Study Materials for

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

by William Shakespeare

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Dear Educator,

Welcome to Southwest Shakespeare Company’s 23rd season! We are dedicated to providing quality productions of Shakespeare’s plays and excited that you have chosen to share our matinee performance of *The Merchant of Venice* with your students.

Experiencing a play on stage opens students to the full range of the dramatic arts and brings literary elements to life right before their eyes. You are providing your students with another crucial means of analyzing and assessing as well as giving lasting memories and helping to create a new generation of theatregoers and lovers of Shakespeare. We applaud your efforts to keep the learning process meaningful and memorable for your students.

This year, we bring you new study guides to use as your class embarks on its journey to discover classical theatre. We’ve designed our curriculum guides in three sections so you have an array of options for teaching overview or details:

1) information about the play itself and its genre,
2) ways to analyze the play’s elements, whether you’re teaching the play or not, and information that can prepare your students for the theatrical experience, and
3) discussion questions and activities you can use in the classroom before and after the performance—

all designed with elements of the Arizona Common Core in mind.

We hope you find our resources helpful and productive. If you have any suggestions for activities or topics not already found in this study guide, please feel free to contact us at education@swshakespeare.org or swillis@asf.net. We are always interested in hearing new ways to excite your students about Shakespeare and live theatre.

Happy Teaching!
Welcome to *The Merchant of Venice*

We assume that, when a Shakespeare play is called a romantic comedy, it will follow the perilous and hilarious road of true love to the altar. His comedies do that, but the nature of the perils vary, and at times Shakespeare plants the action amid the real tensions of his world—which are often also real tensions in our world. That context can give comedy some bite, some bitterness, some edge, so that even amid romance it is not all fairy dust and wedding bells. Nowhere in the canon is that more true for us than with *The Merchant of Venice*.

The play gives us two worlds—one is Venice, the mercantile center of Renaissance Europe, a world of venture capital; the other, Belmont, a separate world of aristocratic privilege and wealth. Thus we instantly meet different sets of values, different pressures, and different opportunities. Law rules Venice; a paternal edict still rules Belmont even after the father's death. Shakespeare weaves these worlds together amid love, conflict, and crisis in what has become, from the perspective of the early 21st century, a play of genuine interpretive challenge and so of genuine interest for us as theatregoers. Performance must make specific choices, so for us to feel the fashion and fabric of the text/script and then the pulse of the living performance within it is the great joy of meeting Shakespeare on stage.

Your gondola awaits—we’re off to Venice and to Belmont.

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**Characters**

**in Venice:**
- The Duke of Venice
- Antonio, a merchant
- Bassanio, his friend, suitor to Portia
- Gratiano, a friend and follower of Bassanio, woos Nerissa
- Solanio, friends of Antonio
- Salerio and Bassanio
- Lorenzo, friend of Bassanio, woos Jessica
- Shylock, a wealthy Jew
- Jessica, his daughter
- Tubal, a Jew, Shylock’s friend
- Lancelot Gobbo, servant to Shylock, later to Bassanio
- Old Gobbo, his father

**In Belmont:**
- Portia, a rich heiress
- Nerissa, her waiting gentlewoman
- The Prince of Morocco, suitor to Portia
- The Prince of Aragon, suitor to Portia
- Balthasar, Portia’s servant
- Servants, officers, a jailer

**Setting:** Venice and Belmont

**Time:**
A Merchant of Venice Fact Sheet

**Genre:** Usually called a romantic comedy, though more recently also called a problem comedy or a tragedy, depending on the perspective.

**Date of composition:** c. 1596

**Setting:** Venice and Belmont

**Length:** 2564 lines, 79% verse, 21% prose.

**Longest roles in play:** Portia (third longest female role in the canon), Shylock, Bassanio

**Sources:** Many usury tales existed, not all involving Jews. There is also a long history of tales from Persia, India, Rome, and medieval Europe involving a bond for human flesh. A likely source is Ser Giovanni Fiorentino's set of tales, *Il Pecorone*, from the late 14th century, published in 1558. The relevant tale involves the wooing with a test (sleeping with the lady), a Jewish usurer, the pound of flesh, the trial, and the ring sting.

Shylock and Jessica also have precursors, especially Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. Another widespread legend was the casket motif, not only in Boccaccio but also John Gower and the *Gesta Romanorum* (translated 1577).

**Words and Imagery:**
Caroline Spurgeon notes that the imagery in *Merchant* is not evenly spread but congregated in two "high points of emotion"—Bassanio's 3.2 choice of casket and the top of 5.1 before and as Portia returns to Belmont. Music is a major image, and two-thirds of the imagery she calls "poetical." Bassanio and Portia most often use imagery in the play.

