

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Shakespeare's language can seem scary, but give it a try! *Go at your own pace, and have fun!*



SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE'S
SIGNATURE COMMUNITY PROGRAM

Here we are in Venice, Italy, where a merchant named Antonio decides to lend his BFF Bassanio 3,000 ducats to help him woo a wealthy woman—but, since he won't have the money on hand till a few of his ships get back from selling stuff, Antonio goes to Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, to take out his own loan. Antonio has treated Shylock horribly (to put it mildly) for years—hurling bigoted insults at him in public and intentionally harming his business—so, naturally, Shylock is not too fond of him (to put it mildly). Antonio guarantees repayment, and Shylock agrees to lend him the money free of interest on condition that if the loan is not repaid on time, Antonio will have to give him "a pound of flesh." More on that later.

Meanwhile, Shylock's daughter Jessica elopes with Antonio's buddy Lorenzo, and Shylock is NOT happy about it. Which brings us to this scene with Shylock, two of Antonio's other buddies, and one of Shakespeare's most famous monologues...

The Shakespeare

Enter SHYLOCK.

SOLANIO

How now, Shylock, what news among the merchants?

SHYLOCK

You knew, none so well, as you, of my daughter's flight.

SALERIO

That's certain. I for my part knew the tailor that made the wings she flew withal.

SOLANIO

And Shylock for his part knew the bird was fridge, and then it is the complexion of them all to leave the dam.

SHYLOCK

She is damn'd for it.

SALERIO

That's certain, if the devil may be her judge.

SHYLOCK

My own flesh and blood to rebel!

SALERIO

There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory, more between your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish. But tell us, do you hear whether Antonio have had any loss at sea or no?

SHYLOCK

There I have another bad match. A bankrupt, a prodigal, who dare scarce show his head on the Rialto; a beggar, that was us'd to come so smug upon the mart; let him look to his bond. He was wont to lend money for a Christian curty's, let him look to his bond.

SALERIO

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

SHYLOCK

To bait fish withal—if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me, and hind'rd me half a million, laugh'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, scorn'd my nation, thwarted my bargains, cool'd my friends, heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his suifrance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

"Let him look to his bond"

Shylock talks a lot about the agreement he had with Antonio. Why do you think he does this? Does he have faith that the legal system will support him? Or is it something else?



*If you prick us, do we not bleed?
If you tickle us, do we not laugh?
If you poison us, do we not die?*

Shylock gives these three examples of things that all people do, before continuing to say that revenge is one of those things.

— Why do you think **Shylock** chooses these three examples? Think about each one on its own, and then think about all of them together.

— Why do you think **Shakespeare** chose these three examples? (Not necessarily different from the character's reasons, but not necessarily the same!)

— Would **you** choose different ones? Pretend you're Shakespeare's editor. What examples would you suggest?

Brainstorm different ways this scene could be adapted without changing its core meaning. Where else could it be set, and when? What other things could set Shylock apart from most people, why might he be the target of bullying or discrimination, and what might that look like? Would you write another play? A movie? A musical? A novel? A short story? Something else entirely?

The Translation

Enter SHYLOCK.

SOLANIO

How's it going, Shylock? What's the news among the merchants?

SHYLOCK

You knew—no one knew, no one knew as well as you did—about my daughter's plans to run away.

SALERIO

That's true. I even knew the tailor who made the disguise she wore when she ran off.

SOLANIO

And Shylock knew his daughter was ready to run away. It's natural for children to leave their parents.

SHYLOCK

She'll be damned for it.

SALERIO

That's true—if the devil's judging her.

SHYLOCK

My own flesh and blood turned against me! A rebel!

SALERIO

You two are totally different. Your flesh is more different from hers than coal is from ivory. There's more difference between your bloods than between red wine and white. But tell us, did you hear anything about Antonio's loss at sea?

SHYLOCK

That's another bad deal I've made!—a bankrupt, a spendthrift, who now has to hide his head in the Rialto (the downtown business district of Venice), a beggar who used to look so smug in front of the other merchants. Let him think about his own debt. He liked to call me a loan shark; let him think about his debt to me. He used to lend money as a favor between Christians; but now, let him think about his own debt.

SALERIO

But you won't take his flesh if he can't pay. What's that good for?

