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THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

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Antonio is the merchant of Venice.

He is asked for a loan by his good friend, Bassanio who needs the money to pay off debts and woo the wealthy Portia of Belmont. But Antonio has no ready cash (he is waiting for his merchant ships to return); therefore, he and Bassanio visit a moneylender, Shylock the Jew. Shylock and Antonio have a history of animosity that revolves around religious differences and the morality of lending money and charging interest for it. In an effort to be more “Gentile” or gentle, Shylock devises a “merry bond”; he will loan Antonio the money without charge but, if the merchant fails to repay the loan, Shylock will claim his payment in the form of a “pound of flesh.”

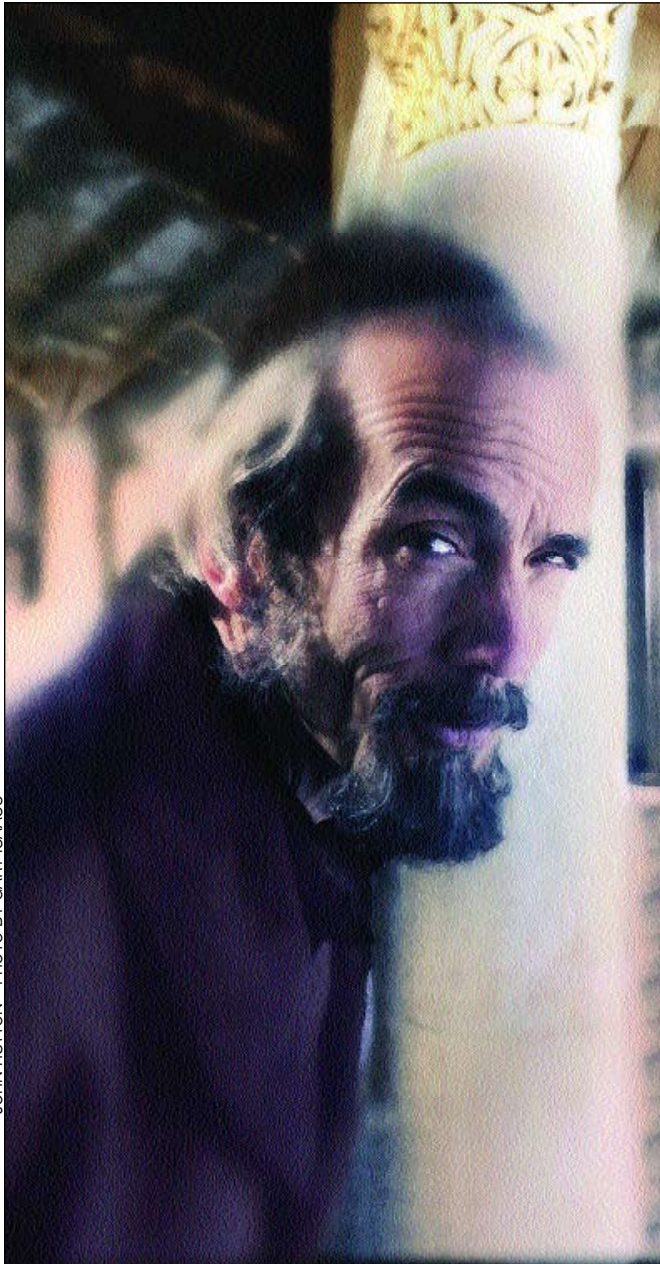
Meanwhile, in Belmont, Portia is besieged by suitors, but under the terms of her father’s will, she cannot pick a husband unless he passes a test of selecting the right casket from a group of three—gold, silver or lead. Portia is overjoyed when the handsome, charming Bassanio picks the right one.

Her happiness is short-lived, however, when Bassanio learns that Antonio’s ships have been lost at sea and that he must leave to support his friend who is now in jail and in debt to Shylock. The witty and wise Portia, along with her maid Nerissa, devise a plan to rescue Antonio and, in turn, her new husband Bassanio.

In this, Shakespeare’s most controversial play, the audience must confront the darker side of Elizabethan culture, while laughing at some of the Bard’s most comic characters.

The villainy you teach me I will execute,
and it shall go hard but I will better the
instruction.

—Shylock, *The Merchant of Venice*, III-1-56-57



JOHN HUTTON • PHOTO BY GARY ISAACS



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Themes of the PLAY

I keep saying Shakespeare,
Shakespeare, you are as
obscure as life is.

