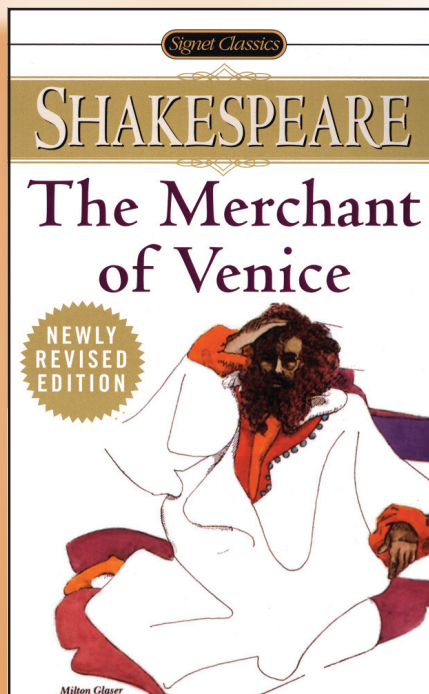




A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE SIGNET CLASSICS EDITION OF  
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S  
**THE MERCHANT OF VENICE**



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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Introduction .....4

Prereading Activities.....5

Summaries and Teaching Suggestions.....9

After Reading the Play .....31

Resources .....35

About the Author of This Guide.....36

About the Editors of This Guide.....36

Penguin Speakers Bureau .....37

Full List of Free Teacher's Guides.....38

Click on a Classic .....39

## INTRODUCTION

### ABOUT THIS TEACHER'S GUIDE

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This guide contains four sections: **Pre-reading Activities, Summaries and Teaching Suggestions, After Reading the Novel**, and **Resources**. The pre-reading activities involve and engage students, preparing them to read this mature work. The **Summaries and Teaching Suggestions** section guides students during their reading. Organized by act and scene, it provides summaries, discussion questions, and assorted activities. Numbers in parentheses refer to the page number in the Signet Classics edition of *The Merchant of Venice*.

**Summaries** help both students and teachers keep track of the action of the play, allowing students to appreciate the depth of Shakespeare's language without getting bogged down by it.

**Questions** are useful for class discussion, individual writing, or group activities.

**Activities** may be selected by the teacher or students, since completing all the activities would be too time-consuming. Some may be delayed for use as part of the post-reading experiences.

The **After Reading the Novel** section suggests activities that pull together reading experiences through an examination of themes. Finally, the Resources section assists those who wish to pursue individual interests.

### INTRODUCTION TO THE SIGNET CLASSICS EDITION OF *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

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One of Shakespeare's most complex plays, *The Merchant of Venice* provides myriad opportunities for deeply examining character and motivation. Few other pieces of literature hold such complex characters who appear as infrequently as Shylock, who surfaces only in four scenes, but whose mark is indelible.

Because of the complexity of the themes and characters, issues involving stereotypes and racism, as well as heavy sexual innuendo, *The Merchant of Venice* is recommended for study by sophomore through senior high school students.

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## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

### THEMATIC ACTIVITIES

1. **Attitudes Survey.** Have students take this attitude survey, marking A for agree or D for disagree about each of these themes that recur in the play. After the survey, have students defend their positions. Use this survey frequently throughout the play to revisit their attitudes and to see how those perceptions have changed. Revisit the survey at the end of the play to determine how this play may have changed their attitudes:

Money can affect my level of happiness.  
Appearances can be deceiving.  
Spouses should have the same values.  
People who do not follow or practice my faith are wrong.  
A true friend would do anything for their friend.  
People should forgive those who have wronged them.  
The way a rule is worded is the way it has to be; no exceptions.  
People should keep their promises, no matter what.  
To what extent is racism evident even in “good” people?

2. **Common themes.** One reason people continue to read Shakespeare and other classics is that the struggles, desires, and conflicts that people faced in the past are the same ones that we face today.

Brainstorm a list of ten works you know well that were created by an earlier generation—myths, folktales, legends, epics, novels, or song lyrics. You might start your list with tales you recall from childhood, favorite books, works you read in school last year, or “oldies” music. For each work identify the central idea, issue, or conflict of the work.

Of the ten works on your list, which ones are about ideas or themes that are relevant to your life and your generation? Circle them. Are there any works within the list that tell similar stories or explore similar themes? Draw a line connecting them. Look for similarities between your list and those of others. What ideas or conflicts come up again and again? Add another layer to the storytelling tradition: take the bare bones of the plot from one of these works and imagine a more modern version of this tale. Provide a title and plot summary. How do you need to change the story so that it speaks to your generation or comments on your own time?

3. **Concept Map Activity.** In groups of four, students discuss the relationships among these words: money, love, religion, law, marriage, justice, and mercy. What connections do these words have with one another? Students create some visual to show how these words interact.
4. **Discussion:** What is a stereotype? How do stereotypes originate? Identify characters in television, film, and literature that are built on a stereotype (of age, class, region, ethnicity, race, etc.). Label characters that reinforce negative images. Which characters break the stereotype? How do they do this? What

message do those characters send? What purpose do these stereotyped characters serve? Should they remain part of our cultural landscape? Why or why not?

5. **The Casket Test.** Create three caskets and inscriptions as found in Act II and Act III of the play, and have students take roles as Portia and three suitors. Portia should read the following before the selection begins: *If you choose the right casket, you will win a beautiful, intelligent, rich young woman and all her possessions. If you choose the wrong casket, you will never be allowed to marry or to have children.* Each suitor should pick a casket in turn (no duplications), and the rest of the class should hold a discussion on which casket they believe is right, giving rationales for each. Open the caskets one at a time, reading the scrolls inside the caskets after each one. Ask the suitor who picked lead to explain his/her rationale for picking the correct casket.

Follow-up activity: Have students brainstorm the characteristics of the type of people Portia's father would expect to pick each casket (For example: gold—people who rely on outward appearances, flashy, materialistic). Then, come up with lists of modern-day people from the worlds of politics, entertainment, sports, history, or your own life that fit the gold, silver, and lead profiles. Select one, and write a poem that sets them within the context of that casket.

6. **Usury activity.** Much of *Merchant of Venice* deals with the practice of usury, or money lending with high interest rates. Laws of Elizabethan England limited interest rates to 10%. In the play Bassanio (through Antonio) borrows 3,000 ducats from Shylock. Have students examine various credit card offers for examples of current interest rates and, using a debt calculator (search “debt calculator” on an internet search engine like Google) and minimum payments (usually about 15% of the balance), have students calculate how long it would take to pay off a loan of \$3,000. How would this affect public perception of moneylenders like Shylock? How would the public view the borrower?

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## LANGUAGE

1. **Vocabulary.** Although most challenging words in *The Merchant of Venice* are defined in footnotes, students will want to familiarize themselves with the words common to Shakespeare's plays found on pages xxi-xxiii of the introductory notes as well as Shakespeare's grammatical structure found on pages xxiii-xxv of the introductory notes to the Signet Classics Edition of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Additionally, students can note words that made their first appearance into the English language through *The Merchant of Venice*:

laughable: ridiculous or silly (Solanio, I, i)

compromise: to come to terms by mutual agreement (Shylock, I, iii)

green-eyed: jealous (Portia, III, ii.)

scrubbed: fresh-looking, as in scrubbed clean (Gratiano, Nerissa V, i.)

For further exploration, students can research other words Shakespeare brought to the English language (it is estimated that he contributed over 1,700 words to our lexicon).

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2. **Puns.** Read page xx of the introductory notes and find some modern jokes with puns in them to share. Discuss the complexities behind puns and how those puns are “an important way of communicating a complex meaning.” Keep a Pun Log that cites act, scene and line numbers throughout the reading of the play to share.

