

2010 Study Guide for *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare

Before seeing/reading the play

1. The plot of *The Merchant of Venice* is based on two folk tales. Research Shakespeare's source material for *The Merchant of Venice*. These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sources/merchantsources.html>
<http://www.bl.uk/treasures/shakespeare/merchant.html>
2. The play takes place in two locations: Belmont and Venice. Research the history of Venice. What are the unique qualities of the city? What was its reputation in Shakespeare's day? What was the economy based on? What is the Rialto? What is the meaning of the name Belmont? Based on the meaning, what do you expect Belmont to be like? These and other website provide information:
http://www.tours-italy.com/venice-about-history_of_venice.htm
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rialto_Bridge
<http://www.babynametrain.com/meanings/boy/belmont/>
3. Define mercy. Define justice. What does it mean to be just? What does it mean to be merciful? In what ways can justice and mercy work against each other? Think of an instance (either actual or imaginary) in which mercy would triumph over justice. Think of an instance in which justice would triumph over mercy. How is it possible for both to co-exist, or be reconciled, in terms of "merciful justice" or "just mercy"?
4. Research the scales as an emblem of justice. What other elements does the figure of Justice traditionally include? What does each element signify? This and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_Justice

5. The word bond appears throughout *The Merchant of Venice*. What are the various definitions of the word bond? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.answers.com/topic/bond>
<http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/bond>
6. What is usury? How was it regarded in Shakespeare's time? How is it regarded nowadays? These and other websites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Usury>
<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Pope+Eugenius+IV+and+Jewish+money-lending+in+Florence:+the+case+of...-a015674106>
7. What is capitalism? Research the development of capitalism. How was it manifested in Shakespeare's time? What was the Elizabethan attitude toward money's reproducing itself? Why? This and other websites provide information:
<http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?historyid=aa49>
http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/articles/1998_usury.htm
8. When and why were Jews expelled from England? What was life like for the few who remained there in secret? In what ways, both negative and positive, were Jews portrayed in Christian teachings? How were Jews portrayed in popular culture and on the stage? Research religious conversion in Elizabethan England, especially forced conversion. How many changes of religion had English Christians been compelled to undergo in the thirty years before this play was written? How might Christians' personal experience of persecution have affected attitudes about converting Jews, if at all? This and other websites provide information:
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/merchant/ei_shylock.html
<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/queen-elizabeth-i-jews-catholics.htm>
<http://remember.org/History.root.classical.html>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_and_antisemitism#The_Church_Fathers
9. What is a stereotype? Why do stereotypes occur? How fair are they? Who creates them? What are stereotypes meant to do? How are stereotypes broken? This and other websites provide information:
<http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/problem/stereoty.htm>

10. How and why are we defined by the material objects we possess? What is the value of material possessions in our society? In materialism, we define and value ourselves by what we possess; what are other ways we define and value ourselves (i.e.: power, whom we know)? How do you define and value yourself? How would you like others to define and value you?

11. Look up the following words, whose meanings in Shakespeare's time were somewhat different from their current meanings: Affection. Use. Thrift. These and other resources provide information:
A Shakespeare Glossary (1986), C.T. Onions
Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary (1971), Alexander Schmidt
<http://www.william-shakespeare.info/william-shakespeare-dictionary.htm>

12. Look up the following words, including their origins: Ghetto. Bankrupt. Hazard. Gentile. These and other websites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghetto>
<http://www.worldwidewords.org/weirdwords/ww-ban1.htm>
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/hazard>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gentile>

Resources

Books:

Shylock: A Legend and its Legacy (1992), John Gross, Simon & Schuster
The Merchant of Venice: Texts and Contexts (2002), ed. M. Lindsay Kaplan
Understanding The Merchant of Venice: A Student Casebook (2000), ed. Jay L. Halio
Shakespeare and the Jews (1996), James Shapiro, Columbia University Press

Films:

The Merchant of Venice (2004), Al Pacino as Shylock
The Merchant of Venice (2001), Royal National Theatre
Playing Shakespeare (1982), John Barton, especially the section with Barton, Patrick Stewart and David Suchet discussing Shylock

Learn more about Shakespeare's life and times at the following websites:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>

<http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=865&CFID=6230886&CFTOKEN=25420173>