– Matthew Arnold

Frank Kermode in his essay, “Some Themes in *The Merchant of Venice*,” says the play is about “judgment, redemption and mercy” while A.D. Moody in “An Ironic Comedy” argues that the play is too complex to see in terms of good and evil.¹ However, late 20th century critics see the play in a different light.

In his commentary, David Nicol writes that the play is structured on the contrast between the ideal and the real in society and relationships. On one hand, Shakespeare tells us “love is more important than money, mercy is preferable to revenge and love lasts forever.” On the other hand, his more cynical side tells us “money rules the world, mercy alone cannot govern our lives and love can evaporate after marriage.”² This theme is illustrated by the play’s two locations. Venice is depicted as a city of merchants, money-lenders and cynical, arrogant young men who are considered noble. In contrast, Belmont is the land of sweetness and love where gold and silver caskets may glisten, but do not hold the secret to Portia’s hand.

Portia demonstrates this dichotomy of ideal versus real. When Bassanio proposes to her, she promises to be the dutiful wife, handing over her power and wealth to her husband. But when her impending marriage is threatened by the arrest of Antonio, she leaves Belmont, drops her feminine wiles and dons male attire to venture to the dangerous city of Venice where she will rescue Antonio, Bassanio and provide little mercy for Shylock.

Jay L. Halio in his book *Understanding the Merchant of Venice* writes the major theme of the play is that of bondage and bonding. All kinds of ties are illustrated. There is the one between father and child: Portia honors her deceased father’s wishes, while Jessica steals from and deserts her father, Shylock, and her religion by eloping with Lorenzo. The strength of male friendship is shown by Antonio and Bassanio; the merchant Antonio

will loan his spendthrift friend the money to court Portia even if he must borrow it. Commercial bonds are also explored: the relationship of creditor to debtor is illustrated by Shylock and Antonio as well as Antonio and Bassanio. Portia’s suitors are bound by the terms of her father’s will and when Portia and Bassanio and Nerissa and Gratiano announce their engagements, the bonds of matrimony are forged and sealed by the rings.

The bonds of law are very important in the trial scene, Act IV, scene 1. Shylock has a hold on Antonio and stands on Venetian justice to claim his pound of flesh.

Most importantly, the bond that connects one human being to another is often ignored. Antonio and his friends treat Shylock to insults and ignominy and yet borrow money from him; Jessica deserts her father and then maligns him; Shylock mistreats his servants; Portia makes cutting comments about her suitors and the Venetians harbor slaves. No character comes off unscathed.

There is but one law for all,
namely the law which governs
all laws – the law of humanity,
justice, equity – the law of
nature and of nations.

– Edmund Burke (1729-1797).
Impeachment of Warren Hastings, 1794

VENICE

I stood in Venice on the Bridge
of Sighs, A palace and a prison
on each hand.

– George Noel Gordon, Lord Byron.
Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, canto IV,
st. 1, (1818)

In 1611, Thomas Coryat published a travel book titled *Coryat's Crudities*. His “Observations of Venice” provide a wealth of detail and information on Venetian architecture, customs and dress of the city in late 16th century. For example, he describes the Grand Canal as “on both sides adorned with many sumptuous and magnificent Palaces that stand very near to the water and make a very beautiful and glorious show... with their stately pillars made partly of white stone and partly of Italian marble.”¹ He was particularly taken with the little terraces or galleries that gave “great grace to the whole edifice” and served as a place where occupants could contemplate the whole city on a cool evening.²

Coryat also described the Rialto Bridge as the only bridge to go over the great canal and the Exchange of Venice as the city’s most stately building. In his view of the Exchange, he provides a sense of the daily routine of mercantile commerce “where the Venetian Gentlemen and the Merchants meet twice a day, between 11 and 12 of the clock in the morning and betwixt five and six of the clock in the afternoon.”³ There are references to the gondolas, St. Mark’s Square, the Duke’s Palace and its “image of Dame Justice with a pair of scales in one hand and a sword in the other.”⁴

Known as the pleasure capital of Europe, Venice attracted countless visitors. Yet, by the end of the 16th century, the city was in decline as a mercantile giant because Portuguese navigators had found an alternative route around Africa for trade with the East, the main source of Venice’s wealth for centuries. Despite its splendor, the city had a dark side in the licentiousness that was allowed to exist. Known for its justice, authorities discouraged citizens from fraternizing with foreigners. Though its laws were impartial, they could be rigorous; persons could be punished for swearing and judges were notoriously corrupt.

