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 A MICHAEL RADFORD film AL PACINO JEREMY IRONS JOSEPH FIENNES LYNN COLLINS **WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S "THE MERCHANT OF VENICE"**
 ZULEIKHA ROBINSON KRIS MARSHALL CHARLIE COX HEATHER GOLDENHERSH MACKENZIE CROOK Supervising Art Director JON BUNKER Make Up and Hair Designer ANN BUCHANAN
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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *The*
MERCHANT *of*
VENICE

Official Teacher's Guide

On DVD Spring 2005

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TEACHER'S GUIDE

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NOTE TO TEACHERS

The production of a major feature film of one of Shakespeare's most controversial plays, *The Merchant of Venice*, provides literature teachers with an exciting opportunity to get students talking about some of the most difficult issues of our day—the tension between people of different cultures and religions—tensions that are as explosive today as they were in Shakespeare's time. Director Michael Radford decided to take on this play because, he says, "*The Merchant of Venice*, I saw as a piece that basically spoke not just of Jews and Venetians. But, using the epoch of the 1500s, it spoke of a very modern situation—that is, two cultures that don't understand each other in terms of customs and beliefs."

The purpose of this teacher's guide is to provide a variety of contexts in which to read the play and to see the film. The material is flexible and easily adapted to a variety of uses—discussion questions can also be used as essay questions, historical, cultural and artistic contexts can provide ideas for research projects, and acting exercises provide the opportunity for active student involvement and passionate argument.



SYNOPSIS:

The play opens in Venice, where the merchant Antonio tells his friends, "I know not why I am so sad." His friends—Salerio and Salanio, and then Lorenzo and Gratiano—try to cheer him up, but with no success. Antonio's close friend Bassanio informs him that he intends to seek an heiress's hand in marriage, but needs money to do so. Antonio, wanting to please Bassanio, offers to borrow 3,000 ducats on his behalf to help his suit (he has no ready money since his wealth is all invested in merchant ships that have not yet returned to Venice with their goods).

The scene shifts to the play's other locale, a fabulous place called Belmont, where a rich, dead father controls the fate of his daughter Portia. According to the terms of her father's will, Portia must accept as her husband the first man who can solve a riddle and choose the right one from among three caskets—ornamental boxes—of gold, silver and lead. The lucky choice holds the portrait of Portia within. Those who choose incorrectly must leave Belmont at once and agree never to marry. Suitors come from afar to engage in this contest, but the only man Portia wishes to marry, she tells her servant Nerissa, is a Venetian named Bassanio.

The scene returns to Venice, where Bassanio visits a Jewish moneylender, Shylock, and persuades him to lend the 3,000 ducats. Antonio has agreed to be bound for him in case of forfeiture. Antonio and Shylock despise each other: Antonio, because Shylock lends money at interest; Shylock, because Antonio spurns him like a dog and spits on him in the street. The "merry" bond to which the two men agree is that if the money is not repaid by the day specified, Shylock may cut off a pound of Antonio's flesh. Antonio is confident that his treasure-laden ships will return to Venice in time to repay the loan.

Meanwhile, Shylock's clownish servant Launcelot Gobbo tells his father, old Gobbo, that he wishes to leave Shylock and serve Bassanio. Bassanio agrees to take him and instructs his servants to prepare for a dinner to which Shylock has been invited. Shylock's daughter, Jessica, gives a love letter to Launcelot to pass on to Lorenzo, informing him that she will escape Shylock's house and elope with him, disguised as a boy. When Shylock leaves home to join Bassanio and his friends for dinner, he is unaware that he takes his final leave of his daughter. That evening, Lorenzo, along with Gratiano and Salerio, helps Jessica escape—carrying away Shylock's money and jewels.

In Belmont, high-born suitors have come to try for Portia's hand. The Prince of Morocco chooses gold, which is the wrong casket, and leaves defeated. He is followed by the Spanish Prince of Aragon, who incorrectly chooses the silver casket.

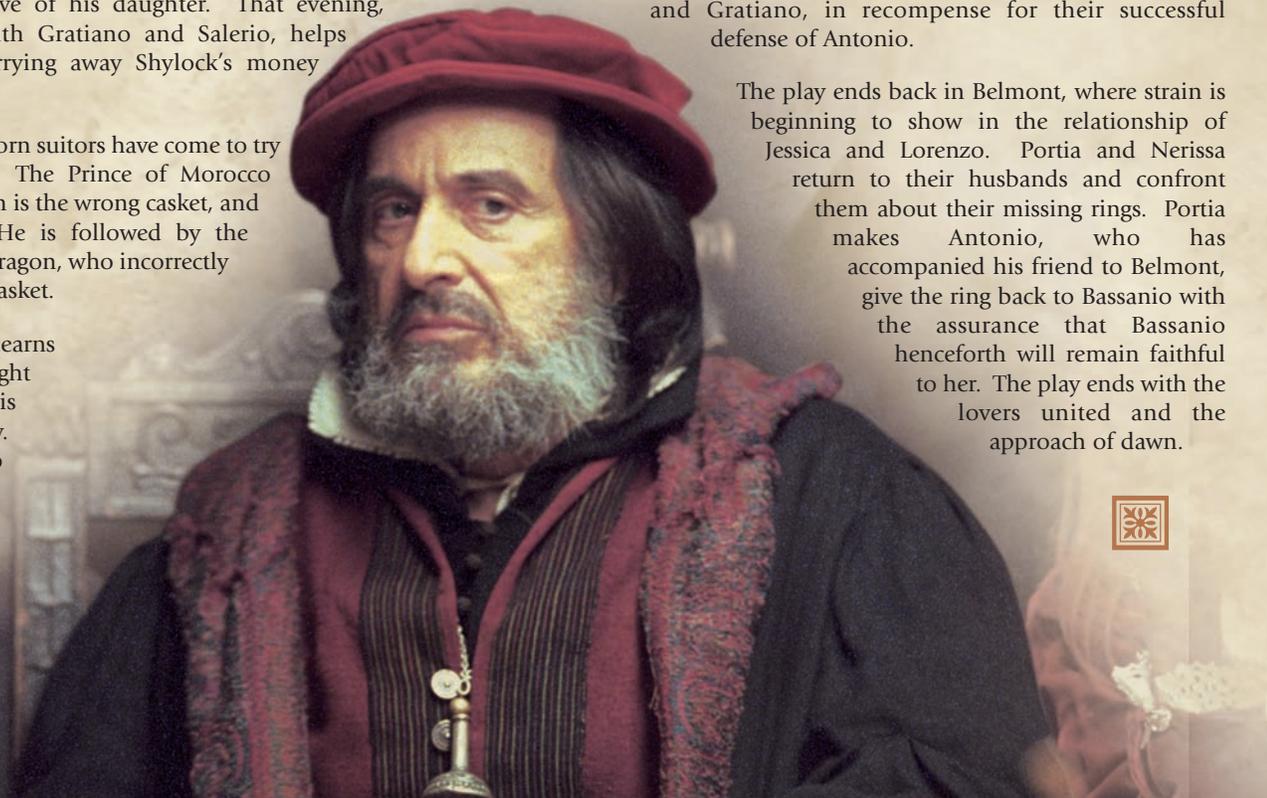
In Venice, Shylock learns of his daughter's flight and the loss of his jewels and money. Baited by Salerio and Salanio about

his losses, and having learned from a fellow Jew, Tubal, of Antonio's recent losses by sea, he swears revenge and challenges his Christian tormentors in a speech that famously begins "I am a Jew."

Bassanio arrives in Belmont and, to Portia's relief and joy, chooses the lead casket. To seal their union, Portia gives Bassanio a ring and warns him never to lose it or give it away, and he assures her that he won't. Bassanio's friend Gratiano agrees to marry Portia's servant Nerissa and receives a ring from her. News arrives from Venice that Antonio has lost his ships and forfeited the bond, and that Shylock, insisting on his pound of flesh, has had Antonio arrested. Portia urges Bassanio to return to Venice to support his friend and then determines to disguise herself and go there herself, along with a disguised Nerissa. She asks the newly arrived Jessica and Lorenzo to look after her house until she returns.