**Plot:** In order to win wealthy Portia and thereby repay his debts, Bassanio again asks Antonio for money, but since the merchant's funds are all ventured at sea, Antonio borrows from Shylock, a Jewish usurer, with the bond for nonpayment being a pound of his flesh.

As Bassanio and his friend Gratiano prepare for the voyage, their friend Lorenzo elopes with Shylock's daughter Jessica, who steals money and jewels. Shylock is distraught at this double loss and vows to get Antonio's flesh even as the merchant's ships wreck at sea.

Two princes vie for Portia's hand, taking her father's test of three caskets, but both fail. Bassanio chooses the correct casket and wins Portia (and thereby wins Nerissa, her gentlewoman, for Gratiano) just as a letter from Antonio arrives to say the bond is forfeit.

After immediate marriage ceremonies, Portia gives Bassanio money and he heads to Venice, but she and Nerissa, disguised as a judge and clerk, follow right behind their new husbands. Portia acts as judge in court, manages to break Shylock's bond, flip the charges, and save Antonio, who forces Shylock to give half his fortune to Lorenzo and to convert to Christianity. As a fee, this "judge" asks only the ring Portia gave Bassanio.

Back at Belmont, both women disavow their husbands for giving away their rings, then confess their disguise and return the rings. Portia also gives Antonio news of returned ships and Lorenzo and Jessica news of their good fortune; then the newlyweds head off to consummate their marriages.

**Things to Look for:**
- how the groups are defined: along economic lines, religious lines, social lines?
- how the Venetians treat Shylock
- how general/prejudicial or specific/personal the virulence is between Antonio and Shylock
- how the friendship between Antonio and Bassanio is defined and how Bassanio values it compared to his marriage
- Portia's motivation for going to Venice and what, if anything, she gains from the trial
- value of conversions
- the mood of the "ring sting"
It's Got (Structural) Rhythm!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene</th>
<th># Lines</th>
<th>Locale</th>
<th>Action/Plot line</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>Venice</td>
<td>introduce Antonio and Bassanio, need for money [CRISIS] and quest</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>Belmont</td>
<td>introduce Portia, Nerissa, and the casket choice for Portia's marriage</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>introduce Shylock and mutual animosity with Antonio</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>casket plot: Portia's first suitor arrives; will choose after dinner</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>introduce comic subplot with Launcelot; shifts to serve Bassanio;</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Gratiano asks to go to Belmont (he gains importance)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Lorenzo gets letter with elopement plot</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Shylock to dine with Bassanio, leaves keys with Jessica</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Jessica's elopement [marriage/WIN]; news Bassanio sails tonight</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>casket plot: Morocco chooses gold casket [LOSS]</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>news of Shylock's reaction to elopement [LOSS]; Antonio's losses</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>casket plot: Aragon chooses silver [LOSS]; news of Bassanio's arrival</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Salerio/Solanio: more Antonio losses, bait Shylock; Tubal's news</td>
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<td>3.2</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>caskets: Bassanio chooses lead [WIN]; Antonio's letter [new CRISIS] and possible LOSS [marriages]</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Shylock will not hear Antonio's plea</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Portia and Nerissa leave for Venice, plan for disguises</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Launcelot teases Jessica [costume change for Portia/Nerissa]</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>trial scene: Shylock WINS, then LOSES; Bassanio denies/sends ring</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Portia gets Bassanio's ring; Nerissa will try to get hers from Gratiano</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Jessica/Lorenzo [first 88 lines costume change for Portia/Nerissa]; ring loss discovered; disguises explained; re-pledge loyalty; good financial news for Antonio and Lorenzo/Jessica</td>
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Considerations:
- in length, act 1 matches act 4; act 2 matches act 3—an arc to act 5
- compare roles of large scenes, medium-length scenes, short scenes
- all major characters except Shylock end up in Belmont—and rich; three newlywed couples. Shylock is the character excluded
- contrast of father/daughter relationships in Belmont and Venice: Portia chafes at restriction but seems to obey; Jessica denies family/faith bonds and leaves; both women enrich husbands
- subplot: Lorenzo/Jessica/Launcelot
- main plot: Bassanio/Portia and Antonio/Shylock
  - Shylock link between plots; then Portia takes over that role?
  - Lorenzo: a Christian who converts a Jew, takes money; like Antonio: a Christian who converts a Jew, takes money?
  - does Gratiano in main plot approximate Launcelot in subplot?
  - compare Jessica's conversion to Shylock's
- friendship bonds, family bonds, legal bonds, love bonds, faith bonds—how do the various bonds fare in the play?