<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>

<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/life.htm>

<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your research on Shakespeare's sources. What elements did Shakespeare keep intact from the sources? What elements did he eliminate? What elements did he add? What do you deduce he regarded as important to the story he was telling?
2. What is the emotional state of Antonio in his first scene? What is the emotional state of Portia in her first scene? How do their friends explain their states? How do they explain them? What does each do to cope with his or her state?
3. In Act I, scene ii, Portia observes, "If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages princes' palaces.... I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done than to be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching." Find instances in the play in which individuals claim a set of principles and fail to live according to them. How do they account for the discrepancies? How excusable do you find their inconsistencies?
4. Describe Bassanio's finances at the beginning of the play. How did they get that way? How does he hope to improve them? How does he intend to use love as a means of improving his situation?
5. The title of one of the sources for *The Merchant of Venice*, *Il Pecorone*, means "sheep." Find the references to sheep in the play—Biblical, classical and everyday. Who makes these references? Who and what are compared to sheep? How apt are these comparisons? How do they further your understanding of the world of the play?

6. Consider the test of the three caskets and the three suitors who try to solve the riddles contained in the inscriptions. Answer the following questions for each: Prince of Morocco (Act II, scene vii), Prince of Arragon (Act II, scene ix) and Bassanio (Act III, scene ii). What is the presumed religion of each suitor? What do you learn about him through his reasoning about the value and significance of gold, silver and lead? Given what each values, what makes each suitable or unsuitable as a husband for Portia? Describe the changes Bassanio goes through during the casket scene. How does he become worthy of winning?
7. Antonio describes himself as “the tainted wether of the flock,” (“tainted castrate” in the OSF production.) What does that mean? Why does he make this claim? What does he see as his due as “the tainted wether/castrate”?
8. Chart the relationship of Antonio and Bassanio through the play. What does each particularly value in the other? What does each want of the other? How does each go about getting it? What is each willing to risk for the other? What is each willing to sacrifice? What future do you imagine for their relationship?
9. Consider the two meanings of “hazard”: danger and gamble. What danger do the suitors risk in trying to win Portia? What do they hope their gamble will win for them? What sacrifices and risks are required of the other characters in the play? What does each hope to gain?
10. Refer to your research about Elizabethan attitudes toward Jews. How does Shakespeare’s portrait of Shylock conform to these attitudes? How does it deviate? What treatment does Shylock receive from the other characters only because he is Jewish? What other reasons do they have for the way they treat him?
11. List the names other than Shylock by which other characters talk about or address him. What do they tell you about Shylock? About the speaker? About attitudes in the Venice of the play? List the animals to which Shylock is compared. What do these comparisons tell you about Shylock? About the speaker? About attitudes in the Venice of the play?

12. According to their statements of belief, what are the values of the Christian characters? According to their actions, what are their values? Answer the same questions for the Jewish characters. In what areas are they similar? Where are they different?
13. Salerio and Solanio give us our first impression of how Shylock responds to his daughter's elopement and theft. Consider their previous behavior. To what extent do you think they present an accurate image of Shylock's response? To what extent do you think they exaggerate?
14. Chart the instances of prejudice throughout the play. How does Shakespeare use prejudice to move the plot forward? How would the story be different if people judged each other on their characters and actions rather than on their religion, ethnicity, age, skin color or gender?
15. Portia's first question on entering the court in Act IV, scene i is "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" Chart the similarities and differences of Antonio and Shylock. How does each cope with the loss of large sums of money? How does Antonio treat Shylock? How does Shylock treat Antonio? In what ways are they both outsiders in their communities? What do Portia's words suggest about the way we define/differentiate groups of people? How do her later actions support or negate this?
16. What are the conditions of the contract between Antonio and Shylock? What justification do Antonio, Portia and the Duke offer for honoring the contract? Make the case that they should honor the contract no matter the consequences. Make the case that circumstances justify their refusing to honor the contract. How would you handle the situation if you were the Duke or Portia?
17. Describe the case which the Prince of Morocco makes against prejudice based upon appearance (Act II, scene i). Describe Shylock's speech about the common humanity of Jews and Christians (Act III, scene i). Compare these two rationales.
18. Use Shylock's speech in Act III, scene i, "Hath not a Jew eyes?" Substitute the word *woman* for *Jew*, and for *Christian*, substitute *man*. Consider Portia in relation to this

reworked manifesto, in particular those instances in which she steps outside her traditional “feminine” role. What “unwomanly” or “masculine” acts does she perform? What would be the play’s outcome if she adhered strictly to the traditional woman’s role?