The scene now shifts to a crowded courtroom in Venice, where Shylock is urged by the court to accept money in lieu of a pound of Antonio's flesh. He refuses, and when asked why, reminds the Venetians of their hypocrisy: they own slaves, and if challenged as to why they don't set them free or marry them to their children, they will say "The slaves are ours." Shylock insists the same holds true for the pound of Antonio's flesh, which is now his. Portia arrives, disguised as a lawyer (with Nerissa as her clerk) and is permitted by the Duke of Venice to take charge of the case. She asks Shylock to show mercy and take twice the money, but he refuses. She watches as Antonio bids farewell to Bassanio—telling him to describe to Portia his sad end and to let her be judge of "whether Bassanio had not once a love." She then orders Shylock to cut the pound of Antonio's flesh, but as he is poised to do so stops him with the warning that if he spills even a drop of Antonio's blood, his goods and lands will be confiscated, according to Venetian law. Shylock is defeated, and as he prepares to leave the court Portia says that there is a law in Venice that punishes aliens with death for threatening the life of a citizen. Shylock will be spared only if he agrees to convert to Christianity and give half his wealth to Antonio, who will use it to lend money at no interest. The remaining half must be promised to Jessica and Lorenzo upon Shylock's death. Shylock agrees and departs. Before leaving Venice, Portia and Nerissa succeed in cajoling the rings from their unsuspecting husbands, Bassanio and Gratiano, in recompense for their successful defense of Antonio.

The play ends back in Belmont, where strain is beginning to show in the relationship of Jessica and Lorenzo. Portia and Nerissa return to their husbands and confront them about their missing rings. Portia makes Antonio, who has accompanied his friend to Belmont, give the ring back to Bassanio with the assurance that Bassanio henceforth will remain faithful to her. The play ends with the lovers united and the approach of dawn.



COMEDY, TRAGEDY, OR PROBLEM PLAY?

From the very beginning, *The Merchant of Venice* has uncomfortably straddled the boundary between comedy and tragedy. Shakespeare wrote the play around 1596. When it was registered for publication the entry described it as “a book of the Merchant of Venice or otherwise called The Jew of Venice” as if it were already unclear whether this was Antonio’s or Shylock’s story. The title page of the first edition of the play in 1600 didn’t do much to clarify matters, dodging the comedy vs. tragedy question in favor of calling it a “most excellent history” and going on to emphasize both the “extreme cruelty of Shylock the Jew toward the said merchant in cutting a just pound of his flesh” and “the obtaining of Portia by the choice of the three caskets.” In 1623, the comedy classification became canonical, when Heminges and Condell placed it among the comedies in the First Folio of Shakespeare’s work.

Critics still argue about whether the play tilts toward comic harmony or tragic dissonance. Among those who have seen in the play an expression of sunny comedy is Harley Granville-Barker, who claimed in 1930 that there “is no more reality in Shylock’s bond and the Lord of Belmont’s will than in *Jack and the Beanstalk*,” and concludes that “the play ends, pleasantly, and with formality, as a fairy tale should.” Critics in this camp point to the multiple marriages with which the play ends, the triumph of mercy over law, and the overcoming of the traditional comic blocking figure, Shylock. Within this view, the play is one of simple oppositions: Jew and Christian; law and mercy; false bonds and true ones; Venice and Belmont.

This benign view has been increasingly called into question, for to sustain it so much has to be ignored. Lines like Portia’s racist remark rejecting her African suitor Morocco—“Let all of his complexion woo me so”—must be cut, ignored, or rendered innocuous in footnotes (which desperately try to suggest that “complexion” means “temperament”). Act 3, scene 5 must also be downplayed or cut, as it often is. Here, Lorenzo and Launcelot accuse each other of polluting the commonwealth, one for marrying a Jew, the other for impregnating a black serving-woman. It’s not just matters of race that are smoothed over or ignored by those who want to see the play as a pristine comedy: Antonio’s love for Bassanio—the obvious reason for his sadness—is also overlooked or written off as merely platonic. The position of women in

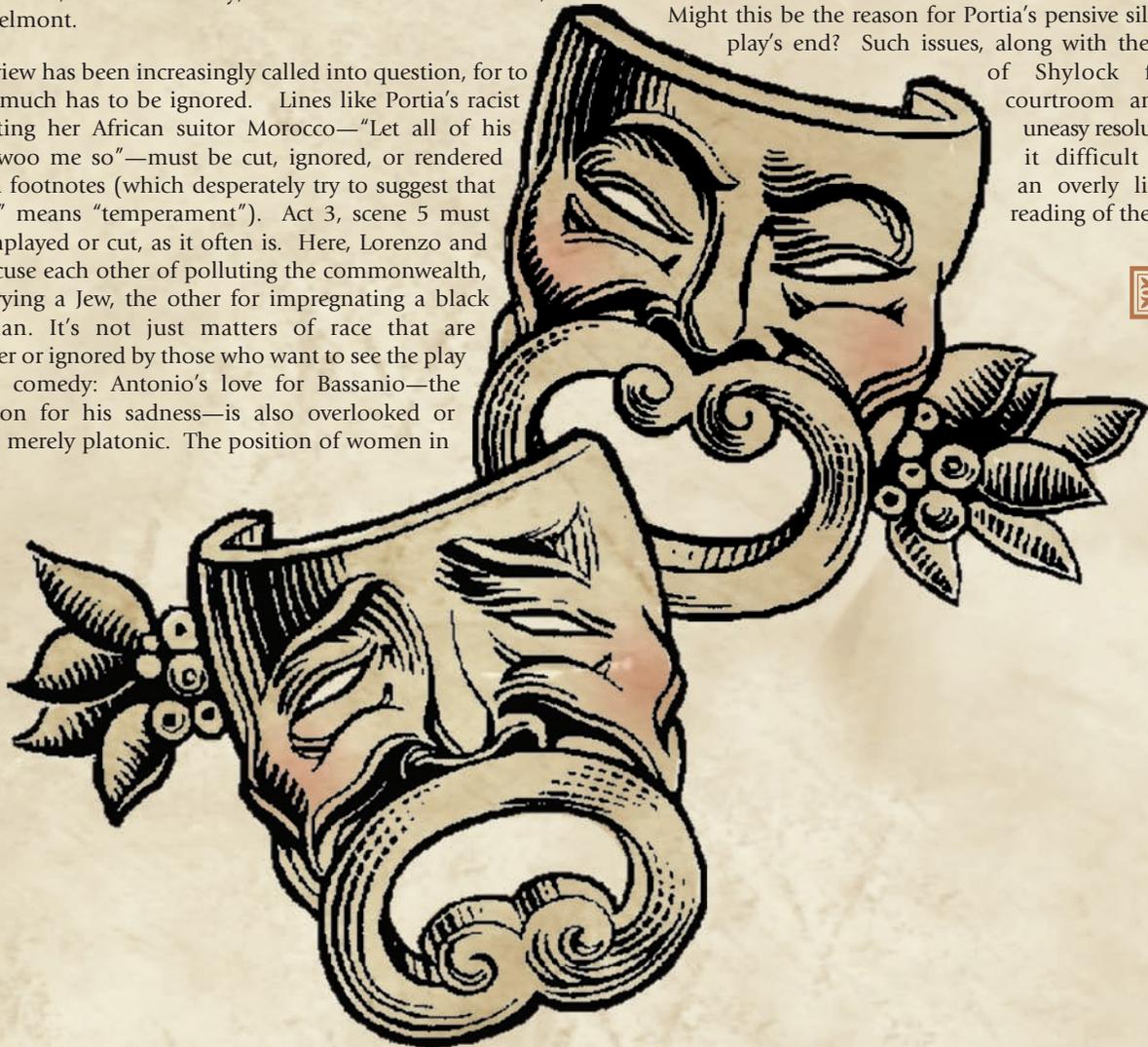
the play is also quite disturbing. Why must every woman in the play dress as a man to obtain her desires? How do the lively women of the opening acts become submissive or silent at the end? Why does the play end with Gratiano’s dirty joke at Nerissa’s expense?

Also ignored in the argument for unsullied comedy is the treatment of Shylock. Especially in a post-Holocaust world, it’s difficult to see any comedy in the humiliation, mockery, and forced conversion of a Jew. Even in the late nineteenth century there were many who felt that the play succeeded better as tragedy than comedy, and the influential stage productions of Edwin Booth and Henry Irving ended prematurely and on a tragic note upon Shylock’s departure, defeated, at the end of the trial scene.

In Shakespeare’s festive comedies, from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to *As You Like It*, the action moves from city to country and back to city. The green world is a place where conflicts caused by the social dislocations and harsh laws of the urban world can be worked out. Departing from this model, *The Merchant of Venice* ends in Belmont, not Venice. Is this because the world of Venice is simply too dark and disturbing or because the oppositions between the two worlds turn out to be false ones, and that Belmont, once the surface is scratched, is not much different from Venice? Are the marriages made in Belmont love matches, or are Bassanio, Lorenzo and Gratiano—spendthrifts in the past—merely hedging their bets against future lean times by assuring wealth through marriage?