Interpretive points:
- Jessica's elopement and conversion—impulse/teen angst or true love, true faith? how well do they know each other?
- is Lorenzo a liberator/good guy/man in love or a thief/gigolo?
- does Jessica give away Leah's ring?
- does Portia know whole trial strategy when she starts or solve the problem on the spot?
- last scene at dawn
- is ring sting a joke or serious?
- who is left onstage at end?
Genre Issues in *The Merchant of Venice*

**It Depends on the Perspective**
A young aristocrat wins the love of a beautiful heiress, passes her dead father's test, and wins the lady. Then they save his friend. It's a romantic comedy.

A Jewish usurer, practicing one of the few trades European society will allow him, has his daughter and money stolen by a Christian, has a legal bond denied him in court, and then is forced to relinquish control of his fortune and to sacrifice his faith. It's tragic or very cruelly comic.

The Jewish usurer is a two-dimensional figure of scorn and fun to the majority audience, and all of whom laugh at him, so it's a boffo comedy of ridicule.

The issues of majority privilege and minority exclusion and abuse reveal the society is flawed and self-interested, far from its espoused values; the play is a problem comedy or tragicomedy.

While the two plots lines and the two locales reflect each other and share common concerns, Shakespeare complicates this play for modern readers and audiences—and perhaps for his own. A number of concerns can emerge in reading or production. The play abounds in verbal abuse of Shylock. Is blatant anti-Semitism funny? Bassanio is a spendthrift; is that abuse of Shylock. Is blatant anti-Semitism funny? Bassanio is a spendthrift; is that noble lover who should win Portia? Portia doesn't trust her pretty boy to cope with the crisis; is she a control freak or another running away, one that also joins the Bassanio group.

The "wrong" wooers lose in Belmont. But what has Shylock done except complete a business deal that Antonio sought? Why should he lose a servant, a daughter, and money and jewels? Just because he's a Jew and Antonio doesn't like him?

The Structure
Act 1 establishes Bassanio's marital quest to Belmont and its economic underpinnings—and the fact that winning Portia's love won't be enough because there's also her father's test of the caskets to pass. Another obstacle is Antonio's lack of ready cash and the terms of the loan he gets from Shylock.

Act 2 gives us one theft and many losses in both sites. Two princely wooers fail the casket test and lose Portia. Meanwhile, Shylock's agony at Lorenzo's successful plot to steal his daughter and some of his wealth (a "downy"?) bodes ill for Antonio should he default on his bond.

Act 3 brings news of Antonio's ships sinking and Shylock's determination for revenge. Bassanio passes the casket test, wins Portia, and learns of his friend's plight, marries Portia, and races off to Venice. Portia reveals cross-dressing plans to address the judicial crisis in Venice.

Act 4 is full of trials—the judicial hearing about Antonio's bond, which he loses and then wins thanks to Portia; in reprisal he hijacks Shylock's fortune and his faith. Portia and Nerissa also test their husbands' faith by getting as payment the rings they pledged them to keep.

Act 5 distributes wealth to Antonio and Lorenzo/Jessica, chastizes and forgives the husbands for giving away the rings, and finally allows the consummation of the Belmont marriages.

Act 2 is key early in the arc of action. If we root for Lorenzo's elopement, then it's a very comic act—one young lover gets his girl and riches by stealth; love conquers all (including morality?). How does that compare to Bassanio's winning Portia?

The first Act 2 action in Venice is Shylock's servant Launcelot debating whether to run away, an inner debate he resolves by asking Bassanio to hire him; this introduces Jessica's elopement plot, another running away, one that also joins the Bassanio group.

The "wrong" wooers lose in Belmont. But what has Shylock done except complete a business deal that Antonio sought? Why should he lose a servant, a daughter, and money and jewels? Just because he's a Jew and Antonio doesn't like him?

The two test/trial scenes, 3.2 and 4.1, need closer scrutiny, but the Bassanio team wins both, though it's certainly not pretty in the courtroom.

• So the genre structure can be comic—lovers win against blocking fathers, or an argument can be made for tragedy—since something, in fact many things, of great value are lost if Shylock is seen as victim to a tyrannical, prejudicial system. How do we assess the action?

And if it's easy to know who the antagonist is, who is the protagonist of the play?
Scholarly Comment on the Genre of the Play

**Merchant, the Romantic Comedy**

E. M. W. Tillyard: the play is a comedy and a fairy romance. With distortion, Shylock can seem more sinned against than sinning, a tragic intruder. As a result, Antonio's friends cease to seem decent, but become callous wastrels. This upsets the balance of the play and we get a violent reaction of its elements. Shakespeare does not take sides.