Venice’s reputation for liberty and justice attracted a large community of Jews. From the mid and late 13th century, Jewish loan bankers began to

migrate from Germany where persecution was rampant and from central and southern Italy, England, France (where they were expelled), Portugal and Spain (where they were driven out by the Inquisition). The Jews settled near the Rialto, but by 1516 they were resettled in an area known as the New Foundry (*getto nuovo*), from which the word “ghetto” is derived. This was the first ghetto ever created. The original brass foundry (*getto del rame*) had been established in the 14th century as a walled fortress for the secret military operation of making cannons. But no factory was ever built there.

The island was seen as an ideal place to contain the Jews because it was completely surrounded by water and was accessible by only one bridge and had only one gate. The high apartment buildings that had been developed could be turned into a walled “city” by sealing up the outside windows. In the course of the 16th century, Turkish Jews had to be accommodated in the already overcrowded ghetto, so additional floors were added to the old buildings; these new stories put a strain on inadequate foundations. Though the inhabitants were free to leave the island at will, they had to be back by nightfall, except for doctors who had freedom of movement at all times, in case they were needed by the other citizens of Venice. Jews also had to wear conspicuous clothing that distinguished them from other citizens—yellow tunics and hats.

Despite the discrimination against them and the limitations on their ability to earn a living (Jews could not own land or engage in many crafts), Venetian Jews prospered. They could practice their religion openly and generally live free from tyranny and violence. They could also receive justice from “Venice the Just” where foreigners (the classification for Jews) as well as citizens had equal rights before the law. This is the basis for Shylock’s appeal to the Duke which Antonio, the “royal merchant” recognizes.

All men, especially strangers (foreigners) have so much liberty there that, though they speak very ill by the Venetians, so they attempt nothing in effect against their state, no man shall control them for it.

– William Thomas. *The History of Italy*,
(1549)

Jews in SHAKESPEARE'S England

For Elizabethan audiences there was little distinction between Shylock the Jew and Shylock the usurer. During the Middle Ages, trade and other occupations were closed to Jews, leaving few choices besides money lending. Moreover, the Church proclaimed this occupation a sin, leaving little doubt as to the morality of Jewish usurers in the eyes of Elizabethans. The worst insult to any Christian moneylender was to say the he was as bad as a Jew. It was not until the 1640s that the idea of lending money with interest was considered remotely respectable.

Moneylenders were familiar figures on the Elizabethan stage: Sir Tyrant Thrift, Bloodhound and Hornet are only a few characteristic names. Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, first performed in 1592, had established the villainous Jewish stereotype four years before *The Merchant of Venice* appeared in 1596. In Marlowe's play, Barabas the Jew "cheats, robs, betrays, murders and poisons an entire nunnery, encompassing the epitome of the Jewish stereotype."¹

In Shakespeare's play there are nine direct references to Shylock as the devil and numerous indirect ones. Commonly, Jews were perceived by the Elizabethans to be in league with the devil if not the very devil himself in disguise. In most Elizabethan productions, Shylock wore a red wig similar to that which Barabas wore and before him, Judas and Satan in the old mystery plays.

This distorted perception flourished because there were very few Jews in England at the time. This is primarily because, in 1290, they had been overtaxed, persecuted, imprisoned and finally expelled. During the first half of the 16th century, a handful of secret Jewish refugees from Spain and Portugal called Marranos came to live in London and Bristol. The Marranos had organized underground religious communities and a kind of secret service, the goal of which was to protect immigrants from the omnipresent Inquisition spies. By the time of Elizabeth's reign the Marrano community had grown considerably and played an important role in overseas trading, particularly money-lending. Though Marranos were publicly Christian, they retained their Jewish affiliations

and practiced their Judaism covertly.