Might this be the reason for Portia’s pensive silence at the play’s end? Such issues, along with the departure

of Shylock from the courtroom and Act 5’s uneasy resolution, make it difficult to accept an overly lighthearted reading of the play.



SHAKESPEARE'S SOURCES

Shakespeare combined two sources in creating *The Merchant of Venice*, one for the flesh-bond story, the other for the caskets scenes. The story of the pound of flesh most immediately derives from Giovanni Fiorentino's collection *Il Pecorone* [*The Simpleton*], published in Italy in 1558. Many of its plot elements are familiar to those who know Shakespeare's story. A young Venetian man pursues a mysterious, intelligent, and beautiful woman in Belmont, who has offered herself and her possessions to the first man who can "possess" her. The young man, Giannetto, has been adopted by Ansaldo, a rich man who gives him the wealth and ship he needs to make his suit to the lady. He sails to the island and is feasted by the lady, who then invites him to take a drink before going to bed with her. The drink is drugged, and he falls asleep immediately. On his second attempt events follow the same pattern. Giannetto returns to Ansaldo, who has now invested much of his wealth in Giannetto's suits, and for the third try Ansaldo borrows the money from a Jewish money-lender. Giannetto goes to the island and succeeds the third time (with help from the lady's servant), but forgets to repay Ansaldo's bond on time. The benefactor now owes the Jew a pound of flesh. The heroine, dressed as a lawyer, saves the day, triumphing over the Jew by pointing out that in cutting that pound he is forbidden to shed a drop of blood. The lawyer also persuades Giannetto to give her a ring his lady had given him, and the lady presents him with the ring when he returns to Belmont. Ansaldo returns to Belmont with Giannetto, and marries the lady's servant, who had appeared in the courtroom disguised as the lawyer's clerk. The flesh-bond story at the heart of this tale is an old one and was found in a variety of contemporary versions, including Alexander Silvayn's *The Orator*—"Of a Jew, who would for his debt have a pound of the flesh of a Christian"—which had just been translated into English.

In *Il Pecorone* the heroine could only be won by a man who succeeded in spending a night with her, but she used drugged wine to fend off all wooers,



including the hero (until, on his third attempt, he was warned not to drink the wine). Shakespeare rejected this bed trick, with its roots in the story of Odysseus and Circe, in favor of the more complex casket story, which he adapted from Richard Robinson's English translation of the *Gesta Romanorum*. In this source it is a princess who successfully chooses between the gold, silver, and lead caskets in order to marry an emperor's son.

The two strands of the plot have deep anthropological and psychological dimensions, which lend a good deal of complexity to the play. Sigmund Freud seized upon the casket scenes as an example of the symbolic overcoming of death and the death wish: "In this way," Freud writes, "man overcomes death, which he has recognized intellectually. No greater triumph of wish-fulfillment is conceivable" (*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London, 1958), vol.12, pp. 291-301).

And others have seen in the threatened cut of a pound of a Christian's flesh a threat of circumcision or castration—underscored by the Jew's lines in Silvayn's *The Orator* about cutting the Christian's "privy members." (It's worth noting that not until Act 4 do we learn that the site of Shylock's cut will be from near Antonio's heart, where, as St. Paul writes in the New Testament, Christians are symbolically circumcised).

All this is to suggest that the plot elements are ancient and richly resonant, and reinforce the play's fascination with desire, conversion, and wish fulfillment.



THE MERCHANT OF VENICE IN FILM

There has never before been a full-length feature film of the play, despite the fact that, after *Hamlet*, no play by Shakespeare has been staged more frequently. Before the sound era in film there were nine filmed versions of the play, dating back to the first, a now lost two-minute short made in France in 1902. An American version in 1908 ran to ten minutes, and nine minutes of a 1910 Italian version survive—the first to be shot on location in Venice. It was recently released by Milestone Film and Video as a segment of *Silent Shakespeare*, and is worth comparing with the current film for how it uses the Venetian setting. Two other silent film versions are worthy of note: a thirty-three minute French version starring Harry Baur as Shylock (who, ironically, would later be tortured by the Gestapo) and a sixty-four minute German version, starring the leading actor Werner Krauss.

With the advent of television, the BBC offered a ninety-minute version shortly after World War II in 1947, another, not preserved, in 1955, and a memorable one in 1972, starring Maggie Smith as Portia. This was followed in 1980 by the televised BBC version produced by Jonathan Miller—his second attempt, following his 1974 version for American television that starred Laurence Olivier and Joan Plowright. Sadly, Orson Welles, who worked on a version in which he played a sympathetic Shylock, never finished it, though footage survives. The most recent version—again for television, was the 1999 National Theatre production directed by Trevor Nunn and starring Henry Goodman as Shylock.

PLAYING SHYLOCK

**Charles Macklin, 1741, Drury Lane Theatre, London
(Kitty Clive as Portia).**

Macklin is credited with reinventing the role and restoring the play to popularity. Alexander Pope said of his performance: "This is the Jew that Shakespeare drew." His was a dark and malevolent Shylock, one who played the part with "a forcible and terrifying ferocity." Paradoxically, Macklin's Shylock raised the question of Christian anti-Semitism, even as it provoked it. In the words of one spectator, "It cannot be denied that the sight of this Jew is more than sufficient to arouse once again in a mature man all the prejudices of his childhood against this race." It could not have been easy for Kitty Clive, a notable comedienne, to play against Macklin, and she incongruously emphasized the comic side of Portia, even in the trial scene.

**Edmund Kean, 1814, Drury Lane Theatre, London
(Miss Smith as Portia).**

Samuel Coleridge said of Edmund Kean, the greatest actor of the Romantic period, that watching him act was "like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning." According to William Hazlitt, Kean steered clear of the "morose, sullen, inward" aspects of Shylock's character, offering a more naturalistic and sympathetic portrayal than his predecessors. The highlight of his performance was the trial scene: "his fiendish eagerness ... Then, his trembling anxiety to recover what he had before refused; his sordid abjectness, as he finds himself foiled at every turn," and in the end, his "withering sneer, hardly concealing the crushed heart."

**Henry Irving, 1879, Lyceum Theatre, London
(Ellen Terry as Portia).**

Irving played up Shylock's fundamental dignity, which struck contemporaries as both "novel and unexpected." Along with Macklin's, his is arguably the most influential Shylock. As one reviewer put it, "here is a man whom none can despise, who can raise emotions both of pity and of fear, and make us Christians thrill with a retrospective sense of shame." Irving played up the tragic elements of the role, and saw "Shylock as the type of a persecuted race; almost the only gentleman in the play, and most ill-used." Ellen Terry's Portia broke from the prim model of many of her predecessors in the role and some found shocking her forwardness in taking Bassanio "by the hand, almost in an embrace, with all the unrestrained fondness which is conceivable only after he had actually won her."

**Lawrence Olivier, 1970, National Theatre and Old Vic, London
(Joan Plowright as Portia).**

This performance is better known from its televised version of 1973, now available on video. Olivier's Shylock is a financier in a nasty late Victorian world. His was a Jew desperately imitating upper-

crust Christians in dress, mannerisms and especially hyper-correct pronunciation, all in a desire for acceptance. Joan Plowright had the unenviable task of playing Portia, as one critic put it, as "a new rich, snobby spinster ... utterly indifferent to the events taking place around her." Yet the subsequent televised production allowed her to bring out in the trial scene a character who was, in one critic's words, neither "radiant nor sentimental," but who pointed the way to a time in which it would be possible for a woman to actually be a lawyer, not just masquerade as one.

**Antony Sher, 1987, Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon
(Deborah Findley as Portia).**

Antony Sher eschewed the penchant for turn-of-the-century settings, rejecting an Eastern European Jew with a Yiddish-inflected lilt, in favor of a "Turkish Jew" with "a Turkish accent," thereby drawing attention to Shylock's foreign nature. Sher's Shylock, a sympathetic, energetic, and often entertaining stranger, was literally spat upon and kicked. Deborah Findley's Portia was, in one critic's summation, a tactless and "tart astringent figure constantly boxing people's ears." Rather than sidestepping the racism in the play, Findley conveyed it powerfully; as one critic observed, "she visibly shudders when Morocco touches her." She was highly praised for playing "Portia as nasty as she ought to be but so rarely is."

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Compare Al Pacino's portrayal of Shylock with the preceding illustrations of earlier Shylocks from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. What does Pacino bring to the role? How is he interpreting the character? What are his particular strengths? What about his appearance? What aspects of the character come through less well in his portrayal? How will Al Pacino's Shylock be remembered, and how does it fit within the traditions established by these forebears? What of Lynn Collins' Portia?
2. If you were to direct the play, how would you want Shylock to be played? What aspects of the character, and of Shakespeare's text, would you emphasize? How would you handle setting and costuming?