Walter Kerr: "Within the fairy-tale structure of the piece, Shylock is most certainly the villain, a scoundrel whose harsh terms and ready knife constitute the only threat to the happiness of some of the nicest people who never lived. …in Shylock [Shakespeare] had drawn neither a melodramatic villain nor a tragic hero but a true comic giant." Early theatre tradition said Shylock was "a ludicrous figure with a large nose and odd gestures which were mimicked by Launcelot," and this was true until Macklin's 1741 performance of the role. The actor who played Shylock for Shakespeare, Thomas Pope, also played Falstaff, Sir Toby Belch, Jaques, Benedick, and Mercutio—all on a grand scale and sympathetic. The version of an old, greedy, funny guy is synonymous with the Pantalone figure of commedia dell'arte, who was traditionally a merchant of Venice, a miser who starved his servants. In his belt was a moneybag and a dagger, which he never used. And he had a daughter. He was the butt of the joke, victim of his greed, as were Molière's great misers. Shylock is of this kindred.

**Merchant, the Tragicomedy**

W. H. Auden: "If the spirit of Belmont is made too predominant, then Antonio and Shylock will seem irrelevant, and vice versa….the romantic fairy-story world of Belmont is incompatible with the historical reality of money-making Venice … [calling] into question the claim of Belmont to be the Great Good Place, the Earthly Paradise. …We are compelled to acknowledge that the attraction which we naturally feel towards Belmont is highly questionable. On that account, I think The Merchant of Venice must be classed among Shakespeare's 'Unpleasant Plays.'"

**Merchant, the Tragedy**

The tragic view stems partly from the experience of the twentieth century, especially its vitriolic anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. It is all too easy for a dominant group to privilege its views and biases and to call them just and right. Shylock is an "other," one of many in human history. Baited and excoriated, he is victimized and then, when he turns to "blind" Justice for a fair hearing, he is played by the system and then denied control of his own property and his own faith. Forcible conversion (like so much of the Venetians' behavior) seems unChristian; the pious words cover a hegemonic power play that leaves Shylock with nothing.

In terms of the definition of tragedy, Shylock errs and so something of great value is lost—his integrity, his soul, his identity. Theatre performance has explored this dynamic since the 19th century, when a scene of Shylock returning home to find his daughter gone was often added.

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What the Two Worlds Imply

**Parrott:** attitudes toward wealth: breed more vs. promote good life

**Bradbrook:** contracts: bond of marriage vs. Shylock's bond

**E. K. Chambers:** hate vs. Love, friendship vs. usury

**J. R. Brown:** possessiveness vs. generosity, take vs. give and hazard; commercial wealth vs. love's bounty

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**quoted by John Russell Brown, ed., 2nd Arden edition:**

"in the eyes of modern law, Portia's conduct is very strange if not reprehensible: no sensible judge, who wishes to bring about a compromise, will assure the party whom he wishes to persuade that he is certain of success if he persists in his legal claim; and no fair judge could give assurances of that kind knowing them to be false." [Lord Normand, *U of Edinburgh Journal*, x (1939), 44]

From this point of view, The Merchant of Venice has been called the 'most ingenious satire on justice and courts of law in the literature of the world'" [H. Sinsheimer, *Shylock* (1947), 139]
Ideas and Issues in the Opening Scene: Antonio/Bassanio

1.1—Venturing, debts, friendship, and credit

The opening scene gives us a public truth and a private truth. To Solario and Solanio, Antonio shows his public face and protests his fiscal security:

My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,
Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate
Upon the fortune of this present year.

Yet to his dear friend and kinsman Bassanio Antonio at the end acknowledges,

Thou know'st that all my fortunes are at sea;
Neither have I money nor commodity
To raise a present sum.

His situation is a crisis for both him and Bassanio because Bassanio has just made the "big ask." He, too, has nothing at present. He has spent his estate and borrowed money beyond that to maintain his lifestyle. Now he wants to "adventure" to win a heiress "to get clear of all the debts I owe."

His plan is a business deal—I know how I can make a windfall profit—and in a way he is talking to his banker as well as to a close friend. With an analogy to how he found a lost arrow in childhood by shooting a second one the same way, he confesses "That which I owe is lost." Bottom line: I'm broke—again. But maybe I can marry an heiress! She's "a golden fleece," for "had I but the means... / I have a mind presages me such thrift [profit] / That I should questionless be fortunate."

So against all fiscal practicality, Antonio acts on friendship and offers an extreme measure. "Therefore go forth, / Try what my credit can in Venice do...." Put it on my credit card; I'll take out a loan for you. That's all Bassanio needs to hear.

Considerations:
• Shakespeare uses his opening scenes to plant seeds, establish issues, and set up images and concerns for the whole play.
• The scene establishes economic terms: merchant, venture, profit, worth, merchandise—the idea is making money, the calculated profit/loss risks of capitalism.