Shakespeare's knowledge of the fierce mistreatment of one Marrano in particular almost assuredly contributed to his development of Shylock. This person was Roderigo Lopez, Queen Elizabeth's doctor, who was accused of poisoning her and thus imprisoned in the Tower of London by the Earl of Essex. Although rebuked by the Queen herself for his actions, Essex extracted a confession to the crime under threat of torture. During the trial, the prosecutor and judges were said to have placed undue emphasis on Lopez being Jewish. The doctor was eventually convicted, hung, drawn and quartered as an onlooking crowd cried, "He is a Jew!" That such an event occurred just two years before *The Merchant of Venice* first appeared provides a vivid sense of the atmosphere in which Shakespeare wrote his play.

Sources

for the STORY of

THE

MERCHANT

OF

VENICE

Shakespeare's main source for *The Merchant of Venice* was a 16th century Italian novel, *Il Pecorone (The Dunc)* by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino. In the story, Ansaldo, the godfather to Gianetto, finances the young man's attempts to woo the Lady of Belmonte, a rich widow who requires her suitors to consummate their love before she agrees to marry them or lose everything they have brought with them. Twice Gianetto fails the test because a drink given him has been drugged; the third time, however, one of the ladies-in-waiting takes pity on the young man and warns him not to drink. Meanwhile, to subsidize the third voyage, Ansaldo has had to borrow the needed sum from a Jewish moneylender and, if the debt is not paid on time, forfeit a pound of flesh.

Enjoying his good fortune, Gianetto forgets all about the loan his godfather owes until it is too late; then he rushes to Venice with plenty of money from his wife to repay the debt and save his godfather. His lady, in disguise as a lawyer, follows him. The Jew refuses ten times the amount of the debt and insists on pursuing his pound of flesh.

The "three casket" test that Portia uses for her suitors was taken from a story in the *Gesta Romanorum*. In this tale a young woman must choose the right casket before the king will allow her marriage to his son. Shakespeare complicated the plot by introducing more characters and suggesting a moral element in the choice of the correct casket.

For the character of Shylock, Shakespeare drew upon Christopher Marlowe's play, *The Jew of Malta*. Barabas, the Jewish moneylender, is a true villain, while Shakespeare endowed Shylock with some very human qualities that invite audience sympathy. The result is an ambivalence toward this man that makes Shylock one of Shakespeare's most complex and compelling characters.

The playwright also changed the fate of Barabas's daughter, Abigail. She, too, fell in love with a Christian and wished to marry him, but Barabas foiled her hope by having the lover killed and then killing his daughter. In the subplot involving Lorenzo and Jessica, the two lovers marry; Jessica is an "instant Christian" and Shylock mourns his loss. The issue of conversion to Christianity, voluntary or forced, is a new element in Shakespeare's representation and brings out aspects of Shylock's character that make him less of a villain and more of a victim.

MALE Friendships in Classical and Renaissance LITERATURE

Friendship with a man is
friendship with his virtue, and
does not admit of assumptions
of superiority.

—Mencius (372-289 B.C.). *Works*.
Book IV 2:13

From ancient times through the Renaissance, friendship between men was regarded as the highest form of social relationship.

- Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates places male friendship higher on the scale of love than marriage between a man and a woman.
- Cicero, a Roman politician and statesman, wrote *De Amicitia*, a treatise of friendship (106-43 B.C.).
- Sir Thomas Elyot (1490-1546), a 16th century humanist in the court of Henry VIII and the author of *The Governor*, emphasized compatibility between two persons and goodness and generosity as qualities essential to true friendship.
- Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), a French essayist and philosopher wrote "On Friendship" in which he professed "to compare this brotherly affection [of friendship] with affection for women, even though it is the result of our choice... cannot be done."¹

In addition, the Biblical story of David and Jonathan (in Samuel I, chapters 18 and 19) and the Greek story of Damon and Pythias were very popular in the Elizabethan age. The stories illustrated the willingness of one friend to give his life for another as the true test of friendship. All these writers and thinkers influenced Shakespeare in his characterizations of Antonio and Bassanio.

In *The Merchant of Venice* the friendship between the two young men is tested almost as strongly as the one in the Biblical and Greek tales. Antonio will loan Bassanio his needed sum even if he must put his life in jeopardy. Portia seems to recognize the threat their relationship may pose for her marriage and that may account for her use of the ring plot toward the end of the play. Since she also recognizes the depth of her husband's feeling for his friend, she is willing to defer the consummation of their marriage until Antonio's problem of forfeiture is resolved. But Portia does insist on the marriage ceremony in church before Bassanio departs for Venice, for somewhere she may have read:

Friendship always benefits;
love sometimes injures.