ASSIGNMENT:

Research these and other major players of Shylock and Portia, consulting the chronological production list in Charles Edelman, ed., *The Merchant of Venice. Shakespeare in Production* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. xvi-xxii and H. H. Furness, ed., *A New Variorum Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott Co., 1888), pp. 370-385. See also James C. Bulman, *The Merchant of Venice: Shakespeare in Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991) and the performance history in any modern edition of the play.

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS FOR THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

1. The idea of Venice in Shakespeare's England

It's unlikely that Shakespeare ever visited Venice, but he was sufficiently fascinated by its myths and history to set two of his greatest plays there, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. The Venetian Republic was renowned in Shakespeare's day for its political independence, its relaxed sexual morals and love of pleasure, its tolerance of different nationalities and religions, and most of all its great wealth.

Shakespeare could have learned a great deal about Venice and its Jewish community from travelers and published travel accounts. One of the earliest is that of William Thomas, *The History of Italy* (London, 1549), who describes Jewish usury—taking interest at fifteen percent—a rate that enriches both the authorities and the Jews:

It is almost incredible what gain the Venetians receive by the usury of the Jews, both privately and in common. For in every city the Jews keep open shops of usury, taking gages of ordinary for fifteen in the hundred by the year, and if at the year's end the gage be not redeemed it is forefeet, or at the least done away to a great disadvantage, by reason whereof the Jews are out of measure wealthy in those parts.

Another early visitor was Laurence Aldersey, whose "Account of Venice" provides insight into the customs of the Jews. It was written in 1581 and printed in Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation* (3 volumes, London 1598-1600).

The number of Jews is there thought to be 1,000, who dwell in a certain place of the city and have also a place to which they resort to pray, which is called the Jews' Synagogue. They all and their offspring use to wear red caps (for so they are commanded) because there they may be known from other men. For my further knowledge of these people, I went into their synagogue upon a Saturday, which is their Sabbath day, and I found them in their service or prayers, very devout. They receive the Five Books of Moses and honor them by carrying them about their church, as the papists do their cross. Their synagogue is in form round and the people sit around it, and in the midst there is a place for him

that reads to the rest. As for their apparel, all of them wear a large white lawn over their garments which reaches from their head down to the ground. The psalms they sing as we do, having no image nor using any manner of idolatry. Their error is that they believe not in Christ, nor yet receive the New Testament.

An even more vivid contemporary account of Venetian Jewry is offered by Thomas Coryate, in his travel narrative *Coryat's Crudities* (London, 1611):

I was at a place where the whole fraternity of the Jews dwelleth together, which is called the ghetto, being an island: for it is enclosed round about with water. It is thought there are of them in all betwixt five and six thousand. They are distinguished and discerned from the Christians by the habits on their heads; for some of them do wear hats and those red. . . . They have divers synagogues in their ghetto, at the least seven, where all of them, both men, women, and children, do meet together upon their Sabbath, which is Saturday, to the end to do their devotion and to serve God in their kind . . .

In the room where they celebrate their divine service, no women sit but have a loft or gallery proper to themselves only, where I saw many Jewish women, whereof some were as beautiful as I ever saw, and so gorgeous in their apparel, jewels, and chains of gold, and rings adorned with precious stones, that some of our English countesses do scarce exceed them . . . They are very religious in two things only, and no more, in that they worship no images, and that they keep their Sabbath so strictly that upon that day they will neither buy nor sell, nor do any secular, profane, or irreligious exercise (I would to God our Christians would imitate the Jews herein), no, not so much as dress their victuals, which is always done the day before, but dedicate themselves to the strict worship of God. . . .

Truly, it is a most lamentable case for a Christian to consider the damnable estate of these miserable Jews, in that they reject the true Messiah and Savior of their souls, hoping to be saved rather by the observation of these Mosaical ceremonies (the date whereof was fully expired at Christ's incarnation) than by the merits of the Savior of the world, without whom all mankind shall perish. And as pitiful as it is to see that few of them living in Italy are converted to the Christian religion. For this I understand is the main impediment to their conversion. All their goods are confiscated as soon as they embrace Christianity.



THE VENETIAN GHETTO

Because of their central role in economic exchange—in foreign trade, loans to the state, and small-scale money-lending—Jews were seen in late medieval and early modern Europe as a necessary evil; they could neither be tolerated nor expelled. Jews had been lending money to Venice to fight its wars since the late fourteenth century. Venetian authorities, like others in Europe, felt uneasy about the close cohabitation of Christians and Jews, so they passed laws forbidding sexual relations between them.

The origins of the Venetian Ghetto can be traced back to the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, when Pope Innocent III decreed that Jews should be forbidden from holding public office, should have clothing that distinguished them from Christians, and should not appear in public during Easter week. It was the responsibility of Christian magistrates to restrict Jewish economic activity. Segregation was seen as a simple way of enforcing these laws in Venice and elsewhere (Jews had been living in restricted quarters in cities like Prague since the late thirteenth century). Jews had been permitted to live in Venice in 1509, and soon secured the right to practice money-lending in return for financial payments to the state. They were tolerated as a source of revenue for the government and as providers of cheap credit for poor Christians. Unlike what we find in Shakespeare's play, Venetian Jews were forbidden to make large-scale commercial loans.

In 1516, after rejecting the idea of relegating the Jews to a small island called Giudecca, the Venetian authorities designated an area called the *ghetto nuovo*, or "new foundry," named after the copper

and bronze foundry there, as the locale where all Jews were required to relocate and to live in rented quarters. This is the origin of the now widespread use of the term "ghetto." High walls sealed off access and heavy wooden gates, guarded by Christians, were opened at sunrise and locked at sunset. At its peak, several thousand Jews lived in the Ghetto and a thriving community flourished.

Anti-Jewish actions intensified in the sixteenth-century Catholic Europe, part of a larger Counter-Reformation reaction by the Church. Copies of the Talmud were burned in 1553 and Jews who had converted to Christianity, and whose conversion was suspect, were persecuted. In 1555 Pope Paul IV declared, "Jews were condemned to live in a quarter set apart from the Christians." They also had to wear distinctive garb and were no longer allowed to own real estate. The Venetian Ghetto served as a model for other Italian cities. In the wake of Pope Paul IV's decree, similar restrictions were imposed on Jewish communities in Rome, Siena, Florence, Verona, Padua, and elsewhere in Italy.

Not until 1797, two hundred and eighty years after they had first swung shut on the Jews within, would the wooden gates of the Venetian ghetto be torn down and burned. The gateless Ghetto still stands, a living memorial to the story of Jews in early modern Europe.



CONTEXTS: USURY AND THE JEWS

The bitter conflict between Antonio and Shylock is rooted in their different approaches to money-lending. Shylock hates Antonio because "He lends out money gratis and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice" (1.3.34-35). Shylock knows that he is hated in turn by Antonio and other Christians because he makes an ample living through the practice of usury. He says of Antonio,

He hates our sacred nation, and he rails,
Even there where merchants most do congregate,
On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,
Which he calls interest.
Cursed be my tribe
If I forgive him! (1.3.38-42)

Antonio says, "I oft delivered from his forfeitures / Many that have at times made moan to me" (3.3.22-23). Antonio's refusal to take interest from borrowers is seen in the context of the play as Christian generosity, while Shylock is positioned as a bloodthirsty fiend. However, Christian usury had become business as usual by the time the play was written.

Debates over usury in late medieval and early modern Europe coincided with, and were prompted by, the rise of the banking industry, the discovery of the new world and the growth of overseas markets and trade, all of which depended on money lent at interest. For without loans at interest, trade and exploration were badly impeded. There was general agreement that usury was both wrong and necessary, and had to be regulated. The debates turned on a number of complex questions: Was all money-lending at interest forbidden, as St. Thomas Aquinas had argued, or was it only wrong to lend at exorbitant rates? Did usury depend upon intent? Did it

depend upon risk? Was it permissible to charge interest to the rich, though not to the poor?

Shakespeare's play was written in the midst of debates in England over usury, and the period witnessed a number of important pamphlets on this subject, such as *The Death of Usury* (London, 1594) and *Money Monger, Or the Usurers Almanacke* (London, 1626). After the Act Against Usury passed in 1571, lending at ten percent interest was tolerated and by 1624, the House of Commons struck out of the usury statute the words "that all usury was against the law of God."

Jewish usury was also likened to prostitution, another distasteful, illicit, but seemingly necessary social evil: Samuel Purchas, in *Purchas His Pilgrimage* (London, 1617), writes that the "beastly trade of courtesans and cruel trade of Jews is suffered for gain" in Italy; both "suck from the meanest to be squeezed by the greatest. . . . So well is the rule of Paul observed . . . not to be a lover of filthy lucre, from filthy stews, from filthy Jews." For Jews, however, usury was freely permitted on loans to non-Jews (see Deuteronomy below).