Bassanio adds debts, prodigal, adventuring, hazard, thrift, credit, money. Because he opens with his debts, Bassanio may seem to be in the business of indulgence and display and now pursuing marriage as venture capitalism/loan repayment. However, that was the Renaissance approach to marriage, and so is his approach to money. Most of Queen Elizabeth's court overspent and was in debt, an approach that only increased later under James.
• The public view/private hidden truth aspect of this scene will eventually link to Portia's disguise motif in court. The court scene also links to Salerio's imagined worry about the risk of venturing: "even now worth this, / And now worth nothing"—a state both Antonio and Shylock will experience and that Bassanio may face with the ring giveaway.
• Bassanio is described as both "your most noble kinsman" and calls himself "prodigal," and several scholars use the prodigal son theme in interpreting the play.
• Wooing is almost entirely couched in economic terms here; love is not mentioned. Is Bassanio giving Antonio one version of his purpose, the money angle, whereas he has a private love interest he does not express? He's seen Portia before, yet he says nothing about his feelings for her. Talk money with one's friend, feelings with the woman?
• Before Bassanio specifies his request, his mere mention of repaying debts calls forth a pledge from Antonio: "...be assured / My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions."

Antonio may not realize that what he offers will indeed be required by future developments, but he offers sincerely and will follow through (if legally required) on his pledge. The "what I have is yours" ethic is at the core of Renaissance friendship.
As in many cultures today, in Renaissance England the standard route to the altar for most middle-class and all aristocratic youth was an arranged marriage, that is, a business alliance between families agreed on by the fathers—not by the spouses to be. (Only Puritans or the lower class had companionate marriage.) A marriage, thus, was a business deal, and love, if it occurred—which was not expected—would be a bonus. Erotic love was considered unstable and fickle, no fit basis for so important a bond as marriage.

So where did one find a soul mate if not in marriage? In friendship—the only close personal relationship one could choose for oneself. In the Renaissance, friendship was considered a higher form of human affection than erotic love; it was disinterested, platonically pure, capable of teaching selflessness. As it was considered "a supreme achievement of the human spirit, it must transcend humanity's all-too-common penchant for rivalry and ingratitude."

"Friendship is ... seen as an institution that enables man to develop his mental and moral potential to the highest possible degree" and thus offers an example for ordering all human relationships. In the Renaissance the word lover was often used non-sexually as a synonym for friend, and Shakespeare so uses it in several of his plays.

Today's popular culture often values friendship in a similar way—consider the mass of buddy films involving soldiers, cops, cowboys, or vagabonds and the tight bond that forms when men grow up or face crisis together. Merchant is in some respects a buddy play—one helping the other succeed—and the crisis is not war but love.

“A good fellowship (or society) is one that fosters 'friendship' in all of its senses.

—Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics

“You cannot compare with friendship the passion men feel for women.... I must admit the flames of passion are more active, sharp and keen. But that fire is a rash one....”

Friendship "is a matter of the mind, with our souls being purified by practising it.... [our] souls are mingled and confounded in so universal a blending that they efface the seam which joins them together.... Not only did I know his mind as well as I knew my own but I would have entrusted myself to him with greater assurance than to myself."

—Montaigne, Essays

Friendship in the Play

The closest male friendship in the play is Antonio/Bassanio. Antonio consistently speaks and acts as if the friendship is deep and abiding, an important bond. How the marriage may affect that friendship is not addressed (in the Renaissance they might well not compete); Bassanio keeps the talk financial with Antonio, but with Portia the love rhetoric blossoms. We need to sound the depth of each relationship—how important is the friendship (is he concerned out of guilt or caring?) and how important the marriage.

The emotional expressions in court may be the extremity of the moment, with someone sharpening a knife to slice open a friend, or may be heartfelt. Either way, Portia hears them. Is she in a triangle, or is Bassanio a Renaissance man of feeling, who has a valued wife and a valued friend? Discerning these nuances comes from performance, so watch 1.1, 1.3, 3.2, and 4.1 carefully.

At the end, Portia negotiates Antonio into pledging that Bassanio will be true to her, a nice move whatever the situation.

Agreeing to the bond in 1.3—Antonio, Bassanio, and Shylock (Louis Rhead)

Renaissance Venice

"The City of Light," Venice is built on 118 small islands in the Venetian Lagoon. It is a city "bridged" together, a city in which the only roadways are waterways. Singularly situated to be a major port, during the Middle Ages Venice linked trade between East and West, especially with the Byzantine Empire and the Muslim world, and became a commercial center from which traders and merchants sent ships to all corners of the earth and brought back spices, grain, cloth, and other valuable commodities, as demonstrated by its most famous citizen, Marco Polo. Its dominance extended from the 13th century through the 17th century.