—Seneca. *Ad Lucillum* XXXV

The Women in THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

Frailty, thy name is woman.

—Hamlet

In Shakespeare's England, women were supposed to be submissive, meek and obedient to their husbands and fathers. However in this play, the women do not fit that description.

Portia is wealthy, beautiful, confident, witty and resourceful. Though she abides by her father's will to have her suitor select the correct casket, she (and the singers) drop direct hints so that Bassanio will choose the lead one. He has earned the right to become "her lord, her governor, her king" and, by English law, has control over her property and fortune (Act II, sc. 165-170). But for all her humble words, Portia remains very much in charge. She sets the conditions of the marriage and gives Bassanio a ring that he must never lose or give away.

Wearing male attire, she enters the court of Venice to defeat Shylock (and men) at their own game. Making things up as she goes along, she gauges her opponent, probes his weaknesses and looks for an opening. She pleads that he show mercy, but when Shylock does not, she turns on him. She calls Shylock an alien who plots the death of a citizen and, by Venetian law, he would be deprived of his goods and his life. "She feels no scruples about using his outsider's status against him. In fact, the mercy that she forces him to beg of the Duke contains little of the compassion that she has preached."¹ Intent on rescuing Antonio before he becomes a martyr in Bassanio's eyes, she is ruthless.

In an essay, "*The Merchant of Venice* and the Politics of Commerce," Karoline Szatek writes "Shakespeare created Portia as a means to indict British lawyers."² Shakespeare's father was sued often enough, especially for usury, and the son knew well of legal techniques and the manipulation of laws, as does Portia. In the final act, Antonio and Bassanio realize their debt to Portia, but she is not satisfied with their thanks and words of love and service. Bassanio ultimately bows down to his wife and Portia gains control and power over him and Belmont.

Nerissa, too, is a strong woman. "If anything, Portia learns by Nerissa's example throughout the first half

of the play that should she need to turn to anyone, it should not necessarily be a man," writes Corinne S. Abate in her essay "Nerissa Teaches Me What to Believe: Portia's Wifely Empowerment in *The Merchant of Venice*."³ Nerissa defends the terms of Portia's father's will and reminds her that the assorted suitors are lords, princes, counts and barons who have money and power. Therefore, Portia would not be important to them.

Instead, Nerissa reminds her mistress that Bassanio has no money; thus, she would be gaining a husband who would be dependent on her estate while securing her position of power in the marriage. Nerissa also looks after her own interests. She does not want to leave Belmont and her secret romance with Gratiano, so she urges Portia to marry a hometown boy.

Jessica is another matter. Although she rebels against her father by eloping, she shows little strength of character elsewhere. She deliberately chooses the Christian Lorenzo, friend of Shylock's rival merchant, Antonio; and steals from her father. When she learns of Antonio's trial and Shylock's bond, she adds her own testimony of her father's malice and enmity. "Her speech reads suspiciously like a newcomer's eagerness to ingratiate herself by playing informer."⁴

But does Jessica secure a place in Christian society and Lorenzo's heart? In an essay, "Jessica," by John Drakakis, his opinion is: "Their love is lawless, financed by theft and engineered through a gross breach of trust."⁵ Her defection to Christianity threatens the organization of family that is so important in Venice. Therefore, Jessica, because of her bloodlines and behavior, will remain an outsider at Belmont.

A woman who demands equality
renounces her superiority.
—Mort Sahl (via George Bernard Shaw)

The Controversial SHYLOCK

The Jews are a frightened people.
Nineteen centuries of Christian love
have broken down their nerves.

—Israel Zangwill

So much has been written about the riddle of Shylock that it is difficult to know where to begin. For example, his name is a puzzle, writes Isaac Asimov in *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare*. Shylock is not a Jewish name, so where did Shakespeare get it? Asimov traces the word to the Hebrew “shalakh” which appears twice in the Bible (Leviticus 11:17 and Deuteronomy 14:17) and translates loosely into “cormorant,” a bird of prey that Jews are forbidden to eat. “The cormorant is a seabird which eats fish so voraciously that the word has come to mean personified greed and voraciousness.”¹ Shakespeare may have used the form of the Hebrew word both as a name and characterization of the Jewish moneylender.