## RESEARCH

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Several of these research topics are suitable for either before or after the reading of the play:

1. Research Venice's reputation among the major cities of the world during the Elizabethan period and its stance towards people of different cultures and faiths. In terms of the modern world, what cities or locales might be equivalent? Show parallels in a chart or another visual format.
  2. Why were Jews and Christians separated in Shakespeare's time? How was this separation delineated in society? What rights and privileges did Christians have that Jews did not?
  3. Research the deportation of Jews in England under Edward IV in 1290 and the re-establishment of Jewish communities (ghettos) under Cromwell in 1656.
  4. Research the reasons why Amsterdam and Venice allowed openly Jewish communities to flourish during this time, while elsewhere in the world Jews had to appear to convert to Christianity to avoid persecution and deportation.
  5. Research the 1593 trial of Dr. Roderigo Lopez, a converted Jew and Queen Elizabeth's physician. How would this sensational trial affect Shakespeare's writing of the play?
  6. Research one region in the world currently suffering from religious intolerance. Delineate the main causes of hatred leading to discrimination and violence in these areas. What efforts have been made to create peace between the religious groups? Present your findings in a news report format.
  7. Research the politics of money lending in Elizabethan England, especially under Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Elizabeth I. Given these laws and what you know about the restrictions on Jews regarding property, why did many then turn to usury?
  8. Research the nature of male friendship in Elizabethan England.
  9. What does the expression “pound of flesh” mean?
  10. One major stereotype about Jews involves money. Research how the exclusion of Jews from guilds, their inability to own land, and the Christian prohibition against usury led to the subsequent creation of “middleman” occupations such as money lending, selling, and estate management.
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## CHARACTER LIST (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

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**Antonio:** The title character, Antonio is a wealthy but sad older merchant who claims never to have borrowed money but is willing to lend to friends, especially Bassanio, without benefit of interest.

**Salerio and Solanio:** Friends of Antonio and Bassanio, minor characters almost indistinguishable from each other who comment on the action and who inform the audience about the action that has occurred offstage.

**Bassanio:** A young man with expensive tastes and rich friends who borrows money from Antonio in order to court the rich, intelligent, and beautiful Portia.

**Gratiano:** Bassanio's friend with a bawdy and clownish demeanor. Accompanies Bassanio to Belmont to court Portia and falls in love with Portia's servant Nerissa.

**Lorenzo:** Bassanio's friend who falls in love with Shylock's daughter Jessica.

**Portia:** Widely pursued noblewoman who is as intelligent as she is rich and beautiful. Her father's will demands that her husband be selected through a test involving three caskets: one of gold, one of silver, and one of lead. Portia's mind allows her to find loopholes in legal matters, thus rescuing her new husband's friend from his bond.

**Nerissa:** Portia's handmaid who falls in love with Gratiano, Bassanio's friend.

**Shylock:** The Jewish merchant of Venice who lends Antonio the money on his friend Bassanio's behalf. Clever and quick, Shylock is all at once a dark humorist, a moral absolutist, a religious bigot, an ogre, and, surprisingly, a sentimentalist. He serves as both the villain and the most tragic figure of the play.

**Prince of Morocco:** Portia's suitor and the only Black character in all of Shakespeare outside of Othello. Like Othello, he embodies many of the stereotypical Elizabethan perceptions of Moors: violent and sexual. He wrongly chooses the silver casket.

**Launcelot Gobbo:** Shylock's comic servant who leaves Shylock's service to serve Bassanio.

**Old Gobbo:** Launcelot's blind father who has not encountered his son in years.

**Jessica:** Shylock's daughter, who escapes from her father's house in order to marry Lorenzo. She converts to Christianity in order to further assimilate into the Christian society of Venice.

**Prince of Arragon:** One of Portia's suitors who greedily chooses the golden casket.

**Tubal:** Shylock's friend, the only other Jew in the play, who functions as a news bearer of Jessica's escape and of her consequent behavior.

**Balthazar and Stephano:** Servants to Portia.

**The Duke of Venice:** The reigning official of Venice who presides over the court where Shylock intends to collect on his bond.

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## SUMMARIES AND TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

Acts and scenes are referred to through Roman numerals; for example, Act One, Scene One will be indicated as I, i. Line numbers correspond with the Signet Classics edition and are indicated in parentheses after the item.

## ONGOING ACTIVITIES

Throughout the reading and study of each act, it is important to give students opportunities to summarize and react to the issues and language of the play. Although they may not be appropriate for each act, using the following activities periodically will help deepen student understanding of the play:

1. Give students a graphic organizer to help them track the progress of the play. Depending on your emphasis, you may want to use three “fishbone” style graphic organizers, one for Venice, one for Belmont, and one for the courtroom, to track actions and the results of those actions as the play progresses. Another graphic organizer might be used to track the four major plot strands of the play: the “pound of flesh” plotline, the casket plotline, the elopement plotline, and the ring plotline.
2. Use a graphic organizer to help students track the growth of one or several major characters of the play, tracking actions, decisions, and important quotes (with act, scene, and line numbers) to help fill out their understanding of a character. You may want to assign groups with specific characters and have them convene at the end of each act to share their graphic organizers. Alternately, you may want groups of students with different characters to discuss characters and their relationships with each other.
3. Summary is an important strategy in helping students retain information. Pair students, labeling each student as either a “one” or a “two.” At key places of in the text, stop and have pairs summarize the action in those lines (give them no more than 30 seconds to do this). Have all ones (or twos) stand, and select one student to report, refining where necessary. This activity is key, especially early in the play, to get students used to the language and the situation. Later, you may want to expand the “stopping points” to more than 20 lines, but initially, shorter breaks are better to insure understanding.
4. Rewrite this scene in modern English, maintaining the tone and purpose of the scene. Perform the scene for the class or film it and place it on a video-sharing site such as YouTube for classmates to view and comment on.

## ACT I, I.

### SCENE SUMMARY

Antonio, a merchant of Venice, talks of his sadness with his friends Salerio and Solanio, who believe that his heavy investments at sea must cause him worry. When he says that doesn't bother him, since his wealth isn't invested in just one ship, they

claim he must be in love. Antonio shrugs this off as well. When Bassanio enters, he tells Antonio of Portia, a rich and beautiful woman he has fallen in love with, and, although he has borrowed money from Antonio before and hasn't paid it back, asks to borrow money again so that he may court her, and thus have enough money to pay Antonio back completely. Even though Antonio's money is tied up in the ships, he allows Bassanio to see what kind of loan he can secure with Antonio's credit.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Antonio seems to have it all. Why, then, is Antonio so sad? Why doesn't *he* know the cause of his sadness? What guesses do Solanio and Salerio have about the causes of his depression? What lifts his depression?
2. What has Bassanio come to tell Antonio?
3. Why does Bassanio set his sights on Portia? What stands in his way? How does he plan to overcome those barriers?
4. Bassanio lives well beyond his means. Why, then, does Antonio continue to lend him money willingly, even though Bassanio has yet to pay him back? Would you lend money to him?
5. What plan does Bassanio have to pay Antonio back?
6. Although he has condemned usury in the past, Antonio doesn't need much convincing to go into debt for Bassanio. Why? What would he get out of granting him the loan?
7. What does Antonio get from his relationship with Bassanio?

## ACTIVITIES

1. For the summary activity (#3 of the "Ongoing Activities"), stop after lines 20, 40, 67, 78, 104, 118, 134, 152, 176, and 185.
  2. Journal/Discussion topic: What favors have you asked of a friend? Is there one friend you repeatedly turn to for favors? Why do you turn to that friend so frequently? Or, conversely, do you have a friend for whom you continue to grant favors, even though you know they won't repay them? Why do you continue to do those favors?
  3. Although the allusions are defined in the Signet edition of the play, conduct deeper research into some of the classical allusions in this scene: Janus (l.50), Nestor (l.56), Oracle (l.97), Cato (l.166), Brutus (l.166), Portia (l.166), the Golden Fleece (l.170), Jason (l.172). What does the frequency of Roman mythical allusions say about Venetian culture in general and about these characters in specific?
  4. Research the Biblical allusions and references to the church and religion in this scene: holy church (ll.29-30), wheat and chaff (l.116), pilgrimage (l.120). Compare the volume of references in this scene with later scenes.
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**ACT I, II.**

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**SCENE SUMMARY**

In Belmont, Portia complains to her servant Nerissa, that she cannot choose her own husband; her dead father has stipulated in his will that Portia's suitors must pass a test in which they must choose among three caskets—one lead, one silver, and one gold—to find which one contains her portrait. The one who chooses correctly will become Portia's husband and inherit her fortune, but if suitors fail, they may never marry. Portia and Nerissa discuss the faults of suitors who have come and gone, and remember Bassanio as one who might be worthy to be her husband.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Shakespeare often juxtaposes (placing seeming opposites near one another) scenes (and therefore characters, settings, ideas) for a purpose. Read I, ii carefully to see what purpose Shakespeare had in placing these scenes next to one another.
2. How does Venice differ from Belmont?
3. How does Portia and Nerissa's relationship differ from Antonio and Bassanio's? How is it similar? Look at the way they speak. How does Shakespeare show differences in their personalities and social stature through dialogue?
4. How is Portia's mood similar and different from Antonio's at the start of I, i?
5. How does Portia feel about her deceased father's method of selecting a husband for her? So far, how successful has it been in eliminating inappropriate suitors?
6. Portia mocks each of her potential suitors in turn. What faults does she see in each one? How do those faults reflect the Elizabethan viewpoints of each of these cultures? What is different about her criticism of Morocco?
7. How does Portia first encounter Bassanio? What kind of social status does he have?
8. Reread lines 126-130. Does Portia's racism shock you?