Profiting from its international business community, Venice was famed for its tolerance. A major part of its success was its renowned judicial system, important because international trade was vital to its prosperity. The Venetian republic was governed by a Great Council of old aristocratic families, with an executive council, the Council of Ten, and the Doge (the elected head of council and state, called the Duke in Shakespeare). They created a "machine" of government with an income tax, statistical science, floating government stock, state censorship, anonymous denunciations, gambling casinos, and the world's first Ghetto for its Jews. The arts and entertainment also flourished; its sophisticated courtesans were world-famous.

By the 15th century new sailing routes around Africa and to the New World altered European trade, stemming Venice's era of trade domination. It continued its 1070-year history as an independent city-state, however, until Napoleon conquered it in 1797. In 1866 it became part of the newly constituted kingdom of Italy.

"What news on the Rialto?"
The Rialto Bridge, hub of Venetian trade, 1694 (it opened in 1592)

"Venice is the world's unconscious: a miser's glittering hoard…"
—Mary McCarthy (1956)

Mirror Images?

Venetians "had a name for sharp dealing, for 'sticking together,' artful diplomacy, business 'push,' and godless secularism—traits familiarly ascribed to the Jews. Anti-Semitism is often traced to a medieval hatred of capitalism. To the medieval mind, the Jew was the capitalist par excellence. But this could also be said of the Venetian, whose palace was his emporium and his warehouse. Certainly the hatred excited by Venice … had an irrational, supercharged quality that was like modern anti-Semitism. The Venetians were more feared than they deserved to be. Boundless ambition was attributed to them; they were accused of seeking world-domination…."  
—Mary McCarthy (1956)

"No man is an island, entire of itself: every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."
—John Donne, Meditation 17

For Discussion

• How relevant to the play's relationships is the Venetian setting—a city of islands that must be bridged to create the larger entity? Are some men "islands," or made into "islands," in the play? Can you make a man an island and then easily bridge that gap?

The patron saint of Venice is Saint Mark, whose relics were stolen from Alexandria by Venetian merchants. The winged lion is the icon of Saint Mark and was adopted as the symbol of the city; winged lions can be seen across Venice.

The Ca d'Oro, loveliest palace on the Grand Canal in Venice; below, a canal bridge

"Venice is the world's unconscious: a miser's glittering hoard…"
—Mary McCarthy (1956)
The Jews were a major refugee population in medieval and Renaissance Europe. Often ejected by individual countries, as they were from England in 1290, they moved and settled under tight restrictions by local communities.

They were limited to certain occupations—as traders, peddlers, moneylenders, and physicians (at a time when physicians were classed with butchers). They had little choice but to succeed if they were to survive, and they lived apart, obeying their own cultural and religious laws and maintaining traditions. That, of course, labeled them as "other."

Spread as they were across Europe and the Mediterranean, the Jews were well situated to trade, and they often lived and worked in the Levant, trading with the Ottoman Empire and with Venice, the link into Europe. The Levantine Jews were viewed more as fellow citizens by Venice, but the German Jews were excluded from international trade and forced into moneylending (with an interest rate supposedly capped at 15%, actually higher) and commerce in second-hand clothing.

A third group, the Western [Spanish and Portuguese] Jews arrived after the Inquisition took effect.

In 1516 the German Jews were finally allowed to reside in Venice on an island that had housed a new foundry (getto), and so it was called Ghetto Nuovo, subsequently one of the highest density living spaces in Venice. The three bridges accessing it were barred at night, locking in all the Jews, ostensibly for protection. To identify them on the streets, Jews were required to wear a yellow "O" on their backs or, if cloaked, to wear a yellow or red hat or turban (as they had had to do in England prior to the expulsion). Levantine and Western Jews later lived in a newer part of the Ghetto, the Ghetto Vecchio.

Residence did not mean citizenship. The Jews were not allowed to own the land on which they were required to live, because long leases proved more profitable for the government. Residential permits and their frequent renewal were required as were an endless series of taxes and fees to support the state. Within these restrictions, the Jewish community prospered during the Renaissance. The state found them helpful and profitable residents, and the Jews found Venice offered them a way to thrive.

Why Usury Was a Hot Topic in the Renaissance

"Lend, hoping for nothing again" (Luke 6:35) was the Biblical injunction that long prevented Christians from joining the Jews in the profitable field of moneylending. Eventually the Christians couldn’t resist and found ways around it. These early bankers charged upwards of 60% interest when the Jews were allowed to charge a maximum of only 43%. (Payday loan offices are just re-inventing the wheel.)

