, interestingly, his wealth, a great deal of which she takes along with her.

Jessica’s behavior is not altogether surprising when one considers Shylock’s treatment of her.
Shylock shows his daughter little affection or kindness—she is his flesh and blood and therefore an extension of himself, not a person in her own right. Days after she has run away, he exclaims in disbelief, “My own flesh and blood to rebel!” (3.1.32). In her first scene, Jessica laments, “Our house is hell” (2.3.2), and Launcelot’s descriptions as well as Shylock’s actions seem to bear this out. Shylock, stingy and puritanical, keeps Jessica locked up and attempts to isolate her from the world, but he doesn’t think to distrust her any more than he would distrust his ducats: “Hear you me, Jessica: / Lock up my doors; and 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 upon Christian fools with varnished faces; / . . . Let not the sound of shallow fopp’y enter / My sober house” (2.5. 28–36). He assumes he has her obedience and doesn’t give it a second thought, being much too busy contemplating his money (“I did dream of moneybags tonight” [2.5.18]) and his revenge (“I’ll go in hate, to feed upon / The prodigal Christian” [2.5.14–15]). “There are my keys,” he says to Jessica, “Look to my house” (2.5.12, 16).

When Shylock discovers that Jessica has fled, it becomes clear that he is just as upset that his valuables have disappeared with her. “My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter! / Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats! / Justice! The law! My ducats and my daughter! / A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats, / Of double ducats, stol’n from me by my daughter! / And jewels—two stones, two rich and precious stones, / Stol’n by my daughter! Justice! Find the girl! / She hath the stones with her, and the ducats!” (2.8.15–22). And it is equally apparent which of the two he values more: “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!” (3.1.83–85).

The relationship between Launcelot Gobbo and his father is neither as tempestuous as that of Jessica and Shylock nor as caring as that of Portia and her father. Launcelot shows a lack of respect for his father when he jests, “Well, my conscience . . . says very wisely to me, ‘My honest friend Launcelot, being an honest man’s son’—or rather an honest woman’s son, for indeed my father did something smack, something grow to, he had a kind of taste” (2.2.13–18). In addition, Launcelot, unlike Portia, has very little faith in his father’s wisdom, perhaps with some justification—Old Gobbo quite literally doesn’t know his son.

Not only does he fail to recognize Launcelot when he meets him on the street (he is, after all, nearly blind), but he also fails to recognize his son’s voice and personality. The only thing of which Old Gobbo is certain about his son is his social status—he is no “Master Launcelot” but plain Launcelot, a servant, and Old Gobbo is not to be fooled on that count.

However, Launcelot is unnecessarily cruel, teasing his father by referring to himself in the third person as “Master Launcelot” and then telling his father that “Master Launcelot . . . is indeed deceased, or as you would say in plain terms, gone to heaven” (2.2.60–65).

Old Gobbo, on the other hand, seems fond of his son, even if he doesn’t have the sense to recognize him: When he thinks Launcelot is dead, he says, “The boy was the very stuff of my age, my very prop” (2.2.66–67), and when Launcelot makes the request, Old Gobbo very obligingly assists him in acquiring a new position away from Shylock.

The three family relationships in The Merchant of Venice have remarkable similarities, yet they vary widely in success. Portia’s father, in his way, is just as controlling as Shylock; after all, he insists on choosing his daughter’s mate, even from the grave. Yet Portia, one of the strongest-minded individuals in the play, respects his wishes while Jessica betrays and abandons her father. Old Gobbo, though affectionate, is an adequate parent at best, because—like Shylock—he does not truly know or understand his offspring. Shylock, the least successful parent, combines the other two fathers’ worst characteristics without any of their redeeming ones—he is a domineering yet oblivious father who
fails to show his daughter the love she needs. The message that emerges from these strands of The Merchant of Venice’s tapestry is that parental control is best paired with loving concern and that a good parent not only loves and cares for his child but also knows and understands him or her; ideally, the bond between parent and child should consist of more than duty, more than love, though both are important; it should also include a healthy measure of wisdom and understanding.

Neither Comedy, Romance, Nor Tragedy

From Midsummer Magazine, 1992; used with permission
By Patricia Truxler Coleman

Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice is neither comedy, romance, nor tragedy, and consequently defies easy classification. Although it dates to between 1595 and 1600 and thus belongs to that period of enormous productivity during which time Shakespeare composed, in addition, to this play, six romantic comedies, three histories, and two tragedies, The Merchant of Venice is more properly a “problem play,” one that raises far more questions than it answers. With its intricate triple plot—the Shylock-Antonio bond, the Portia-Bassanio romance, and the ring trick—this play is an already complicated story which turns on our understanding of the relationships of mercy to justice and love to honesty.

Thus, at the outset of this play, we are introduced to the melancholic Antonio, who “hold[s] the world but as the world, . . . / A stage where every man must play a part, / And [his] a sad one,” to Gratiano, who “speaks an infinite deal of nothing,” and to Bassanio, who has “much disabled [his] estate” by running up extraordinary debt. Into this world steps Shylock who hates Antonio “for he is Christian” and resents that he “lends out money gratis and brings down / the rate of usance here with us in Venice.” Here then we have the material for one plot: Bassanio needs money; Antonio has tied all his money up in his ventures at sea, and Shylock has money to lend.