**ACTIVITIES**

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the "Ongoing Activities"), this time stopping at lines 34, 98, and 132.
  2. Journal/discussion topic: What advice have you given to someone else that you yourself find hard to follow?
  3. Journal/discussion topic: What have your parents done that was "for your own good"? What was the end result of their actions? Was it indeed "for your own good"? Do you think that Portia's father's test seems like a good one? Why or why not?
  4. Examine how Portia uses language, especially in the use of puns/words with double meanings (e.g. *will* in l.24).
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5. Draw a caricature of one or more of Portia's suitors according to her descriptions in this scene, exaggerating the features she dislikes the most.
6. Each of Portia's suitors represents different cultures. Research the Elizabethans' perceptions regarding each of those countries, especially attitudes surrounding race (e.g. Morocco). How do Portia's attitudes reflect those perceptions?

## **ACT I, III.**

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### **SCENE SUMMARY**

Shylock agrees to lend Bassanio three thousand ducats for three months based on Antonio's credit but is skeptical, since all of Antonio's assets are tied up at sea. He confesses in an aside that he hates Antonio because he is a Christian who lends money without interest, which makes Shylock's profession as a moneylender difficult. Shylock has also been offended by Antonio's public physical and verbal assaults against him for usury, which is considered a sin by Christians. When Shylock points out Antonio's hypocrisy, Antonio points out he makes the exception for Bassanio, not for himself.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Again, Shakespeare places a scene in Belmont against one in Venice. What contrasts does he want us to see in these locations? What are the main concerns/issues of importance in Belmont? Look for repeated word choices in this scene. How does the language reflect this?
  2. Bassanio contacts Shylock regarding the loan. What are the terms of the loan? What does it mean for Antonio to be "bound" to a loan?
  3. What does it mean when Shylock says, "Antonio is a good man" (l.12)? How does Bassanio take his meaning? What distinction does this show between the two men in terms of their priorities or states of mind?
  4. Shylock does a risk analysis of Antonio's ability to repay the loan in ll.13-26. What are the risks? What does Shylock say outweighs those risks for him? Would this be enough for you to lend him the money?
  5. Bassanio invites Shylock to eat with Antonio and him, but Shylock refuses. What reasons does he give? Why does he seem so bitter all at once? What underlying rancor is there?
  6. Once Antonio enters, Shylock's aside gives us insight into why he dislikes Antonio. How would his feelings reflect the political position Jews held in Elizabethan society? How would his attitude towards the merchant influence his risk analysis?
  7. Examine Shylock's speech patterns. What patterns do you notice? What figures of speech does he tend to use?
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8. Describe Shylock. What stereotypical characteristics do you notice in the way Shakespeare's words present Shylock's character? What do you see that defies stereotypes?
9. Shylock's love of money is undeniable. Why does Shylock tell the story of Jacob and Laban? How does Shylock interpret the story? How does Antonio? Review *Genesis 30* and determine if there is a distinctly "Christian" as opposed to a "Jewish" interpretation. Which does the play seem to support?
10. Why does Shylock drop the Biblical discussion as soon as Antonio challenges him? What does this say about Shylock's place in Venetian society? How do Antonio's words in ll.93-98 reflect this Elizabethan perception of Jews?
11. Shylock directly confronts Antonio regarding the way Antonio has treated Shylock in the past. What wrongs has Antonio committed against Shylock?
12. How does Antonio react to the charges against him? How does he reconcile that apparent hypocrisy? Why does he say this is even more reason to grant the loan? Give proof from the text (including line numbers) in your answer.
13. What are Shylock's terms of the loan? He says he grants it in terms of a "merry sport" (l.142). Is he joking or serious? How does Antonio take it? How does Bassanio? Give proof from the text (including line numbers) in your answer.
14. What is the difference between Bassanio's and Antonio's perceptions of the loan terms? What accounts for those differences? Give proof from the text (including line numbers) in your answer. Would Bassanio have done the same for Antonio?
15. How does Shylock's loan to Antonio differ from Antonio's loan to Bassanio?
16. Given this scene, what is important in Venice? Look for repeated word choices for evidence. How does the language reflect that values system?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the "Ongoing Activities"), this time stopping at lines 26, 36, 48, 98, 134, and 178.
  2. Compare Shylock's use of language to Portia's. How similarly do they speak? What is different about the way they speak? Give examples of how they are alike and different, citing line numbers for each.
  3. Write a journal as if you were Bassanio regarding the terms of the bond, including his reaction to the terms, quandaries about the terms, and reasons he lets Antonio accept the terms of the bond.
  4. Write a later conversation between Bassanio and Antonio in which they discuss the events of this scene. How do they feel? Be sure to highlight Bassanio's concern and Antonio's confidence. Create a podcast of this character conversation and post it on a podcast-sharing site such as iTunes for others, including classmates, to listen and comment on.
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5. Compare the religious references in this scene to those in I, i. What type are they and how do the characters use them? Why do you think there are so many more references? Are the characters deeply religious or are they bigots?
6. Create a table listing good and bad qualities of each of these three characters: Shylock, Bassanio, and Antonio? Who qualifies as “good”? Who qualifies as “bad”? Why?
7. Review each of the scenes in this act and identify the purpose of each scene of Act I. How do they fit with one another? What ideas in one scene are illuminated in other scenes? What does the juxtaposition of scenes highlight in each other? What recurring themes, ideas, emotions, and words do you find in this act? Create a collage reflecting these themes and motifs.

## **ACT II, I.**

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### **SCENE SUMMARY**

Morocco has come to take the casket challenge to win Portia's hand, but she tells him that if he fails, he may never marry.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Examine Morocco's opening lines. What issues does he address?
2. Look at the language he uses in ll.1-12 and 22-38. How does the imagery in his speech reflect the Elizabethan perception of Moors?
3. What is Portia's reaction to Morocco? Based on her previous comments to Nerissa, do you believe her? Why or why not?
4. Notice how careful Portia is with her words. Why do you think this is? What does this indicate about her intelligence?
5. Why do you think there is no Biblical imagery, only mythological imagery, in this scene?

### **ACTIVITIES**

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the “Ongoing Activities”), this time stopping at lines 12, 22, 38, and 46.
  2. Select one of Morocco's speeches to illustrate or to create a collage about.
  3. Create a script for a talk show on prejudice in which both Morocco and Shylock are guests. What experiences would they have in common? How might their experiences differ?
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**ACT II, II.**

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**SCENE SUMMARY**

Launcelot Gobbo, Shylock's servant, ponders running away from Shylock to serve another master. He encounters his father, Old Gobbo, who is nearly blind and doesn't recognize his son. Launcelot plays a trick on his father, misdirecting him and pretending that Launcelot is dead, but soon reveals himself and asks for his father's blessing. During their reunion, Launcelot begs Bassanio to have him as a servant. Bassanio then sees Gratiano, who asks to go to Belmont with Bassanio. Bassanio allows Gratiano to accompany him, making clear, however, that Gratiano needs to be on his best behavior, since he has a reputation for being a wild man. Gratiano agrees, but asks that his behavior not be judged on the partying they plan to do that night.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What is Launcelot's debate about?
2. When Old Gobbo enters and Launcelot recognizes him, why doesn't Launcelot reveal himself to his father? What is the purpose in hiding his identity, even briefly?
3. What purpose does the scene between Launcelot and Old Gobbo have?
4. Why does Launcelot want to leave Shylock's service? How do his comments affect our perceptions about Shylock?
4. Why does Bassanio accept Launcelot as his servant so quickly? Can he afford a servant?
5. Why does Gratiano want to go with Bassanio to Belmont?
6. What terms does Bassanio give him in order to go? Under what terms does Gratiano agree?