The rise of capitalism and the banking industry in Europe changed human relationships in sundry ways, as did the discovery of the New World and international trade. They shifted the basis of society from landowning and its attendant obligation/oath of loyalty system to a mercantile system that was risk taking and based on contracts or legal bonds. Social power began to be derived from money, not from inherited position. This shift was occurring right before Shakespeare’s eyes. (His own father was fined for twice charging exorbitant interest, 20 to 25%.) The need for business investment capital was widespread, and the people who had that money were the moneylenders, the "usurers," the ones who charged interest for use of their funds. The fact that such dealings were not seen as "risks" caused trouble with the "heroically" risk-taking merchants and entrepreneurs; they could win or lose, but the moneylender apparently could only win. Because usurers were needed, they were hated, whether Christian or Jew.
Shylock—the Jew of Venice

Shakespeare's Cultural Context

The portrayal of Jews in England throughout the Middle Ages presents Shakespeare and the character of Shylock with a significant obstacle in crafting anything except a horrific stereotype of malice, menace, and greed. Once the Jews were banished from England in 1290, they became the stuff of legend with no verifiable fact to counteract the tales—they poisoned wells, they kidnapped and ate Christian children, they killed Christ, so the curse was on them.

The 1590s were an active time for Jews in London news. First, about 1589-90 playwright Christopher Marlowe came out with a zinger of a revenge tragedy, *The Jew of Malta*, in which Barabbas, the Jew, is bankrupted by the state to pay its Turkish tribute, but manages to secret away much of his huge fortune. He redeems it by having his daughter appear to convert, since his home had been seized and turned into a nunnery; now she can retrieve the cash and jewels from under the floor boards.

After he kills the Christian youth she loves, she sincerely joins the nunnery, which Barabbas then poisons. Next he plots a double betrayal of Maltese Christian and Turkish leaders, but they turn it back on him. With Machiavel as the prologue, the play is brilliantly wicked, satiric (everyone is ruthless and self-interested), and bitter—funny and horrifying by turns. This is the figure of a Jew that was on the stage when Shakespeare penned Shylock. And in many ways *The Merchant of Venice* is quite aware of Marlowe’s character as Shakespeare inverts the elements of that Jew’s story and gives them different flesh and a real heart.

Moreover, in 1594, the Queen’s physician, Roderigo Lopez, who was a Portuguese Marrano, that is, a converted Jewish immigrant, was accused of plotting to poison her, tried for treason, and executed before a crowd of thousands. It was ‘feed the legend’ time in London news. Into this melée of stereotype Shakespeare introduces Shylock.

The Issues about Shylock

In this cultural environment, Shylock could so easily be a caricature, a stereotype of the greedy, malicious Jew, created to ride the wave of London fervor. On the other hand, the character could also be a way of calling London on its prejudices by making Shylock a real man, not the legendary monster. Do we get inside Shylock; do we understand him? Or do we stand outside and mock, as many of the Venetian Christians do in the play?

Of the plays 20 scenes, Shylock appears in only 5, yet his impact is far larger. If he’s a villain, then we love to bait and hate him; Gratiano, Salerio, and Solanio speak for us. If he’s not a villain, we listen to him try to maneuver through the obstacle course that Venetian society and law pose him, receiving abuse and having his profit questioned and devalued.

He is sought out for the loan, told to treat Antonio as an enemy by the man himself, suspicious of Christian invitations, and robbed of child and coin. When he relies on justice, the fabled equanimity of the Venetian law, he seems to be drawn in and then sucker-punched by his judge. He gets nothing; in fact, he gets less than nothing, for he cannot now own either his wealth or his religion (and, by that same Venetian law, the minute he converts all his wealth will be confiscated by the Church). He was a “have,” but is obliterated by the Christian “haves,” whom the play rewards with returned fleets, riches, and wedding nights. Whose side are we on? The wealthy Belmont/Christian/consumer-indulgent crowd or the outsider who goes too far? Is either side completely right or just in this play?

Is Shylock inherently vengeful? We must decide. Or is he tormented until he snaps? Or does his society model such behavior:

> If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (3.1)

Shakespeare makes us justify our judgment; the entire play is a trial scene for both sets of characters, and we need to reach a verdict.
When we meet her, Portia has all the hallmarks of a spoiled rich girl, a characterization that brings with it its own set of stereotypes, though not as virulent as those Shylock faces. She laments that she cannot choose her husband. At her level of society in the Renaissance, a father would undoubtedly make that decision, and we wonder if her father would welcome this noble debtor as a son-in-law, however hot he is. Bassanio's clear advantage over Morocco and Aragon is that he's Italian. Yet Portia pledges, "If I live to be as old as Sibylla I will die as chaste as Diana unless I be obtained by the manner of my father's will" (1.2), so she will respect even deceased patriarchy. As Nerissa reminds her, "Your father was ever virtuous … and you will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly but one who you shall rightly love." Trusting Dad is not a common emotion in Shakespeare's comedies, or at least Silvia, Julia, Bianca, Hermia, Anne Page, and Rosalind don't think so.