The topic of usury was not merely an academic one for Shakespeare; his own father was charged and fined for lending money at excessive interest—charging twenty pounds interest on loans of eighty and a hundred pounds—and he was fined forty shillings in one of these cases.

The readings that follow offer the much-debated positions in the Bible, which are followed by the pros and cons of usury as set out by Francis Bacon in his *Essays*.

EXODUS 22:25

If thou lend money to my people, that is, to the poor with thee, thou shalt not be as an usurer unto him: ye shall not oppress him with usury.

LEVITICUS 25:35-37

Moreover, if thy brother be impoverished and fallen into decay with thee, thou shalt relieve him and as a stranger and a sojourner, so shall he live with thee. Thou shalt take no usury of him nor vantage, but thou shalt fear thy god, that thy brother may live with thee. Thou shalt not give him thy money to usury, nor lend him thy vituals for increase.

DEUTERONOMY 23:19-20

Thou shalt not give to usury to thy brother, as usury of money, usury of meat, usury of anything that is put to usury. Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury, but thou shalt not lend upon usury unto thy brother, that the Lord God may bless thee in all that thou setteth thine hand to, in the land whither thou goest to possess it.

LUKE 6:30-31

Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods, ask them not again. And as ye would that men should do to you, so do ye to them likewise.

[all quotations are from the Geneva Bible (London, 1560)]

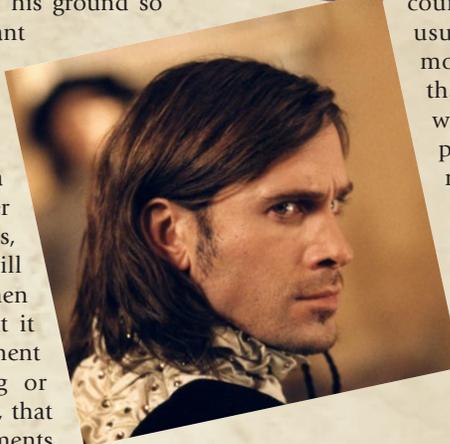
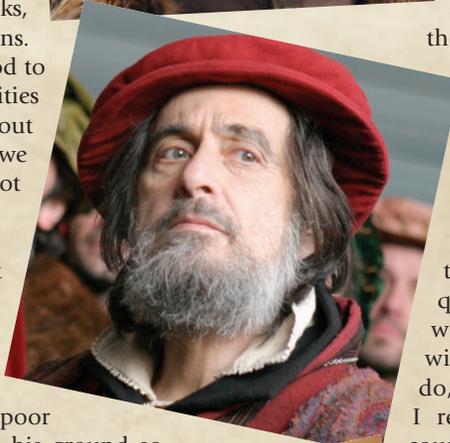


FRANCIS BACON, *ESSAYS* (LONDON, 1626)

"OF USURY"

Many have made witty invectives against usury. They say that it is a pity, the devil should have God's part, which is the tithe. That the usurer is the greatest Sabbath-breaker, because his plough goeth every Sunday. That the usurer is the drone ... That the usurer breaketh the first law, that was made for mankind after the fall. ... That usurers should have orange-tawny bonnets, because they do judaize. That it is against nature for money to beget money; and the like. I say this only: ... since there must be borrowing and lending, and men are so hard of heart, as they will not lend freely, usury must be permitted. Some others have made suspicious and cunning propositions of banks, discovery of men's estates, and other inventions. But few have spoken of usury usefully. It is good to set before us, the incommodities and commodities of usury, that the good, may be either weighed out or culled out; and warily to provide, that while we make forth to that which is better, we meet not with that which is worse.

The discommodities of usury are, First, that it makes fewer merchants. For were it not for this lazy trade of usury, money would not be still, but would in great part be employed upon merchandizing; which is the *vena porta* of wealth in a state. The second, that it makes poor merchants. For, as a farmer cannot husband his ground so well, if he sit at a great rent; so the merchant cannot drive his trade so well, if he sit at great usury. The third is incident to the other two; and that is the decay of customs of kings or states, which ebb or flow, with merchandizing. The fourth, that it bringeth the treasure of a realm, or state, into a few hands. For the usurer being at certainties, and others at uncertainties, at the end of the game, most of the money will be in the box; and ever a state flourisheth, when wealth is more equally spread. The fifth, that it beats down the price of land; for the employment of money, is chiefly either merchandizing or purchasing; and usury waylays both. The sixth, that it doth dull and damp all industries, improvements,



and new inventions, wherein money would be stirring, if it were not for this slug. The last, that it is the canker and ruin of many men's estates; which, in process of time, breeds a public poverty.

On the other side, the commodities of usury are, first, that howsoever usury in some respect hindereth merchandizing, yet in some other it advanceth it; for it is certain that the greatest part of trade is driven by young merchants, upon borrowing at interest; so as if the usurer either call in, or keep back, his money, there will ensue, presently, a great stand of trade. The second is, that were it not for this easy borrowing upon interest, men's necessities would draw upon them a most sudden undoing; in that they would be forced to sell their means (be it lands or goods) far under foot; and so, whereas usury doth but gnaw upon them, bad markets would swallow them quite up. As for mortgaging or pawning, it will little mend the matter: for either men will not take pawns without use; or if they do, they will look precisely for the forfeiture. I remember a cruel moneyed man in the country, that would say, The devil take this usury, it keeps us from forfeitures, of mortgages and bonds. The third and last is, that it is a vanity to conceive, that there would be ordinary borrowing without profit; and it is impossible to conceive, the number of inconveniences that will ensue, if borrowing be cramped. Therefore to speak of the abolishing of usury is idle. All states have ever had it, in one kind or rate, or other.



FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Look at Shylock's retelling the story of Jacob and Laban (1.3.68-87), using Scripture to justify his money-lending (see Genesis 27, 30:25-43). Is his analogy appropriate or inexact? Compare what he says to what the Bible says about usury: do his actions contradict what the Hebrew Bible says?
2. Is the 3,000 ducats that Shylock lends to Antonio usury—that is, lent at interest—if the forfeiture is not money but flesh? What does Shylock lose or gain by such an agreement? See the scenes in which he justifies his "merry sport" (see 1.3.135-63).
3. Antonio says that he never borrows or lends upon interest (1.3.66-67). Why does he make an exception in Bassanio's case? Is he acting out an extreme example of the kind of charity commanded by Luke (above), so that he would even give up his life for his friend? Is he motivated by selflessness or by the desire to bind Bassanio to him in return?
4. To what extent can the attack on Jewish money-lending be seen as a projection by a Christian culture, long ambivalent about charging money at interest, but now doing so, given its necessity in an age that increasingly depended upon the investment of capital?

CONTEXTS: CONVERSION AND INTERMARRIAGE

Antonio's remark upon agreeing to Shylock's "merry" bond—the "Hebrew will turn Christian"—turns out to be prophetic. Shylock is not the only character to convert: his daughter Jessica does so as well upon marrying Lorenzo ("I shall be saved by my husband," she says, "he hath made me a Christian"). One of the most striking things about *The Merchant of Venice* is that in having the defeated Jew convert, Shakespeare departs from the model of his sources.

The urge to convert Jews was especially strong in the sixteenth century, in the aftermath of the Reformation and Counter-reformation, when both Protestants and Catholics could point to Jews who converted to their denominations as proof of the rightness of their faith. For Protestants, especially, the conversion of the Jews was essential, a necessary antecedent to Christ's Second Coming. In London in 1577 Yehudah Menda publicly converted from Judaism, his baptism presided over by the influential Protestant writer, John Foxe. Foxe subsequently published the conversion tract, *A Sermon Preached at the Christening of a Certain Jew*, at London (London, 1578). The two passages from Foxe's text excerpted below reflect the deeply conflicted nature of the Christian desire for the conversion of the Jews, and even for the possibility that Jewish national or racial traits can be eliminated through baptism.

Catholics, too, celebrated the public conversion of Jews. An English Catholic visiting Rome in Shakespeare's day, Gregory Martin, described in an unpublished tract how Rome's Jews were required to attend conversion sermons, and converts were enlisted to argue with the stubborn Jews. The end result, Martin writes, was that "now one,

and now another, and sometimes a whole household, sometimes of the rabbis themselves, feel compunction and remorse. ... And so signifying their mind, they are received and baptized." Rome's Jews complained that those who allegedly converted were Christian actors who were employed to impersonate converting Jews.