**ACTIVITIES**

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the "Ongoing Activities"), this time stopping at lines 32, 99, 113, 166, and 203.
  2. Research the role of and importance of clowns in Elizabethan theater. What techniques did they employ for maximum effect on the audience?
  3. What opportunities do actors playing Launcelot and Old Gobbo have to make this scene hilarious? Stage and/or film this scene using physical and vocal techniques so as to heighten the scene's comedic aspects.
  4. Journal/Discussion topic: Discuss the image of an "angel/devil" debate on shoulders by showing students popular cartoons showing this concept. Have them write or tell about a time when they had to make a hard decision that had the feel of an angel/devil debate to it.
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5. Continue to track religious imagery in this scene. What does the religious imagery imply about Venetian society's cultural values? Launcelot says, "To him, father, for I am a Jew if I serve the Jew any longer" (II.112-3). What does this say about the nature of faith?

## ACT II, III.

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### SCENE SUMMARY

Jessica tells Launcelot that she, too, plans to run away from her father's house with Bassanio's friend Lorenzo.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Jessica give Launcelot?
2. What clues from I, iii and II, ii and this scene would indicate that Shylock's house is "hell" (I.2)?
3. What "compliment" is Launcelot trying to give Jessica? What is ironic about Launcelot's speech in lines 10-13?
4. Why is Jessica so ashamed to be a Jew?
5. How much of her running away is related to her oppressive father, and how much is related to her faith? What evidence do you have for your argument?
6. What similarities are there between Launcelot and Gobbo's relationship and Jessica and Shylock's? What are the differences you can see this far?

### ACTIVITIES

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the "Ongoing Activities"), this time stopping at lines 9, 14, and 21.
2. Write Jessica's letter to Lorenzo telling him about her plans to run away. Stay as faithful to her word choices and language patterns as possible.

## ACT II, IV.

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### SCENE SUMMARY

Lorenzo, Gratiano, Salerio and Solanio make plans for the masque, a Shrove Tuesday (Mardi Gras) celebration, discussing whether or not they should arrange for torchbearers. Launcelot, on his way to invite Shylock to dine with Bassanio, arrives with Jessica's letter detailing her plans for escape, which includes taking her father's gold and jewels. Lorenzo tells Gratiano that Jessica will be disguised as a page and will serve as a torchbearer during the night's festivities.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why would torchbearers be considered vile?
2. What does Jessica's letter say?
3. What is her plan?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the "Ongoing Activities"), this time stopping at lines 8 and 39.
2. The play takes place during "Shrove Tuesday", the celebration just before Lent (also known as Mardi Gras or Carnival). Research Shrove Tuesday celebrations during Elizabethan England and, after reading the play, write an essay or give a presentation on how the setting of the play during this holiday affects the mood or tone of the play.
3. This is the first of many mentions of disguises or disguising in the play. What are advantages and disadvantages of a disguise? Keep track of disguises from here on, citing the form they take, the purpose they serve, and how successful the characters are when they are disguised.

## ACT II, V.

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### SCENE SUMMARY

Shylock reacts angrily to Launcelot's leaving him, but accepts the invitation to eat with Bassanio despite some nagging premonitions. Launcelot hints to Shylock that there will be a Shrove Tuesday masque that night, and Shylock orders Jessica to lock up the house so as to avoid getting robbed by the revelers. Launcelot tells Jessica that Lorenzo will go through with their plans.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the word *gormandize* (l.3) mean?
  2. What is Shylock's initial reaction to Launcelot's leaving his service?
  3. Why does Shylock say he will accept Bassanio's invitation?
  4. How is Launcelot's "misused" word (reproach, l.20) actually accurate?
  5. Why does Shylock say at the end of the scene that he is glad Launcelot is leaving?
  6. How does Shylock perceive himself as a master and a father? Give evidence from the text to support your answer.
  7. This is the first time Launcelot and Jessica are together with Shylock onstage. How accurate were Launcelot's and Jessica's descriptions of Shylock's household? How does this further develop our understanding of Shylock's character?
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## ACTIVITIES

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the “Ongoing Activities”), this time stopping at lines 9, 21, 39, and 56.
2. Revisit your research of the perceptions about Jews in Elizabethan England and read the parable of *The Prodigal Son* from the Bible. Then, reread II.14-15: “Yet I’ll go in hate, to feed upon/The prodigal Christian.” Draw an image that conveys the image created in these lines, and write a short essay describing how these lines would have affected an Elizabethan audience. How do they affect us as readers today? How is our reaction different? How is it similar?
3. Create two portraits of Shylock: how he sees himself, and how others see him.
4. Examine Launcelot’s (and Old Gobbo’s) misused wordings in this scene and in II, ii for their literal truth. Why does Shakespeare use the clown figure to do this?

## ACT II, VI.

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### SCENE SUMMARY

Gratiano and Salerio meet Lorenzo outside Shylock’s house, in order to help Jessica, now dressed as a young man (a page), escape with a casket of Shylock’s gold and jewels. As Gratiano is about to leave for the revelries, Antonio catches him, saying that Bassanio’s ship is about to depart, so he’d better skip the festivities.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why are Gratiano and Salerio anxious?
2. What do the two men say about the nature of love? What view of love does Gratiano take? What kind of boyfriend do you think he would be?
3. Gratiano swears by his “hood” that Jessica is “gentle, and no Jew” (I.51). What do his puns refer to? How do his words reflect the Elizabethan values system? What do they say about Gratiano’s character?
4. Review Bassanio’s speech in I, i, ll.161-176. How is Lorenzo’s love for Jessica different from Bassanio’s love for Portia? How are they the same?
5. Do you think Jessica will be happy with Lorenzo? Why or why not?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the “Ongoing Activities”), this time stopping at lines 19, 39, 50, and 67.
  2. Journal/discussion topic: Do you agree with Gratiano, that the thrill of love is in the chase and not the catching?
  3. Examine the heavy wordplay between Jessica and Lorenzo in II.34-50. What images are created and how are they turned around?
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4. Read excerpts from Richard Braithwaite's *The English Gentlewoman* (1631) to discover how women were to comport themselves. If Jessica were discovered, how serious would her punishment be? Create a "Wanted" poster for Jessica's crimes against femininity.

## ACT II, VII.

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### SCENE SUMMARY

In Belmont, Morocco enters the lottery to win Portia's hand in marriage. He reads the inscriptions on each of the caskets and selects the gold one, whose inscription reads, "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire" (l.37). Since the gold casket is made of such a valuable material, he reasons, it is the only one fit to contain Portia's image. When he opens the casket, he finds a skull with a scroll in the eye socket. When he leaves, Portia declares that she hopes that all "men of his complexion" (l.79) choose the same way.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Morocco's mind work, that is, what do his words say about who he is? Based on his reasoning, what is his opinion of Portia? Where do his priorities lie?
2. How does death represent "what many men desire" (l.37)?
3. Do you think Morocco would have been a good match for Portia? Why or why not?
4. Is Portia racist? Give evidence for your claim.

### ACTIVITIES

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the "Ongoing Activities"), this time stopping at lines 12, 21, 35, 47, 60, and 79.
2. Morocco is one of only two Moors in all of Shakespeare, the other character being Othello from the play of the same name. Research similarities in Othello and Morocco's personalities and situations, and write a script of a conversation or series of correspondences they might have with one another, highlighting these similarities.