Yet if Shylock is greedy and voracious, he lives and spends frugally and keeps precise accounts and tabulations. It is the Christians in the play who live extravagantly and disregard expenditure. Indeed, “Bassanio, whose unregulated spending first summons Shylock’s crafty largesse, best represents the play’s fiscal unconscious, the wish to spend without tally.”² Perhaps Shakespeare’s view of Shylock was the same attitude Elizabethans displayed toward the Puritans. This religious sect despised beauty and merrymaking, loved money and “looked down with contempt on their less sanctified neighbors.”³ Thus, Shylock may be viewed as a substitute for the Puritans who were looked upon as fanatics with a warped view of life and lacking in any sympathy.

Shylock is an outsider in Venice and perhaps in his own community. “For all his mouthing of Scripture, Shylock is not a devout Jew and certainly not a good one,” writes Jay L. Halio in *Understanding the Merchant of Venice*.⁴ No religious Jew would try to carry out the bloodthirsty revenge that Shylock wants from Antonio, for the injunction against revenge appears in both the Old

and New Testaments; besides, any kind of human sacrifice is anathema to Jews. Moreover, Shylock wants his pound of flesh from near Antonio’s heart, the place Christians believe themselves to be truly circumcised. Thus, Shylock will have made Antonio a Jew, even if a dead one.⁵

Another view of Shylock is held by Robert Schneider in *Shylock, the Roman*. The author rejects the Jewish/Christian dichotomy, the idea that the play deals with the conflict between Christian forgiveness and Jewish adherence to law. Instead, he endorses a classical Roman interpretation and argues that the education of the Elizabethan people was based firmly in the classics. Schneider looks at two ideas, “... the iconoclastic approach of the Roman Old Comedy which, as in the feast of the Saturnalia, turns society on its head, and the Roman idea of virtue that emphasized the necessity of keeping one’s word...”⁶ The author sees Shylock as a ‘slave’ (or at least on the bottom rung of society’s ladder) who proves to be more truthful and noble in relationships than the pillars of society.

Nevertheless, Shakespeare creates sympathy for Shylock by giving him a reason for wanting to commit his crime. He has suffered years of abuse from Antonio and blames him for helping Jessica betray him. His “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech (Act III, scene i) suggests that the shared humanity of people is more important than religious or racial differences. If Shylock is violent, it is something he has learned from a society who has abused him. At the trial Shylock is forced to convert. For Elizabethans, to turn a Jew into a Christian was “a crowning mercy, since it rescued him from the certainty of hell and placed him on the route to salvation.”⁷ They did not reckon with this more modern viewpoint:

It is extremely difficult for a Jew to be converted, for how can he bring himself to believe in the divinity of... another Jew?”

—Heinrich Heine, German-Jewish author

Usury and the RISE OF Capitalism

The modern capitalist movement, which has its origins in the emergence and spread of banks in the Renaissance, owes a great deal of its success to the widespread use of lending money at interest—usury, as it is still called in some quarters.

Although interest-free loans continue to be available for persons in need, for most people, borrowing at interest is taken for granted. Interest is the charge a lender makes for the use of money or credit and usually is figured as a percentage of the principal and computed either annually, quarterly or monthly. Interest rates vary a great deal, not only from time to time, depending on the economy, but also on the amount borrowed, the purpose for which the loan is used and the length of time required to repay it.

Most people own their homes and automobiles today, thanks largely to their ability to borrow money. Moreover, in the last few decades, the use of credit cards has become widespread, for individuals can purchase high-priced items and pay for them on a month-to-month basis with interest charged to the cardholder. Businesses chiefly use loans from large money center banks to do their work regardless of what it is—construction, import and export, manufacturing, etc.

Interest rates in the United States are controlled in two ways: by the federal government and by state laws and regulations. The federal government controls interest rates through the Federal Reserve

Board, which sets the prime rate that the Federal Reserve Bank charges, and adjusts it from time to time, depending on the state of the economy. An interest rate for an individual may depend upon that person's credit rating or if he/she has other loans or been in bankruptcy. Someone applying for a loan must have tangible security such as a house or other valuable possessions. For anyone to offer a pound of flesh is unheard of; moreover, no government would allow a citizen to offer his or her life as security for a loan.

Less than 75 years after it officially began, the contest between capitalism and socialism is over. Capitalism has won.

—Robert L. Heilbroner. "Reflections: the Triumph of Capitalism." *The New Yorker*, Jan 23, 1989.