19. Describe Shylock as a father. What does he expect of his daughter? What are his fears for her? How does he provide for her? How does he protect her? In what areas does she disappoint him? What about her does he value most?
20. How does Lancelot treat his father, Old Gobbo? How does Jessica treat her father, Shylock? How does Portia treat her late father’s wishes? How does each father protect his child, and against what? How does each child respond to the protection?
21. Lancelot is the only character whose conscience presents him alternatives. What other characters face choices, and what options and reasoning might their consciences present them?
22. What conditions did Portia’s father impose on her? How does she honor the terms of his wishes? What conditions bind the court of Venice to honor the contract between Antonio and the Duke? Compare these two contracts. How does Portia manage to accommodate them both?
23. As the trial begins, how does the Duke describe Shylock? How impartial a judge do you expect him to be? How impartially does he uphold the law?
24. What actions does Shylock perform during the trial to alienate sympathy? What actions engage sympathy? What are your feelings about Shylock at the end of the trial?
25. In the trial scene (Act IV, scene i), what is the case for justice? What is the case for mercy? How and why do they conflict? How is the conflict resolved? In your opinion, which prevails, justice or mercy? To what extent has “justice season[ed] mercy”? To what extent is it necessary for there to be contention between justice and mercy? How does Portia handle the tension between mercy and justice? What leeway does she have to treat Shylock justly? To treat him mercifully?

26. At the end of the play, what has Shylock lost? What has he retained? What, if anything, has he gained?
27. In Act V, scene i, Jessica and Lorenzo compare themselves to famous mythic couples. What was the outcome for each of these famous sets of lovers? Which aspects of the couples' stories do they invoke? Why do Jessica and Lorenzo draw parallels to them?
28. There are several conversions in the play. Jessica welcomes her conversion. Shylock's conversion is forced on him. Portia speaks of herself and all she owns being "converted" to Bassanio. Examine each of these episodes. How do they relate? How does each character view conversion? Also, this production adds a conversion that's not in Shakespeare's text. Why? How does this episode comment on the others?
29. Describe the trick Portia and Nerissa play on their husbands with their rings. What might they wish to accomplish by playing such a trick? What do they in fact accomplish?
30. Describe the city of Venice. Describe Portia's estate at Belmont. What are their essential differences? What are their essential similarities? How is each dependent on the other? Which events could only take place in Venice? Which only in Belmont?
31. How are the relationships in the play a reflection of the society? Look specifically at Portia and Bassanio, Antonio and Shylock, Jessica and Lorenzo.
32. How successful is the final scene in restoring the play's comic tone? Make the case that the play is a comedy. A tragedy. Both. Neither.
33. Describe what you imagine the relationships of the three couples (Portia and Bassanio, Nerissa and Gratiano, Jessica and Lorenzo) will be five years after the play ends. Consider their finances, social status, friendships, happiness. Where will Antonio fit in these relationships?
34. As the play ends, which characters are included and in what? Which are excluded and from what? What choices have they – or others – made that exclude them? What qualifies an individual for inclusion? What standards are used to justify exclusion?

35. Women disguise themselves in men's clothing in both *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Since it's such a radical act, what good reasons does each woman have for passing as a man? What would be the differences if she performed the same actions without disguise?
36. If you are also seeing *Twelfth Night*, compare the outsiders Malvolio and Shylock. What characteristics set each apart from the others in the play? What choices does each make that cause him to be excluded? What opportunities for inclusion is each offered? Why does he turn them down?
37. If you are seeing other plays this season, compare the father-child relationships: Portia and her father (*The Merchant of Venice*). Jessica and Shylock (*The Merchant of Venice*). Lisa and Ann (*Well*). Brick and Big Daddy (*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*). Viola and her father (*Twelfth Night*). Olivia and her father (*Twelfth Night*). Hamlet and Hamlet. Ophelia and Polonius (*Hamlet*). Laertes and Polonius (*Hamlet*). Elizabeth and Mr. Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*). Prince Hal and King Henry (*Henry IV, Part One*). Hotspur and Northumberland (*Henry IV, Part One*).

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