## ACT II, VIII.

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### SCENE SUMMARY

In one of the most racially charged scenes in the play, Solanio recounts for Salerio Shylock's reaction to Jessica's theft and elopement. Solanio hopes Antonio is able to pay his debt, but Salerio has heard a rumor that Antonio's ships have capsized. Salerio remembers how hard it was for Bassanio to leave Antonio, and the two decide to tell Antonio what they've heard, but to try to break the news to him gently.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Solanio report that he heard Shylock say?
2. Do you think Solanio is an accurate reporter? Why or why not?
3. If he is accurate, what new insights do you have about Shylock? What does he value more, his money or his lost daughter? Give evidence from the text to support your opinion.
4. Solanio reports that Shylock calls out for “Justice! The law” (1.17), and Salerio acknowledges that the Duke knows about Jessica’s running off with Lorenzo. What benefit could arise from the involvement of the law in this situation?
5. What reaction do the Venetians have towards Shylock’s grief?
6. What impact will Jessica’s running away with the Christian Lorenzo have on Shylock and his bond with Antonio? Why?
7. What rumor does Salerio hear about Antonio’s ships?
8. What impression do you get about Antonio’s and Bassanio’s relationship based on Salerio’s description of their parting?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the “Ongoing Activities”), this time stopping at lines 22, 26, 34, and 53.
2. Review the references to Shylock thus far in the play. How many times have characters referred to him by name? What are other ways they have referred to him? What about other characters? How do they refer to each other? What does this naming game say about Shylock’s stature in the society, and, by extension, Jessica’s stature?
3. Journal/Discussion topic: How reliable is hearsay? How much stock do you take in rumors? Do you think that Salerio and Solanio are reliable witnesses? What gives you that impression?
4. Write a monologue for Shylock depicting his actual reaction to discovering Jessica’s theft and disappearance.
5. Create a tabloid including all “newsworthy” stories from this scene.

## ACT II, IX.

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### SCENE SUMMARY

Aragon undergoes the casket test and selects the silver casket, which reveals a portrait of a “blinking idiot.” As soon as Aragon leaves, word comes that Bassanio has arrived to try the test.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What can you tell about Portia's attitude towards Aragon? What text clues do you have to support this?
2. What is Aragon's logic in selecting the silver casket? How does his logic reveal his character? How is his thinking different from Morocco's? Is he more or less intelligent than Morocco?
3. What does Portia mean in her response to Aragon's questions (ll.60-1)?
4. What does Nerissa's comment mean (ll.81-2)? What do you make of her character thus far?
5. Why is the messenger so favorable in his description of Bassanio?
6. What is Portia's response to the messenger?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the "Ongoing Activities"), this time stopping at lines 17, 21, 32, 51, 77, and 100.
2. Make a model of the caskets as well as what lies inside them. Be as faithful to the text as you can.
3. Write a journal entry as though you were Portia describing the man of her dreams. Base the description on what you know about her character.
4. Review each of the scenes in this act and identify the purpose of each scene of Act II (for example, II, ii provides a comedic break, sets up means to advance minor plotlines of the Gratiano/Nerissa love story and for Jessica's escape, and furthers the motifs of disguise, escape, and moral struggle). How do they fit with one another? What ideas in one scene are illuminated in other scenes? What does the juxtaposition of scenes highlight in each other? What recurring themes, ideas, emotions, and words do you find in this act? Create a collage reflecting these themes and motifs.
5. What is the effect of all of these short scenes on the pace and tone of the play?

## ACT III, I.

### SCENE SUMMARY

Solanio and Salerio have heard reports that confirm that Antonio's ships have indeed wrecked, and they are concerned about his bond with Shylock. Shylock, still reeling from his daughter's escape, hears from Salerio about Antonio's bad fortune, and his grief turns to anger. Salerio questions whether Shylock will really take his pound of flesh from Antonio, and Shylock responds that he will take it in revenge, just as a Christian would ("Hath not a Jew" speech, ll.50-69). Tubal, another Jew, confirms Antonio's shipwrecks and tells Shylock that he hasn't found Jessica, but has heard that she has spent 80 ducats in one night and has traded her mother's ring for a monkey. Enraged, Shylock gets an officer to arrest Antonio in order to collect his bond.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How are minor characters such as Salerio and Solanio designed to reflect Venetian society at large?
2. Why is it such a crisis for Shylock that his daughter converted and married a Christian?
3. Why does Shylock channel his grief over Jessica's leaving into anger at Antonio?
4. According to this scene, were Salerio and Solanio's report about Shylock's reaction to Jessica's escape correct? How has this affected your opinion of those two characters? How has the reaction you actually see from Shylock affected your opinion of him?
5. Which does Shylock miss more: Jessica or his money? How would his grief and anger affect the way he talks about the losses?
6. Based on how Shylock has been treated by Christians, is it wrong for him to want revenge? If positions were reversed, would Antonio demand fulfillment of the bond according to the terms that were set?
7. Why is the loss of the ring even more agonizing to Shylock?
8. Is Shylock a villain or a victim of persecution?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the "Ongoing Activities"), this time stopping at lines 18, 47, 68, 91, and 123.
2. Shylock's speech, beginning, "Hath not a Jew..." (ll.50-69) is often called "Shylock's Defense." Divide the class into two groups: one reading the speech from the perspective that Shylock is a villain; the other, reading from the perspective that Shylock is a victim. Each group should find textual examples to support their claim. Share results and discuss.
3. Create a film interpretation of "Shylock's Defense" using images to heighten the power of the words as a testament to human tolerance.
4. Research the differences between Old Testament and New Testament concepts of justice. How would this affect the belief systems of Christians and Jews alike? Which is right? How do these characters reflect these belief systems?
5. Select the most important word in this scene. Be prepared to defend your position using what you know about *The Merchant of Venice*.

## ACT III, II.

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### SCENE SUMMARY

Bassanio arrives in Belmont to vie for Portia's hand, and she tries to delay his choice so as to spend more time with him in case he chooses incorrectly. She wishes she

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could teach him how to choose, and in fact gives him clues in her song, but will not defy the letter of the law of her father's will. When Bassanio chooses correctly, Gratiano reveals that he is in love with Nerissa, completing the third romantic couple of the play. Lorenzo, Jessica, Salerio, and a messenger arrive from Venice, and Bassanio receives the news that Antonio has been arrested. Portia offers to repay the debt even twenty times over, and Bassanio makes plans to return to Venice to try to rescue his friend.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How is Portia's demeanor with Bassanio different from that with her other suitors? What new side of Portia are we seeing? Give support for your answer from the text.
2. Why the new emphasis on music (l.43)?
3. Examine the end rhymes of Portia's song as well as the images it includes. How might these be construed as hints?
4. Look at the circumstances under which Bassanio has come to court Portia. Is he the type of man Portia's father would have chosen for her? Does he have an unfair advantage in her hints?
5. Compare Bassanio's logic in selection with Morocco's and Aragon's. How does his elimination process differ from theirs? How does his description of the world also describe himself? Would he have been able to choose without Portia's hints or encouragement? Why or why not?
6. Portia gives Bassanio the ring with a warning, and Bassanio accepts the ring with his own pledge. How is this contract or bond similar to and different from the one made in Venice? What significance did rings have in Elizabethan England? Do they have the same significance today?
7. What news do Gratiano and Nerissa have? What bet do they make with Bassanio and Portia?
8. Look at the "welcome" given to Jessica (ll.218 and 237). How does she try to fit into Belmont society? What will life be like for her?
9. Bassanio comes clean about his financial status (ll.250-271). What effect does that have on Portia?
10. How does the news from Venice change the language used in Belmont?
11. What does Antonio's letter indicate about his feelings for Bassanio?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the "Ongoing Activities"), this time stopping at lines 24, 62, 72, 107, 114, 139, 174, 208, 219, 271, 283, 290, 314, 322, and 327.