ACTIVITIES

Colorado Model Content Standards for Reading and Writing. Standard 1: Students read and understand a variety of Materials; Standard 4: Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing.

Act I

Scene i

1. How can we explain Antonio's sadness?
2. What is Bassanio's attitude toward Portia? What does this say about him?
3. Notice the introduction of the theme of friendship. Watch how this theme is developed in conjunction with the idea of love in the play.

Scene ii

1. In what way does the opening of this scene parallel the opening of the first scene? Do you see any significance here?
2. What purpose is served by having Portia analyze her suitors? What do her comments reveal about her?

Scene iii

1. lines 14-35 – How does this passage help characterize Shylock?
2. lines 37-48 – This aside should be taken at face value. What does it reveal about Shylock? To what extent is the play about bigotry?
3. Note the terms of the loan. Why do you think Shylock would impose such terms?

Act II

Scene i

1. What does this scene accomplish?

Scene ii

1. lines 1-29 -- How do you respond to Lancelot's comments? Do you take them seriously? Why or why not?

2. lines 1-155 -- What is the humor here? What purpose(s) does it serve?

Scene iii

1. Notice Jessica's attitude toward her father. What does it tell you?

Scene iv

1. Does this scene do anything more than give important plot information? If so, what? And what plot information is given? Why is it necessary?

Scene v

1. What do you make of Shylock's superstitions and fears?

Scene vi

1. Notice Jessica's disguise. Is there any humor in it?

Scene vii

1. How does one know when he has chosen the right casket?
2. On what basis does Morocco make his choice?

Scene viii

1. lines 15-16 -- What does Shylock miss? Why is it significant that he links these two items together?

Scene ix

1. On what basis does Aragon make his choice?

Act III

Scene i

1. lines 1-16 -- What is the bad news?
2. lines 46-64 -- What is the tone here? What is Shylock's attitude?

ACTIVITIES

C O N T I N U E D

Scene ii

1. lines 63-65 --Notice the rhyme, here before the choice is made. How would you stage this scene? Would Bassanio hear the song well, and would he understand its hint? What difference would it make?
2. What is the basis for Bassanio's choice?
3. What is accomplished by having Gratiano fall in love with Nerissa?
4. How would you characterize Portia's generosity?

Scene iii

1. What do we learn about Shylock in this scene?
2. Why must the Duke follow the law?

Scene iv

1. Why does Portia say she will seclude herself at the monastery?
2. What hint do we get of Portia's plan?

Scene v

1. What is the purpose for this scene?
2. lines 17-18 -- In what way(s) is this statement significant? How is it related to the end of the play?

Act IV

Scene i

1. lines 16-34 -- What is the Duke's appeal to Shylock?
2. lines 35-62 -- What does Shylock's insistence upon the law reveal about him?
3. lines 182-203 -- Note this famous speech. Is Portia's appeal to the reason? Why does Portia continue pleading for mercy even when Shylock repeatedly demands that the letter of the law be fulfilled?
4. lines 262-79 -- What function does Antonio's speech serve?

5. Why won't Portia allow Shylock to accept the three-fold payment? Has her attitude changed from the mercy speech?
6. Why is it significant that Portia is called a "Daniel"? What does the name mean? Who was Daniel?
7. What are the conditions of Antonio's mercy? Is he really showing mercy?
8. Why does Bassanio give Portia the ring? Is this complication anticlimactic?

Scene ii

1. What is the tone of this scene?

Act V

1. lines 184-233 -- What is Portia's attitude here? What do you make of it?
2. What is the nature of the resolution of the play? What is the tone of the "trick" played on Bassanio and Gratiano? Does it serve any purpose? What is its motivation? How is it related to the major themes of the play?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. 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?
2. In the end, how comic is *The Merchant of Venice*? Does the final act succeed in restoring comedy to the play?
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. Discuss the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. What does their friendship reveal about their characters?
5. 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?
6. Compare and contrast Venice and Belmont. What is the significance of these distinct settings in the play?
7. 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?
8. To what extent is Shylock defined by his religion? To what extent is he defined by his profession?
9. Discuss Portia’s character. How does she compare to the men around her? Is Bassanio a worthy husband for her?
10. Discuss how the trial scene reveals a conflict between justice and mercy. Is the conflict resolved? If so, how?

Bibliography

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