SHYLOCK

I'll use it for fish bait. You can't eat human flesh, but if it feeds nothing else, it'll feed my revenge. He's insulted me and cost me half a million ducats. He's laughed at my losses, made fun of my earnings, humiliated my race, thwarted my deals, turned my friends against me, riled up my enemies—and why? Because I'm a Jew. Doesn't a Jew have eyes? Doesn't a Jew have hands, bodily organs, a human shape, five senses, feelings, and passions? Doesn't a Jew eat the same food, get hurt with the same weapons, get sick with the same diseases, get healed by the same medicine, and warm up in summer and cool off in winter just like a Christian? If you prick us with a pin, don't we bleed? If you tickle us, don't we laugh? If you poison us, don't we die? And if you treat us badly, won't we try to get revenge? If we're like you in everything else, we'll resemble you in that respect. If a Jew offends a Christian, what's the Christian's kind and gentle reaction? Revenge. If a Christian offends a Jew, what punishment will he come up with if he follows the Christian example? Of course, the same thing—revenge! I'll treat you as badly as you Christians taught me to—and you'll be lucky if I don't outdo my teachers.

"BY TALE OR HISTORY"

The Merchant of Venice is one of Shakespeare's more controversial—and, perhaps, misunderstood—plays. Historical context is key if we want to avoid "adding" anything to the text by interpreting it just from a modern perspective. So here's a bit of that context.

The Merchant of Venice is thought to have been written in 1596-97 and first published in a 1600 quarto edition (ala *Hamlet*). This was during the Renaissance, only about 100 years after what's considered the end of feudalism in England. The feudal system was the structuring of society based on land ownership, with peasants at the bottom and the church at the top. This structure was pretty well locked in for hundreds of years.

The church did not allow Christians to charge interest on loans to other Christians. This created a vital role in society for Jewish people who, because they were not allowed to purchase land, had virtually no other way to survive in the feudal economy.

Though Jewish people were forbidden by their own religious guidelines to charge unreasonable interest, they were often subject to bigotry and persecution anyway. This only intensified as Europe transitioned from feudalism to a Renaissance economy that didn't center around the church—which is precisely when Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*.

Many harmful stereotypes that emerged during this period persist to this day, and knowing how false and dangerous those stereotypes are can affect our interpretation of the play. But if we look at *Merchant* in the context of its time, we see Shakespeare displaying far more empathy for Shylock than other playwrights did for minority characters in their plays.

The well-known speech to the left is the ultimate example. Shylock expresses his pain, frustration, and desire for fairness in a way that is not unlike Iago and Richard III. Shylock has been denied "fair" treatment because of his religion, Iago because of his class, and Richard III because of his physical deformity. They even use similar language: compare Iago's "partly led to diet my revenge" to Shylock's "if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge."

If Shakespeare's treatment of Shylock is so similar to these other famous "villains," what does that tell (or not tell) us about this play?

There's no question that the characters in *The Merchant of Venice* abuse and manipulate Shylock because of his religion, and there's no question that his desire for revenge comes from that abuse. The stereotypes in the characters' dialogue have been used for centuries to persecute the Jewish people, so it's easy to judge the play as bigoted. But a closer look at its historical context can give us a more nuanced perspective... which is *always* what we want in Shakespeare in Prison.

Shylock's speech is poetic... but it's written in prose!

Remember that Shakespeare mostly uses prose for casual conversation—and this isn't that! Most of *Merchant* is in verse, so people have wondered about this speech for hundreds of years! What do you think? How would it be different in verse?



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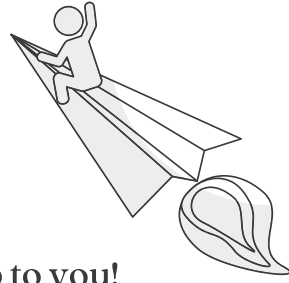
You can respond to these in any way you choose:

Write **ACT IT OUT**

Talk about it

Draw

THINK ABOUT IT



... up to you!

SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

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THE VILLAINY YOU TEACH ME, I WILL EXECUTE

Shylock is upset in his monologue. Antonio hurt him, and now he wants to hurt Antonio.

What "place" in Shylock does this speech come from? Is he in his head? In his feelings? Somewhere else?

Is Shylock angry? Hurt? Offended? Afraid? How do those things look different, in your experience?

If you were Shylock's friend, what would you say to him?

Justified or not, Shylock is focused on getting his revenge.

What makes someone fixate on revenge and lose perspective? How do they break free of that obsession?