Up to this point, the plot seems straightforward enough. But it is not, and what complicates the plot is simply the moral bankruptcy of the citizenry of Venice. Bassanio thinks little of the consequences of his indebtedness; in fact, he intends to borrow more money in order to pay back what he owes. Antonio thinks little of doing business—borrowing money—from his avowed enemy and even less of the moral consequences of his providing Shylock with business. After all, Shylock is in clear violation of the letter of the law by loaning money with advantage, and Antonio is in clear violation of the spirit of the law by providing this “sinner” with the opportunity to “sin” by borrowing money from him. Thus the play raises the old questions of the nature of sin and the relationship of the tempted to the tempter.

Morally Smug

Furthermore, the apparently “holy” Antonio is so morally smug that he cannot fathom the possibility of nature conspiring against him by preventing the return of his three ships. So, while Antonio fancies himself the universal exception to the ordinary rules which govern man in the world, Shylock sees an opportunity to revenge himself on those complacent Christians in Venice who have, by their own definition, made all Jews unworthy “sinners.” Bassanio, in the meantime, is so self-absorbed that he allows his friend Antonio to enter into a potentially deadly bond with Shylock in order that
Bassanio might woo the wealthy Portia and end both his unrequited romantic longings and his long-standing indebtedness.

In apparent direct contrast to the corrupt world of Venice is the world of Belmont, which on the surface seems pure and elegant. But even here, lurking beneath the hope of moral consistency, is a world of potential chaos. We are told, when we first meet Portia, that she “can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow [her] own teaching.” Further, it is she who gives shelter to Jessica, Shylock’s thieving and dishonest daughter, and her lover Lorenzo. If we do not see the world of Belmont as a world of potential tragedy, at least one person does—Portia’s father, who, though dead at the outset of the play, has conspired to control his daughter’s choice in marriage even from the grave. Clearly, Portia’s father understands the lack of congruence in this world between appearance and reality, between words and deeds, between thought and performance. And thus we have the material for a second plot.

But Portia and Bassanio do genuinely love one another, and so she manages to guide her suitors in their choices of the caskets. Bassanio, while clearly a flawed individual who is willing to risk the life of a friend for the love of Portia, seems to understand the nature of real romantic love. He chooses the casket bearing the inscription to “give and hazard all” because he seems to understand that the only love that can be guaranteed is that in which the lovers are prepared to do just that—to give and hazard all. Of course, it may be argued that Bassanio isn’t “hazarding” much, at least financially, as his presence in Belmont is the direct result of Antonio’s generosity. But he is, nevertheless, willing to “give and hazard all” in more than merely monetary ways. So while Bassanio may succeed in alienating us in the first act, he redeems himself, at least in part, with us and with Portia when he demonstrates that he understands the nature of lasting love.

Lacks Moral Sophistication.

Still, the worlds of Venice and Belmont are doomed to collide, and they do this through both Shylock and Portia. When Antonio’s ships do not return and he is incapable of paying the debt he owes to Shylock, the Jew demands justice—a pound of Antonio’s flesh. As in nearly all of Shakespeare’s romantic comedies and romances, it is the heroine—here Portia—who is intellectually sophisticated enough to solve the problem, a problem which is typically a male invention and which the heroine must be in male guise to solve. But, unlike Shakespeare’s other romantic heroines, Portia lacks moral sophistication. When, in the guise of a man, she cautions Shylock to show mercy, she reminds both him and us that “earthly power doth then show likest God’s / When mercy seasons justice.” And yet, having caught Shylock in a bind—he is due his pound of flesh, but not one drop of blood—she proceeds in her humiliation and destruction of Shylock, seasoning none of hers or Christian Venice’s justice with mercy. Apparently, for the citizens of Venice and Belmont, that mercy which “is an / attribute to God himself” is the just due only of those who are like them in appearance, behavior, beliefs, and values.

But, of course, Shylock is like them, and like us. He asks: “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?” (3.1.62)

And our answer must be “yes.” For we see Shylock suffer—at the hands of his daughter who betrays him by stealing the only thing of sentimental value to Shylock and by eloping with a Christian and turning her back on all that her father has valued; at the hands of Antonio, who is so completely able to separate his public and private selves that he will do business with Shylock but will not respect him; at the hands of Portia and the court of Venice, which will commend mercy.
to Shylock as a way of handling Antonio but which will show him none themselves; and at the hands of a system of Christian justice which teaches us on the one hand to love our enemy and on the other to strip him of his faith.

Furthermore, for all her intellectual sophistication, Portia lacks a certain softness of nature where love is concerned. While it may be amusing to her to trick Bassanio and Gratiano into parting with their wedding rings, it is certainly not amusing to the gentlemen. Here we have the material for the third plot. For even if only for a brief time, Portia and Nerissa have mercilessly trapped their husbands in a lie and made the men think that they might have been cuckolded. Thus, The Merchant of Venice ends in a final collision of the worlds of Venice and Belmont. For all that we may have hoped otherwise, we must conclude that Venice and Belmont have at least one thing in common: things are not as they seem. Once again, Shakespeare has reminded us of the perpetual incongruence, where people are concerned, between appearance and reality and of our capacity to be better at knowing what is good to do than we are at doing it.

**Recommended Reading**


Works Cited