The pressure to convert Jews was accompanied by a fear that their conversion was insincere, that Jews would apostatize. As one seventeenth-century English writer, Thomas Calvert, put it: "When a mouse shall catch a cat, then a Jew converted to be a Christian will remain a firm Christian." The excerpt below from Anthony Wood recounts a story from the early seventeenth-century in England in which an Italian Jew deceived Christians into falsely thinking he embraced Christ.

Conversion also raised questions about the fate of the children of mixed unions—a subject nervously discussed both in terms of Jewish-Christian and white-black unions in Act 3, scene 5. This scene, so distasteful to contemporary sensibilities, is invariably cut in productions, including the film, no doubt in part for this reason. As the excerpt from Edward Coke below indicates, there were old laws, still on the books in England, against intermarriage.

Conversion thus raised a series of questions, all of which Shakespeare addresses, directly or obliquely: When Jews convert, does any trace or residue of their Jewishness remain? If so, are Jews a different nation or race—and could they fully be citizens? Are Jews sincere in their conversions?

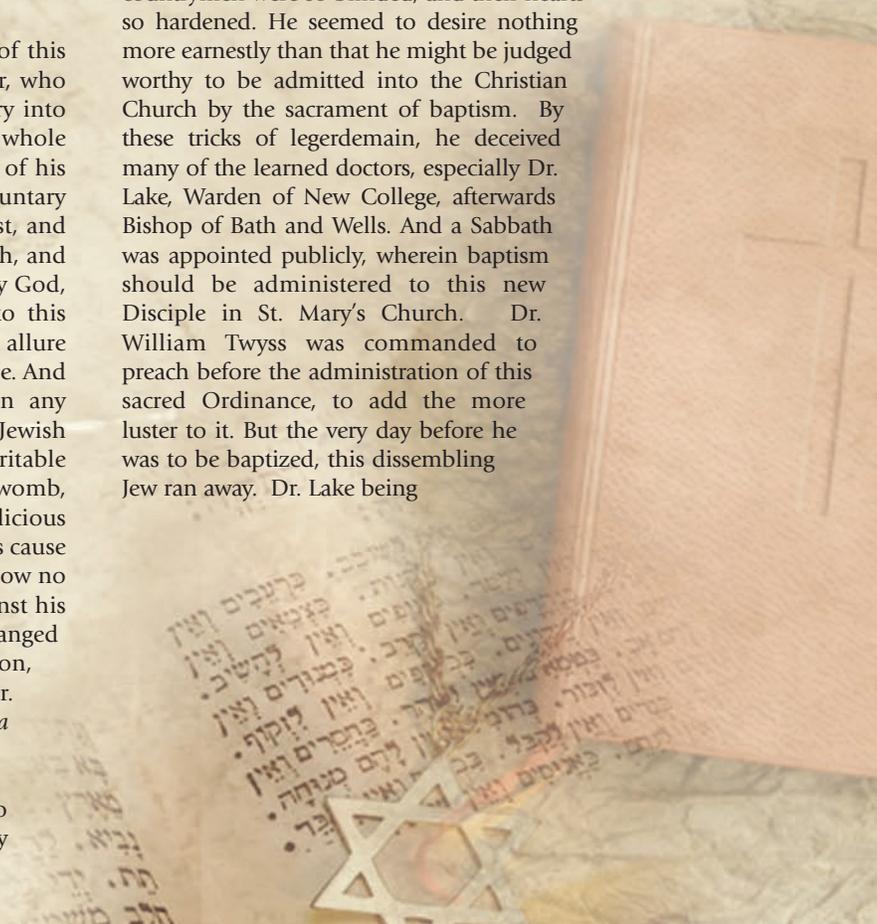
TEXTS:

I find that by the ancient law of England, that if any Christian man did marry with a woman that was a Jew, or a Christian woman that married with a Jew, it was felony, and the party so offending should be burnt alive. —Edward Coke, *The Third Part of the Institutes of the Laws of England* (London 1644).

I do from the bottom of my heart rejoice in the behalf of this person, for whose cause we are as now met here together, who being transported from out the uttermost parts of Barbary into England, and conversant amongst us, by the space of five whole years, renouncing now at the last the natural contumacy of his native country, doth with so earnest bent affection of voluntary will, cheerfully desire to become a member of Jesus Christ, and to be made partaker of his holy congregation through faith, and baptism. And withal I most humbly beseech the Almighty God, that he will not only vouchsafe his gracious increase to this glorious work begun with this Israelite stranger, but also to allure the whole remnant of the circumcised Race, by this example. And this is that unbelief, which being more noisome than any pestilent botch, may rightly & properly be called the Jewish infidelity, and seemeth after a certain manner their inheritable disease, who are after a certain sort, from their mothers womb, naturally carried through perverse frowardness, into all malicious hatred, & contempt of Christ & his Christians. And for this cause especially, I suppose it came to pass that ... God ... could now no longer forebear their abominable cruelty, committed against his well-beloved son, whom they traitorously murdered and hanged on tree, but must needs avenge him upon the whole nation, and root out the remnant of the whole race altogether. —John Foxe, *A Sermon Preached at the Christening of a Certain Jew*, at London (London, 1578).

Joseph Barnet, a Jew both by nation and superstition, who read Hebrew to divers young students, had cunningly

pretended and held forth that he embraced and believed Jesus to be the true Messiah. He professed that he was seriously and heartily grieved for his former blasphemies against him. He mournfully bewailed that the eyes of his brethren and countrymen were so blinded, and their hearts so hardened. He seemed to desire nothing more earnestly than that he might be judged worthy to be admitted into the Christian Church by the sacrament of baptism. By these tricks of legerdemain, he deceived many of the learned doctors, especially Dr. Lake, Warden of New College, afterwards Bishop of Bath and Wells. And a Sabbath was appointed publicly, wherein baptism should be administered to this new Disciple in St. Mary's Church. Dr. William Twyss was commanded to preach before the administration of this sacred Ordinance, to add the more luster to it. But the very day before he was to be baptized, this dissembling Jew ran away. Dr. Lake being



informed thereof, sent some on horseback, others on foot to pursue him, who overtaking him, brought him back, though against his will, to Oxford, where, on his own accord, he professed that he was returned to his old Judaism, which he had foresworn: he jeered at Christ, and despised baptism, for he had now filled his purse. Hereupon Dr. Twyss laid aside the sermon which he had prepared,

and instead thereof, preached an excellent sermon upon occasion of Barnet's revolt; wherein he showed God's just judgment upon that perverse nation and people, whom he had given up to a reprobate sense even to this very day. —Anthony Wood, *The History and Antiquities of the University of Oxford*, 2 vols., ed. J. Gutch (Oxford, 1792-96).

QUESTIONS ON CONVERSION

1. In what ways does the conversion of a Jewish man differ from the conversion of a Jewish woman? To what extent does circumcision make a difference—insofar as a sign of their religion is inscribed on the flesh? Why can this play, and other contemporary ones, like Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, imagine a converted Jewish woman marrying a Christian, but not a converted Jewish man?
2. Is Shylock's conversion sincere? How might we tell? What evidence does the play or film offer in support of this? How can we tell since it doesn't take place onstage?
3. Will Jessica and Lorenzo's offspring be somehow tainted by her Jewishness? What aspects of her traditions—and her Jewishness—will she pass on, if any?
4. Some Christians in Shakespeare's day believed that circumcision made one a Jew. If so, then Shylock's desire to cut a pound of Antonio's flesh can be seen to be a threat to symbolically convert him (ironically fulfilling Paul's words in the New Testament that Christians are circumcised in the heart). Indeed, Shakespeare's sources had specified that the pound of flesh would come from the Christian's "privy members," not his heart. To what extent can Antonio and Shylock's actions in the play be seen as attempts at mutual conversion—and what might this say about the limits of conversion?

CONTEXTS: MALE FRIENDSHIP

From the very outset, *The Merchant of Venice* pits male friendship against the claims of marriage. Antonio's circle of male friends includes a number of men—Bassanio, Gratiano, Salerio, Lorenzo, Solanio, but no women. Bassanio's pursuit of Portia, for love or money or both, threatens to weaken the bonds of friendship. For some in the Renaissance, like the philosopher Michel de Montaigne, male friendship is superior to marriage because it offers not the "mad desire" of heterosexual love, but rather "a constant and settled heat, all pleasure and smoothness" (see below). Male friendship can take many forms and this play explores a range of them, including homosocial ties and homosexual longing. Even Shylock has his friend and confidante, Tubal, who goes in search of Jessica in Genoa, a journey that would have been too humiliating and heart-breaking for Shylock to undertake himself. It's such a friend that Francis Bacon has in mind when he writes in his essay "Of Friendship," (from which further passages appear below): "How many things are there which a man cannot, with any face or comeliness, say or do himself? A man can scarce allege his own merits with modesty, much less extol them; a man cannot sometimes brook to supplicate or beg; and a number of the like. But all these things are graceful, in a friend's mouth, which are blushing in a man's own."