2. Research the classical references in this scene. What connection, for instance, does Hercules have with Bassanio?
3. Bassanio seems to love money as much as Shylock. Review the play for evidence of their love, and create a game show, "For Love or Money," in which the characters compete for a cash sum of 3000 ducats. Be sure to use evidence from the text to help you develop questions and challenges for each of the characters.
4. Create music to accompany Portia's song to present to the class.
5. Examine the financial imagery in this scene both before the news about Antonio and afterwards. How does it shift? Create a visual to account for the change.
6. Write Bassanio's letter in reply to Antonio.

## ACT III, III.

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### SCENE SUMMARY

Shylock takes Antonio to jail, with Antonio pleading for mercy in vain. Solanio and Antonio discuss whether the Duke will dismiss the case, but Antonio believes the law will hold.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does Shylock insist on the punishment for forfeiting the bond?
2. Why does Solanio think the Duke will forgive the forfeiture? Why doesn't Antonio?
3. Much of this play has to do with Christian vs. Jewish standards of morality. What takes precedence in Venetian law, where commerce is king?

### ACTIVITIES

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the "Ongoing Activities"), this time stopping at lines 17 and 36.
2. Research the Elizabethan laws regarding repayment of debts and honoring bonds to share with the class. What kind of language is used? How would this be interpreted in the commercial city of Venice?

## ACT III, IV.

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### SCENE SUMMARY

Portia leaves her estate in the hands of Lorenzo while pretending to stay at a monastery a few miles away during their husbands' absence. Instead, she gets documents and legal clothing from her lawyer cousin so she and Nerissa may go to Venice. Portia promises she will divulge her plan on the way to Venice.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why would Portia even consider helping Antonio?
2. What does she tell Lorenzo that she and Nerissa will do? What is their actual plan?
3. What does Portia's speech about their disguises (II.60-78) say about her opinion of men?
4. How is she equipped to portray a man?
5. What does Jessica's cross-dressing have in common with Portia and Nerissa's? What purpose does each serve?
6. What disadvantages do you see with Portia, coming from Belmont to Venice? What advantages does she have?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the "Ongoing Activities"), this time stopping at lines 36, 56, 78, and 84.
2. Brainstorm films in which men have played women (or vice versa) to achieve some goal. What are the obstacles and challenges they face? What are the benefits of playing someone of the opposite sex? What lessons do those people learn? Create a list of those qualities and make predictions about what Nerissa and Portia will discover in Venice.

## ACT III, V.

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### SCENE SUMMARY

In a scriptural debate Launcelot tells Jessica he believes she is damned for her father's sins, but she asserts that because of her husband, she will not be. Launcelot complains about the conversion of the Jews, which, since they will not be forbidden to eat pork, will raise the price of bacon. Lorenzo enters and berates Launcelot for getting a Moorish servant pregnant. He and Nerissa discuss Portia's merits, and Lorenzo comments that he is as great a husband as Portia is a wife.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Antonio quips that the devil can cite scripture for his own purpose (I, iii, l.95). How does the scriptural debate between Launcelot and Jessica serve each character's purpose? This debate has the potential to explode the harmony of Belmont. How does Shakespeare diffuse this?
  2. How has the relationship between Jessica and Launcelot changed since Launcelot became Bassanio's servant and not Shylock's? Has his change in master changed his personality? Explain.
  3. Why does Launcelot use wordplay as humor? What effect does his humor have?
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4. What do Jessica and Lorenzo think of Portia? Why is their opinion important enough for Shakespeare to show?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the “Ongoing Activities”), this time stopping at lines 17, 35, 42, 68, and 89.
2. Examine the scriptural references in the play. Many verses in Biblical scripture contradict one another. Find scriptural support to defend both Launcelot's and Jessica's positions.
3. Review each of the scenes in this act and identify the purpose of each scene of Act III. How do they fit with one another? What ideas in one scene are illuminated in other scenes? What does the juxtaposition of scenes highlight in each other? What are the recurring themes, ideas, emotions, and words in this act? Create a collage reflecting these themes and motifs.

## ACT IV, I.

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### SCENE SUMMARY

Shylock refuses to dismiss the bond, even for repayment of twice the original loan. The Duke tries to reason with Shylock, asking him to have mercy in order to gain mercy, but Shylock argues that, since he has purchased his pound of flesh, it is his to do with as he likes.

Portia and Nerissa show up disguised, respectively as a young lawyer and a clerk, just as the Duke is ready to allow Shylock to claim his bond. Portia acknowledges the bond, but appeals to Shylock with her “quality of mercy is not strained” speech (II.183-204). When he refuses, Portia says the law must be upheld, but asks him to reconsider mercy. Still, he demands his bond.

As Shylock prepares his knife and the scales on which to weigh the flesh, Antonio bids a passion-filled farewell to Bassanio, who declares that he would give up his wife to keep Antonio alive, to Portia and Nerissa's chagrin.

As the sentence comes down, Portia reveals the loopholes in the law: not a drop of blood may be spilled with the taking of the pound of flesh; and precisely a pound of flesh may be taken, no more or less. Otherwise, all his possessions will be confiscated by the state of Venice. When Shylock backpedals, trying to take the payment rather than the bond, Portia shows no mercy. Furthermore, since Shylock has essentially plotted murder, his property will be split between Antonio and the state, and he is subject to the death penalty. The Duke allows him to live but requires that not only should Shylock's property be willed to Lorenzo and Jessica but that Shylock become a Christian as well. Shylock assents, saying, “I am not well” (I.395).

Antonio and Bassanio offer to pay the disguised Portia and Nerissa for their help. They refuse, but Portia agrees to take Antonio's gloves, asking Bassanio for his wedding ring. Bassanio initially refuses, but recants, sending Gratiano to deliver the ring.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is Antonio's mood going into the trial? How does this compare with his mood in I, i? Why do you think this is?
  2. What comparisons does Antonio make concerning Bassanio's arguing with Shylock?
  3. How is others' treatment of their slaves comparable to Shylock's treatment of his 'pound of flesh,' according to Shylock? How does this argument test Venetian law?
  4. If the courts do not uphold Shylock's claim, what does that mean for the laws of Venice?
  5. How do those in the courtroom react to Shylock? How would you describe their behavior? How is their behavior similar to and different from behavior towards him in the streets of Venice? Find evidence from the text for your comparison.
  6. What appeals does Portia make in petitioning Shylock to have mercy? What effect do these appeals have on Shylock?
  7. Why is Shylock so adamant about the law and in his refusal to grant mercy, despite the offer of double and triple repayment? What is greater than his religion and his love of money?
  8. Does it surprise you that Portia upholds the law instead of bending it in this case? Why or why not?
  9. What does it mean for Shylock to call Portia a "Daniel"?
  10. Why does Shylock refuse to get a doctor to attend to Antonio?
  11. What effect do Bassanio's pleas have?
  12. What is Antonio's reaction to the trial?
  13. How does Gratiano respond to the proceedings?
  14. How does Portia save Antonio's life?
  15. What is the legal punishment for conspiring against a Venetian's life?
  16. What mercy does the Duke show? Before he gives his punishment, the Duke tells Shylock that he will "see the difference of our spirit" (I.367). What is the spirit of the Venetians, and by extension, Christians?
  17. What about Antonio's mercy? What are his conditions?
  18. How does Shylock feel about the outcome of the trial? How do you feel about it?
  19. Was this a fair trial? Explain.
  20. What do the Venetians gain from Shylock's conversion to Christianity? Why would this punishment be viewed as a virtuous one?
  21. What new insights do Portia and Nerissa have into their husbands' natures as a result of this trial?
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22. Shakespeare calls this play a comedy. How does the outcome of this trial help the play qualify?
23. Why would Portia ask Bassanio for the ring he had promised not to give away? What does this say about her character?
24. What excuse does Bassanio give the disguised Portia for not initially giving her his wedding ring?
25. How easy is it for Antonio to change Bassanio's mind? What does Antonio say Bassanio should value more than the ring?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the "Ongoing Activities"), this time stopping at lines 15, 62, 87, 103, 120, 142, 204, 241, 280, 297, 311, 330, 362, 376, 399, 428, and 456.
2. Look at the behaviors of the men during this trial: Antonio, Bassanio, Shylock, Gratiano, and the Duke. How does each respond to the proceedings in the courtroom? How is Portia different from all these men? Create a collage to represent each character's emotional state during this poignant scene.
3. Rewrite this scene as if it were held in an unbiased courtroom. What arguments could be made there? What would be the effect on Portia's arguments?
4. Examine the players and their interest in the proceedings. If you were Shylock's lawyer, what motions would you have made to get this trial dismissed? Write a script in which you, Shylock's lawyer, make a motion for a retrial.
5. By forcing him to convert to Christianity, Antonio prevents Shylock from practicing usury, which Antonio says (I, iii.) was the reason for his prejudiced behavior towards Shylock in the public square. How will Antonio's attitude towards Shylock change, if at all? Write a scene showing a later encounter between Antonio and Shylock based on your opinion.
6. Research different historical eras and script audience reactions from each of these eras towards this scene: a) Elizabethan England; b) American Romantic era 1845; c) 1930s Nazi Germany; d) Modern America.
7. Create a video diary a la "People's Court" or any reality TV show showing reactions of some of the characters as they come out of the courtroom.
8. In her essay "Shylock and History" Shakespearean actress Jami Rogers notes:

"In Shylock's final scene, Shakespeare had him act out another stereotype: a ritual murder. Of course, there is no mention in the play that Shylock would use Antonio's blood in any religious ritual. But the audience would have immediately associated the stage action with the myth. Shakespeare seemed to be giving his audience exactly what they expect from a stage Jew. In Portia, the audience got the means to stop the ritual murder because she would not let the Jew shed one drop of Christian blood. The text specifically says 'Christian,' reinforcing the 'blood libel' legends."

What other myths about Jews were around in Elizabethan England? How do those myths manifest themselves in other scenes of the play? Create a log of the play, detailing these myths and any allusions to them in these scenes, noting whether they are written to play up those myths or to dispel them or change them in some way. What effect would these stereotypes have had on the audiences of that day? What effect do they have on us today?

9. Many productions of *The Merchant of Venice* end after Shylock's defeat in court. Write an essay discussing how that cutting shapes an audience's view of this play.
10. Rewrite this scene in modern English, maintaining the tone and purpose of the scene. Perform the scene for the class or film it and post it on a video sharing site such as YouTube for others, including classmates, to view and comment on.

## ACT IV, II.

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### SCENE SUMMARY

Portia and Nerissa deliver the deed for Shylock to sign. Gratiano catches up to deliver Bassanio's ring to them. Nerissa decides to get Gratiano to give up his ring, and both plot to make the men sorry they ever did.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the fact that both Bassanio and Gratiano give their rings away say about relationships between men and relationships between men and women?
2. How serious will the consequences of giving the rings away be? How do you know?
3. What is Shakespeare's intent in bringing in the ring plotline here? What purpose does it serve?

### ACTIVITIES

1. Continue the summary activity (#3 of the "Ongoing Activities"), this time stopping at the end of the scene only.
  2. Script a conversation between Portia and Nerissa for the coach on the way back to Belmont.
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**ACT V, I.**

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**SCENE SUMMARY**

In Portia's garden Lorenzo and Jessica compare themselves to famous romantic couples of myth and literature. When servants inform them of their masters' arrivals, Lorenzo asks for music with which to greet Portia, noting its power to charm.

Portia and Nerissa arrive, warning the servants not to mention their absence. Upon his return Bassanio introduces the women to Antonio. Portia and Nerissa quarrel with Bassanio and Gratiano respectively about their missing rings, withholding their husbands' marital privileges until they have their rings back. In fact, both women confess they slept with the lawyer and his clerk to retrieve their rings.

Before the men are too shocked at their wives' "unfaithfulness," Portia shows them a letter from her lawyer cousin explaining their roles in saving Antonio's life. In true romantic form, Antonio's ships miraculously return, Lorenzo and Jessica learn they will inherit Shylock's fortune, and everyone retires to bed as morning comes.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. How does the dramatic shift in setting affect the tone of the play at this point?
2. Why does Shakespeare return us to Lorenzo and Jessica? What can we glean about their relationship? Are they a good match? Explain your answer.
3. What effect does music have on the characters specifically, and on the scene in general?
4. Examine the argument about the ring (ll.192-208). What is the tone of that argument? How do you know this? How has Shakespeare molded the language to convey this tone?
5. How is this scene the comic inverse of the courtroom scene from IV, i.?
6. How is Portia's intelligence an asset to her marriage? How is it a hindrance?
7. Note the language play in this scene. How does it reflect the emotional tone of the scene?
8. The act starts in moonlight and ends as morning comes. Why?
9. Does this play have a "happily ever after" ending? Why or why not? What contributes to that feeling? What detracts from it?

**ACTIVITIES**

1. Research the classical allusions in this scene. How are Lorenzo and Jessica like or unlike each of those famous couples? Would they want to be in the same league as those mentioned?
  2. Create a musical composition appropriate for this scene.
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3. Research the reference to “cuckold” and give a presentation on its significance in Elizabethan culture.
4. Create an emotional EKG chart of this scene for the reactions of each of these characters based on line numbers.
5. One of the awkward bits of staging this play comes from the exits for this scene: three sets of couples, plus Antonio. Block (give specific stage directions for) this in a meaningful way that leaves the audience with a specific feeling about the characters and their future.

## AFTER READING THE PLAY

### ESSAY TOPICS

1. Although Shylock only appears in five scenes, he dominates *The Merchant of Venice*. In fact, many critics say that although Shylock was first intended to be a stock comic character, he “outgrew” Shakespeare’s play. What do they mean?
2. Read modern adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice*, such as Arnold Wesker’s play *Shylock* (1976) and A. R. Gurney’s modern sequel *Overtime* (1996), and write an analysis comparing and contrasting one or both with Shakespeare’s play.
3. A Shakespearean comedy often involves complex twists of plot and usually ends in marriage. A Shakespearean tragedy involves a hero whose downfall is the focus of the play. British actor Peter Ustinov said once in an interview, “A comedy is just a tragedy gone wrong, and a tragedy is just a comedy gone wrong.” Using evidence and direct quotes from the play, write a persuasive essay in which you convince your readers that *The Merchant of Venice* is either a comedy or a tragedy.
4. The Nazis found *The Merchant of Venice* to be a useful piece of propaganda during their reign. How would their production have looked? How would the characters have been portrayed? Which lines would have been emphasized? Write an essay in which you discuss how *The Merchant of Venice* could have been an effective tool for spreading anti-Semitism?
5. Throughout the play, Christians de-personalize and alienate Shylock by refusing to use his given name. Instead, they call him “the Jew,” “the villain Jew,” “this currish Jew,” “impenetrable cur,” “harsh Jew,” “infidel,” “cruel devil,” and the devil “in the likeness of the Jew.” To the Christian characters, Shylock is the embodiment of the devil. Write an essay discussing whether Shylock is a villain or a result of the way he has been treated, using support from the play as evidence.
6. In Shakespeare’s world the stereotype of Jews was viciously negative; similarly, Morocco, an African, would have been scorned as inferior. But do Shakespeare’s plays encourage or challenge the widespread anti-Semitism and racism of the time? Write an essay in which you examine which characters reinforce negative images, and which break the stereotypes and how. How do you think a modern

viewer's response to stereotypes differs from viewers in Shakespeare's time? Do you conclude that Shakespeare was anti-Semitic and/or racist? Why or why not?

7. Write an essay in which you examine the various types of love featured in *The Merchant of Venice*: friendship, love between father and child, romantic love, as well as love of possessions/money. Which type of love is shown to be the strongest in the play? What about the tensions in some of the relationships? What is Shakespeare telling us about the nature of love?
8. In an essay, defend or refute: Shylock is the most morally upright character in the play.