Dress Shylock in your mind (or on paper). What does he wear? How does he wear it? Think about everything: the fit of his shoes, the color of his shirt, what's in his pockets...

You don't need to dress him in Renaissance clothes—you can have him wear clothes from today. Or the 1920s. Whatever you want!

Think about: He's not part of the mainstream culture, but he lives in the most diverse city in the world, so he's not *really* an outsider.



ANOTHER SCENE? WHAT'S THE BUSINESS?

Later in the play, Shylock attempts to settle his dispute with Antonio by taking him to court—Antonio did not repay his loan on time, and Shylock wants the pound of flesh they agreed to. Bassanio offers to pay Shylock 6,000 ducats (twice what Antonio owes!), but Shylock is stuck on his (perfectly legal) revenge, and he demands the flesh.

As always with Shakespeare, this isn't a courtroom like you'd see today, but it's a lot like a legal proceeding. There's no judge or jury, but a young man who says he's a "Doctor of Law" is chosen to preside. Then it turns out that this young man is, in fact, Portia!

Oh right, we didn't tell you about Portia. Sorry... this play is complicated. Portia is Bassanio's fiancée, one of the main characters, and, it turns out, a very clever woman. Go ahead and check this bit out....

Portia admits that there's nothing anyone can do to stop Shylock from cutting a pound of flesh from Antonio. So she's not just telling him about mercy—she's begging him to be merciful. How does knowing that objective affect how you read the speech?

Gut check: Whose side are you on, if any? Portia is pleading for "mercy." Shylock "craves the law." Whose argument is more compelling to you? Why?

Put yourself in Shylock's shoes. He got ripped off and insulted by this Antonio dude, and then his daughter ran away to be with one of Antonio's buddies. He has a contract with Antonio with clear terms: Money or Flesh.

Put yourself in Portia's shoes. Her fiancée is about to get carved up, probably killed (Shylock specifically requests that the pound of flesh be taken from Antonio's chest). As a woman, she doesn't have a lot of power in Venetian society, so she's pretending to be a male lawyer in order to save this person she's close to.

Pretend you're a mediator who has finally showed up. (You were running late because you were stuck in a gondola—jam!)

What would you do to resolve this dispute? What's a fair way to settle the conflict? Is there any way to give everyone what they *really* want—not just what they say they want?



The Shakespeare

PORTIA

Is your name Shylock?

SHYLOCK

Shylock is my name.

PORTIA

Of a strange nature is the suit you follow. Yet in such rule that the Venetian law Cannot impugn you as you do proceed.— You stand within his danger, do you not?

ANTONIO

Ay, so he says.

PORTIA

Do you confess the bond?

ANTONIO

I do.

PORTIA

Then must the Jew be merciful.

SHYLOCK

On what compulsion must I? tell me that.

PORTIA

The quality of mercy is not strain'd, It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes The thronéd monarch better than his crown. His scepter shows the force of temporal power, The attribute to awe and majesty, Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings; But mercy is above this scepter'd 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 'against the merchant there.

SHYLOCK

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

The Translation

PORTIA

Is your name Shylock?

SHYLOCK

Shylock is my name.

PORTIA

Your case is most unusual, though the Venetian law can't stop you from proceeding.—(to ANTONIO) He has a claim on you, correct?

ANTONIO

Yes, so he says.

PORTIA

Do you acknowledge the contract?

ANTONIO

Yes, I do.

PORTIA

Then the Jew must show you mercy.

SHYLOCK

Why do I have to do that? Tell me.

PORTIA

No one shows mercy because he has to. It just happens, the way gentle rain drops on the ground. Mercy is a double blessing. It blesses the one who gives it and the one who receives it. It's strongest in the strongest people. It looks better in a king than his own crown looks on him. The king's scepter represents his earthly power, the symbol of majesty, the focus of royal authority. But mercy is higher than the scepter. It's enthroned in the hearts of kings, a quality of God himself. Kingly power seems most like God's power when the king mixes mercy with justice. So although justice is your plea, Jew, consider this. Justice won't save our souls. We pray for mercy, and this same prayer teaches us to show mercy to others as well. I've told you this to make you give up this case. If you pursue it, this strict court of Venice will need to carry out the sentence against the merchant there.

SHYLOCK

I don't ask for mercy for my decisions. I want the law, the penalty, and the fulfillment of my contract.