Portia is well aware of the close bonds that knit her new husband, Bassanio, to Antonio, and what Antonio says about his love for Bassanio in the courtroom scene can only reinforce her concern that Antonio constitutes something of a threat to her marriage: "Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death, / And when the tale is told, bid her be judge / Whether Bassanio had not once a love" (4.1.271-72). Note that Shakespeare defers the consummation of their marriage until after the second exchange of rings in Act 5—in which Antonio,

who gives Portia's ring back to Bassanio, is bound for Bassanio once more, in a replay of the main plot. He tells Portia that "I'll dare be bound again / My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord / Will nevermore break faith advisedly" (5.1.251-53). Only after the marital bond supplants that of male friendship can the comedy come to a close. And yet in the play's final lines, homosexual desire is obliquely raised again, as Gratiano fantasizes about making love to his wife, Nerissa, while she's dressed as a boy.

TEXTS:

Concerning marriage, besides that it is a covenant which hath nothing free but the entrance, the continuance being forced and constrained, depending elsewhere than from our will, and a match ordinarily concluded to other ends: a thousand strange knots are therein commonly to be unknit, able to break the web, and trouble the whole course of a lively affection. Whereas in friendship, there is no commerce of business depending on the same, but itself. Seeing (to speak truly) that the ordinary sufficiency of women cannot answer this conference and communication, the nurse of this sacred bond, nor seem their minds strong enough to endure the pulling of a knot so hard, so fast, and durable. And truly, if without that, such a genuine and voluntary acquaintance might be contracted, where not only minds that this entire jovissance, but also bodies, a share of the alliance, and where a man might wholly be engaged. It is certain that friendship would thereby be more complete and full. But this sex could never yet by any example attain unto it, and is by ancient schools rejected thence. —Michel de Montaigne, "Of Friendship," *Essays*, trans. John Florio (London, 1603).

MALE FRIENDSHIP

"OF FRIENDSHIP"

A principal fruit of friendship, is the ease and discharge of the fullness and swellings of the heart, which passions of all kinds do cause and induce. We know diseases of stoppings, and suffocations, are the most dangerous in the body; and it is not much otherwise in the mind; you may take sarza to open the liver, steel to open the spleen, flowers of sulphur for the lungs, castoreum for the brain; but no receipt openeth the heart, but a true friend; to whom you may impart griefs, joys, fears, hopes, suspicions, counsels, and whatsoever lieth upon the heart to oppress it, is a kind of civil shrift or confession....

But one thing is most admirable (wherewith I will conclude this first fruit of friendship), which is, that this communicating of a man's self to his friend, works two contrary effects; for it redoubleth joys, and cutteth griefs in halves. For there is no man, that imparteth his joys to his friend, but he joyeth the more; and no man that imparteth his griefs to his friend, but he grieveth the less. So that it is in truth, of operation upon a man's mind, of like virtue as the alchemists use to attribute to their stone, for man's body; that it worketh all contrary effects, but still to the good and benefit of nature. But yet without praying in aid of alchemists, there is a manifest image of this, in the ordinary course of nature. For in bodies, union strengtheneth and cherisheth any natural action; and on the other side, weakeneth and dulleth any violent impression: and even so it is of minds.



The second fruit of friendship, is healthful and sovereign for the understanding, as the first is for the affections. For friendship maketh indeed a fair day in the affections, from storm and tempests; but it maketh daylight in the understanding, out of darkness, and confusion of thoughts. Neither is this to be understood only of faithful counsel, which a man receiveth from

his friend; but before you come to that, certain it is, that whosoever hath his mind fraught with many thoughts, his wits and understanding do clarify and break up, in the communicating and discoursing with another; he tosseth his thoughts more easily; he marshalleth them more orderly, he seeth how they look when they are turned into words: finally, he waxeth wiser than himself; and that more by an hour's discourse, than by a day's meditation.

After these two noble fruits of friendship (peace in the affections, and support of the judgment), followeth the last fruit; which is like the pomegranate, full of many

kernels; I mean aid, and bearing a part, in all actions and occasions. Here the best way to represent to life the manifold use of friendship, is to cast and see how many things there are, which a man cannot do himself; and then it will appear, that it was a sparing speech of the ancients, to say, that a friend is another himself; for that a friend is far more than himself. —Francis Bacon, *Essays* (London, 1626).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the nature of the bond between Antonio and Bassanio? Is Antonio in love with Bassanio? If so, what kind of love is this? Is it reciprocated? Compare how the relationship is portrayed in the film with how it comes across in the play text.
2. Compare the friendship of Portia and Nerissa with that of the friendship of the men in the play. What are the main differences? Does marriage change the women's friendships in the play?
3. Why does Antonio call himself "a tainted wether [castrated ram] of the flock," that the community can afford to lose? Is Antonio self-dramatizing or narcissistic in his desire that Bassanio be present to witness his death? If so, why? Does the end of the play adequately end the tension caused by the romantic triangle of Portia, Bassanio and Antonio?
4. To what extent does *The Merchant of Venice* support or call into question the claims for friendship set forth in Montaigne? And in Bacon?
5. What does *The Merchant of Venice* say about the incompatibility of friendship and marriage? Is there any place for Antonio in the community that is formed at the end of the play, or is he, as a single man, excluded?
6. Why is the second exchange of rings—this time with Antonio's participation—so crucial to the resolution of the play? What happens when this scene is acted out that doesn't happen on the page?
7. Think about how Jeremy Irons portrays Antonio: what emotions does he project? Does he elicit your sympathy? Does Irons' interpretation of the role suggest that he is in love with Bassanio, and heartbroken about his friend's marriage?
8. See the film *Death in Venice*, directed by Lucchino Visconti with Dirk Bogarde in the lead (1971), adapted from the Thomas Mann novella. Compare this film, also set in Venice, with this *Merchant*. Think particularly about the use of the setting and about the issue of unfulfilled male longing.
9. Given the centrality of bonds between men in the play and film, discuss the roles of Portia, Nerissa and Jessica. Are the women respected, loved, needed by the men? Are the women commodified? Discuss the ending with regard to the idea of romantic "happy endings" for the three couples.

AFTER READING THE PLAY, BEFORE SEEING THE FILM: SUGGESTIONS

1. Write on the board and discuss some key issues in the play.

Intermarriage Anti-Semitism Trade Male friendship Marriage
Usury Conversion Bonds Mercy Revenge

2. Discuss the words and phrases that are used in the play to describe Shylock.

What do these terms reveal about Shylock?

What do they reveal about those who use this language?

devil misbeliever cur inexorable dog wolfish villain
unfeeling man alien inhuman wretch stony adversary

3. Have the class look up in the *Oxford English Dictionary* some key words:

alien Shylock flesh complexion casket forfeiture
mercy hazard merchant creditor bond

AFTER SEEING THE FILM: SUGGESTIONS

COMPARING SCENES IN TEXT AND ON FILM

1. "I am a Jew" (3.1.46)

Since at least the days of Edmund Kean, this has been treated as the central speech of the play. It has been played in various ways, as a call for religious toleration, a plea for sympathy, an assertion of identity, a cold-blooded justification for Shylock's revenge upon Antonio. Its meaning in production depends

upon which words and phrases receive the greatest emphasis. For some, it's the word "affections"; for others, "revenge," "sufferance," "humility," and "Jew." The speech raises a question central to this play and to Shakespeare's work more generally: what is it that defines someone's humanity? What are the things that divide us, despite what we have in common?

ACTIVITIES AND QUESTIONS

1. Have students take turns reading the speech aloud. Have students volunteer to read it quietly and loudly, sneeringly and sincerely.
2. To whom are Shylock's words addressed? Is he provoked into saying these words? How do those within earshot respond? Is Shylock in a calm or distracted mood when he encounters Salerio and Salanio? What do you think of productions that have him bruised and bloodied at this point, having been beaten up by ruffians who harass him offstage?
3. Have students watch the film and discuss how Al Pacino speaks these words, and what his choices and the director's reveal about their interpretation of these lines. Have them discuss Pacino's various gestures and facial expressions as an essential element of his interpretation of this speech.
4. Why is this speech—unlike so many of Shakespeare's most memorable ones—in prose and not verse? What is the effect of the series of questions Shylock asks here? Are they merely rhetorical?
5. Look at John Barton's video "Playing Shakespeare" where David Suchet and Patrick Stewart take turns delivering these lines. What are the differences in their interpretations? Compare them to Al Pacino's delivery of this speech.
6. Look at how this speech is used in the Israeli film *Avanti Populo*, set in the Sinai in the middle of the 1973 war between Israel and Egypt. A captured Egyptian soldier (a conscripted actor) recites these lines to his Jewish captors when they deny him water. It's spoken in English, the only English in the film (for the Egyptians speak Arabic and the Israeli soldiers Hebrew). Consider how, in different contexts, the speech can take on new and unexpected meanings.
7. Shylock's words tap into a long tradition of anti-Semitism and the expulsion, mistreatment, and murder of Jews in Christian Europe from Medieval to modern times. Discuss this speech within the context of the larger history of Jewish-Christian relations.