## ACTIVITIES

1. The way the audience sees Shylock depends heavily on the director's, and thus the actor's, interpretation of the role. Indeed, Shakespearean actors consider this role one of the most challenging roles they can portray. Some portray him as a tragic victim of the circumstances, some see him as comic caricature, others portray him as a villain, and still others see him as a religious fundamentalist, able to see moral issues only as black and white. Re-examine Shylock's lines in Act I, iii (ll.32-43 and ll.98-121). In groups, decide on an interpretation of each set of lines and perform them for the class. Note how different interpretations reveal different facets of his character and the way the audience views this complex character.
2. Read reports of Charles Macklin's 1741 portrayal of Shylock versus Henry Irving's 1879 portrayal. What can account for the difference in interpretation? Write journals as if you were those actors preparing for opening night. What thoughts, experiences, and attitudes might you have brought to those interpretations?
3. Research directors' comments about directing *The Merchant of Venice* through DVD commentary, podcasts, interviews, or any other medium to discover how they handled one or more of the following elements of the play:
  - a) Casting Shylock, Portia, and Antonio's characters and determining how they should be portrayed
  - b) How religion is dealt with
  - c) The look of the play, as in costuming and set design
  - d) The music of the play and the ideas it conveys
4. Create a casting director's book. For each of the characters in *The Merchant of Venice*, develop a description of each character, qualities an actor needs to portray that character, and potential actors for the role and their acting credits. For each of the potential actors, write a rationale citing reasons that actor would be the best for that role.
5. View several stagings of this play, many of which are available on video sharing sites like YouTube. Which do you think is most faithful to the play? Which is most effective and why? Which are completely off the mark and why?



6. Using lines from the play to “hook” a potential audience, create a film trailer for a new film adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*.
7. The cartoon series *The Simpsons* regularly references classical pieces of literature in its series (for instance, one episode references Homer’s *Odyssey*; another references *Hamlet*). Create a parody of *The Merchant of Venice* using a pop culture reference as a base (*Star Wars* and *The Godfather* might provide jumping-off points for students).
8. Portia’s father created a lottery to best determine a proper husband for his daughter, even after his death. Investigate compatibility quizzes and create a game (or a game show) to help people find their true match. Be sure to create questions that will show a contestant’s true nature and reveal his or her priorities to a potential love interest. Practice your game among your classmates and see whom you would be most compatible with.
9. Read about ways to stamp out prejudice and hate at the Teaching Tolerance website at [www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org). Brainstorm ideas that would work best at your school and create an awareness campaign that could be publicized via your school website, hall posters, announcements, school and local newspapers, as well as your school news broadcast.
10. Have students create a T-chart (table with two columns): one side listing positive character traits (honesty, compassion, etc.) and the second of negative character traits (greed, cruelty, etc.). As a class, create a character trait T-chart for Shylock, citing passages to support each characteristic.

Next, divide the class into small groups, assigning each group either one major character (Antonio, Bassanio, Portia, Gratiano) or several minor characters (Salerio, Solanio, and Launcelot; Lorenzo, Jessica, Nerissa, and the Duke), making a character trait T-chart with text support for each characteristic. Groups should present their charts to the class.

After all the groups have presented, have the class draw some conclusions about the characters. Have their opinions about Shylock changed? How about their opinions of the other characters?

11. Write a soliloquy or a journal for one of the major characters from the play, incorporating direct quotations from throughout the play.
  12. Research Christopher Marlowe’s play *The Jew of Malta*, written in 1590. What influences did Shakespeare take from Marlowe’s play? What did he contribute that was new?
  13. Draw a large circle on a piece of paper representing the society in which *The Merchant of Venice* is set. Place the main characters from the play to show the relationship of each to the mainstream society in the center. Characters closer to the center are more accepted in society and thus have more power; characters closer to the outside are less accepted and therefore less powerful.
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Compare your diagram with ones done by classmates. What differences are there? Discuss your reasoning and try to reach a consensus on where each character should be plotted. Who is an “insider”? Who is an “outsider”? What are the relationships between the characters in the center and at the edges? Try making a similar chart placing characters based on how sympathetic they are and compare. What do you see?

Where did you position Morocco and Shylock? Why do you think Shakespeare placed these characters from the outer circle of society at the center of action in his plays? What is the role of the “outsider” in *The Merchant of Venice*?

Now think beyond Shakespeare: what can an “outsider” character see that other characters cannot? What can he or she show or teach us? Look back on your own experience and recall a time when you were the “outsider.” Draw a concentric circle diagram, plotting where you and others stood during that event. Write a short personal essay about that time.

14. Write the name of each character on an index card and place them in a stack. Create two more cards: “Christian” and “Jewish.” Divide students into teams of three or four. Each team draws one card from the character pile and one of the two category cards. For example, this might yield “Portia” and “Jewish.” What if Portia had been Jewish? Each team should brainstorm how this change would affect the outcome of a particular scene and then present their findings to the class.
  15. In groups of three, identify a pair of characters from *The Merchant of Venice* who have something in common: two women; two “outsiders;” two characters in love; two characters who feel similar emotions; two winners; two losers (for example, Bassanio and Shylock both love money). Have one member serve as an interviewer, with the other two taking on the character roles. Create questions for the interviewer to ask, designed to explore, compare, and contrast what the two characters have in common. Have the characters answer without a script.
  16. Using an online concordance, such as “Shakespeare Searched,” research an image or repeated word (such as money/ducats/gold/fortune) to see how it is used in the play. Write an essay explaining how that one word or image, both literally and figuratively, was used. Draw conclusions about the role of that image in the world of the play.
  17. Trevor Nunn, director of the Masterpiece Theatre production of *The Merchant of Venice*, said, “My intention is to show that the play is as much anti-Christian as it is anti-Semitic. It is a masterpiece about human behavior in extremis.” To what extent do you agree? Using support from the text, create a PowerPoint or another visual display to demonstrate your viewpoint.
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## RESOURCES

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### FILM VERSIONS

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Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* (2004)

Don Selwyn's *The Maori Merchant of Venice* (2002, New Zealand).

This play sets the struggle between the Maori and white New Zealanders.

Jack Gold's *The Complete Dramatic Works of Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice* (1980)

Pierre Boullion's *Le Marchand de Venise* (1953)

Trevor Nunn's *The Merchant of Venice*. Mobil Masterpiece Theater, PBS (2001).

### HELPFUL WEBSITES:

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Folger Shakespeare Library. **[www.folger.edu](http://www.folger.edu)**

The Folger Shakespeare Library has multiple primary documents, artwork, and critical essays to assist students and teachers alike in understanding Elizabethan England.

Teaching Tolerance Website. **[www.tolerance.org/teach/](http://www.tolerance.org/teach/)**

This website provides many activities to improve school environment regarding differences.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. **[www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)**

This site gives insight into the history of Anti-Semitism.

### COMPANION WORKS OF LITERATURE

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*Fiddler on the Roof*.

Respect for parents' wishes, culture.

*Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain.

Boy bucks society's "civilized" values for friendship.

*King Lear*, William Shakespeare.

Parent-child relationships gone wrong.

*Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck.

Sacrifices for friendship.

*Othello*, William Shakespeare.

A heroic Moor is brought down by racial prejudice, jealousy, and murder.

*To Kill A Mockingbird*, Harper Lee.

Courtroom setting, sacrifice.

*The Wave*, Todd Strasser.

A history teacher's lesson about the Nazi movement takes on a life of its own.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

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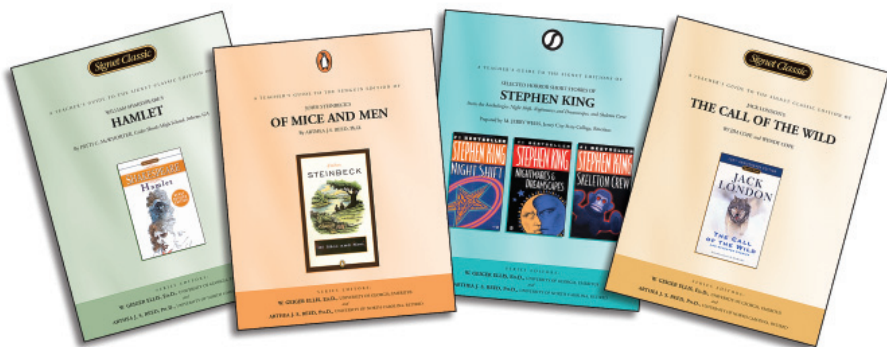
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