THE TRIAL SCENE (ACT 4)

This is one of the most gripping scenes in all of Shakespeare. The arrangement of the court is central to this scene.

1. How does Shylock enter, and what are we to make of his props—especially his knife and his scales to weigh Antonio's flesh?
2. How are we to react to Shylock's speech about Venetian hypocrisy: that they keep among them "many a purchased slave" (4.1.90) but would never consider giving them their freedom or marrying them to their children?
3. Does Shylock really intend to cut a pound of Antonio's flesh from the outset of this scene, or does he merely intend to terrify him?
4. What is the effect of the knife-sharpening scene (which in the eighteenth century Macklin did so terrifyingly that a young man reportedly fainted at the sight)?
5. Is Portia's line—"Which is the merchant and which the Jew"—supposed to be funny?
6. How much does it matter that Portia's and Nerissa's disguise is perfect? Are we supposed to think of them as young men in this scene or remain conscious that they are young women?
7. At what point does Portia figure out how to defeat Shylock? Has she known what she is going to do all along?
8. How is a modern Portia to avoid the problem of the "Quality of mercy" speech sounding like a sermon she has memorized? Should her lines be addressed to Shylock or to the court?
9. Should Shylock pause before responding to Portia's call for mercy? Some Shylocks have responded instantaneously; others, like Henry Goodman in the 1999 production at the National Theatre in London, let half a minute elapse before responding. Is Shylock at all persuaded by Portia's words?
10. Though defeated by the law, is Shylock still tempted to kill Antonio? Should he, as in some productions, have to be restrained from doing so?
11. How are we to respond to Shylock being convicted as an "alien" threatening a citizen's life, but punished as a Jew, being forced to convert?
12. How sincere are Shylock's words agreeing to convert: "I am content"? Is this resolution merciful? Does anyone in the court express sympathy for Shylock? Does he deserve sympathy?
13. What is on Shylock's mind as he exits?
14. In the late nineteenth century, Edwin Booth chose to end the play with Shylock's exit. What is gained or lost by doing so?

THE ENDING (5.1.300-307)

The film ends with a series of poignant images: Jessica, staring out at a fisherman wielding a bow and arrow, and then the gates of the ghetto closing on Shylock. Discuss the symbolism of these powerful shots. What is going on in the minds of these characters? What emotions are being expressed by these shots—regret, loss, abandonment? How does Jessica feel about her marriage, and about what has happened to her father?

The play ends on a similarly ambivalent note, with Gratiano's final speech:

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

Elizabethan playgoers would have been well aware that the play ends with a stale dirty joke, popularized in François Rabelais's classic sixteenth-century work, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Rabelais' version of "keeping safe one's wife's ring" relates how a jealous husband is told in a dream by the Devil that the only way he can be absolutely sure that his wife remains faithful is to wear the ring that is on his finger. And when the jealous husband wakes from his dream, he realizes that he has his finger inside his wife, and she awakens and pulls away.

But onstage and in the new film, the play does not end with these lines and the silent action that follows is crucial to the play's resolution. Some productions have those onstage open a bottle of champagne and celebrate. Others have darker stage actions, including the film, which shows us a pensive Jessica and then a converted Shylock who is banished from the Ghetto but clearly not accepted by Christian Venetians.



QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. What does the film's ending say about its view of the resolution of Shakespeare's story? What is going on in the minds of these characters? Is it more comic or tragic?
2. What are we to make of the fact that the play ends in the liminal space between dark and dawn? How hopeful an ending does this suggest?
3. What is resolved at the end of the play and what is left unresolved?
4. How much hope do you have for the various marriages of Portia and Bassanio, Nerissa and Gratiano, and Jessica and Lorenzo?
5. What happens to the feistiness of the cross-dressing heroines now that they are back in women's clothing?
6. To what extent does the ending foreground the complicated issue of homosocial and homosexual bonds? Why, for example, does Gratiano want to make love to his wife imagining she is still dressed as a young man?
7. Have students write about what happens to the various characters after the end of the play. What will happen to each of the marriages? What is in Antonio's future?
8. On whom should the final scene focus? For much of the twentieth century, the spotlight was on Antonio. More recently, the play has ended with Jessica, though she has no lines at the end of the play. This new film, by returning to Shylock, hearkens back to an older tradition of ending with the focus on him (Henry Irving and others had cut all of Act 5 in order to do so).

FOR DISCUSSION

Examine the "Chandos" portrait of Shakespeare that now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London, and is believed to be the only surviving contemporary painting of Shakespeare. (See http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/main/o/191?image_id=47)

In 1864, the critic J. Hain Friswell wrote in his *Life Portraits of William Shakespeare*:

One cannot too readily imagine our essentially English Shakespeare to have been a dark, heavy man, with a foreign expression, of a decidedly Jewish physiognomy, thin curly hair, a somewhat lubricious mouth, red-edged eyes, wanton lips, with a coarse expression, and his ears tricked out with ear-rings.

Friswell can only offer one explanation for why we are offered this "decidedly Jewish" Shakespeare:

The darkness of the countenance, the expression of the face, and the contour of the features, together with the ear-rings, full lip, and curled hair, have given rise to the suggestion that the portrait painter persuaded our poet-actor to sit to him when he had assumed the dress and character of his own masterly creation—Shylock.

Why does Friswell believe that this portrait must show Shakespeare as Shylock? What does it mean for our understanding of Shakespeare—and of English identity—if his theory is incorrect? What do depictions of Shylock reveal about unspoken prejudices?



FOR FURTHER READING (AND RESEARCH PAPERS)

- Robert Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Anthony Oldcorn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
- James C. Bulman, *The Merchant of Venice. Shakespeare in Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).
- Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid, eds., *The Jews of Early Modern Venice* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
- Charles Edelman, ed., *The Merchant of Venice. Shakespeare in Production* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- H. H. Furness, ed., *The Merchant of Venice. A New Variorum Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott Co., 1888)
- John Gross, *Shylock: Four Hundred Years in the History of a Legend* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992).
- Jay L. Halio, ed., *The Merchant of Venice, by William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
- Jay L. Halio, *Understanding The Merchant of Venice: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000).
- M. Lindsay Kaplan, ed., *The Merchant of Venice: Texts and Contexts* (Boston: Bedford/St Martin's, 2002).
- John W. Mahon and Ellen Macleod Mahon, eds. *The Merchant of Venice: New Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2002)
- Jonathan Morris and Robert Smith, eds., *The Merchant of Venice, by William Shakespeare. Cambridge School Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- Cecil Roth, *The Jews in the Renaissance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).
- Kenneth S. Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
- Hermann Sinsheimer, *Shylock: The History of a Character, or The Myth of the Jew* (London: Gollancz, 1947).

ADDITIONAL UNIT

You may find it useful to teach this film of *The Merchant of Venice* in the context of a larger unit on the representation of Jews in English literature. A possible syllabus for such a unit might include:

- Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Prioress's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1400). Available in any edition of Chaucer's work.
- Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1591). Available in J. B. Steane, *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Works* (London: Penguin, 1969).
- Sir Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (1819), available in A.N. Wilson, ed., *Ivanhoe, by Sir Walter Scott* (London: Penguin, 1986).
- Maria Edgeworth, *Harrington* (1817). Available in Susan Manly, ed., *Harrington, by Maria Edgeworth* (Plymouth: Broadview, 2004).
- Thomas de Quincey, "The Avenger" (1838). Available in David Masson, ed., *The Complete Writings of Thomas De Quincey* (London: A. & C. Black, 1897), vol. 12.
- Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1838). Available in Kathleen Mary Tillotson, ed., *Oliver Twist, by Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Available in Graham Handley, ed., *Daniel Deronda, by George Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).
- Amy Levy, *Reuben Sachs* (1888), available in Melvyn New, ed., *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1993).

For more information about the history of anti-Semitism and for resources to combat current anti-Semitism, contact the Anti-Defamation League, the nation's leading civil rights organization combating anti-Semitism and bigotry of all kinds since 1913.

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