Taking Testimony from 3.2, 4.1, and 5.1

The first question about Portia an audience must decide is whether she actually does respect her father's casket lottery. By the time we get to 3.2 when Bassanio picks, Portia, Nerissa, and all of us know which is the correct casket. Perhaps in jest, she told Nerissa earlier that if the alcoholic German lord offered to choose, she should set "a deep glass of Rhenish wine on the contrary casket" to influence his choice. Does she play fair in 3.2?

Consideration #1—She asks Bassanio to delay his choice, "Pause a day or two / Before you hazard," because "I would not lose you./…I could teach you / How to choose right, but then I am forsworn. So will I never be..." (3.2). She is already using the language of one casket the leaden one, the right one (but she also used hazard with Aragon). Her language here includes not just hazard, but also lose, venture, and miss in her first speech. Is she hinting at "give and hazard all"?

Consideration #2—She has music played during his selection, as she has not for the others. The song lyrics open: Tell me where is fancy bred Or in the heart, or in the head? How begot, how nourished? All of which rhyme with—lead. A subliminal hint?

The next verse suggests not to trust eyes or fancy (i.e. the lure of gold or silver?), Bassanio does seem to hear that, or at least to come to that conclusion: "So may the outward shows be least themselves...."

So he chooses lead, wins the fortune and the beloved, and she wishes herself richer for his sake, but says she is just "an unlessoned girl" able to learn and willing to be "directed" by him: "Myself and what is mine to you and yours / Is now converted" (a key word in this section of the play), and she bestows them with a ring, common at nuptials. How should we hear Portia's downplayed self-description—as modesty? As loving, dutiful servitude?

When Antonio's letter agonizes Bassanio, Portia is in charge: marry me, take money, and go save him. Join and separate again—the action isn't complete yet. Then she decides to go, too, and to go in disguise—as a lark? as a prudent backup? to see what this relationship is? Initially she sounds like Rosalind planning her boyish masculine demeanor, but when she shows up, she shows up as a lawyer/judge, a heavy-hitter in the courtroom, loaded with her kinsman's expertise in case law and precedents.

Far from playful, in 4.1 she is all business, and while she talks mercy, she walks a setup, a ruthless trap. Is she just ready for all options—if Shylock is merciful, then A; if not, then B, C, D? Do we see a fair and just hearing of the bond case? Must Shylock be stopped at all costs?

Having seen the men's world and heard them offer to lose their wives to save Antonio, she asks for her ring as payment, since they all now "owe" her. Is she happy when it is denied? Is she still happy when Gratiano brings it in the next scene? A new plan emerges at that point, and this time the sting is on the husbands.

So is 5.1 a laugh riot of "where's my ring?" or are the loyalty and promise of the ring a more serious matter? The women link the rings to sexual fidelity and use the "second" ring as the revelation of their roles in Venice. Do we sort out which relationship is more important in this last scene?
Gender-Bending Disguise—Then and Now

In Shakespeare's time, English acting companies were all-male—boys and men played all the roles. A young boy in the 1590s who was an apprentice with the Lord Chamberlain's Men not only got to study the art and craft of acting by living and working with a professional actor, but also got to perform some of the greatest female roles ever written. The irony that these roles were written for and played by pre-pubescent boys is not lost on modern actresses or on scholars.

In several comedies, Shakespeare used the male-actor identity of his female characters as an "in" joke with his audience, shifting the "girls" into male disguise and out again as necessity demanded. To have a boy actor disguised as a "boy" was perfect; no one on stage or off could tell he wasn't a boy. The actual "disguise" was his role as a young woman. Julia in Two Gentlemen of Verona, Jessica, Portia, and Nerissa in The Merchant of Venice, Rosalind in As You Like It, and Viola in Twelfth Night all adopt a male disguise.

After these plays, Shakespeare's comedy moves to tragi-comedy and eventually to the adventure-and-reunion plays known as romances, where again in Cymbeline Imogen disguises herself as a boy.

In the modern theatre, these roles are played by women, so the disguise is often transparent—we can see it's a girl—as it would not have been in the Renaissance, undermining Shakespeare's metatheatrical joke.

Portia's Disguise

Of all these disguises, only Portia does not disguise herself as a brother or boy page, as Jessica and most do. Portia's is not a trousers role. She appears as a young legal expert, a male figure of more maturity and education. Her legal robes are also usually form-covering in Renaissance garb (less so in a suit for modern dress productions) and include a hat. Only a modern actress's eye makeup and lipstick give her away (which she usually won't give up because the change back to Portia after 4.2 may not be long enough to put it back on).

Renaissance Identity and Clothes

Far more even than in our world of conspicuous display, Renaissance society considered one's clothing as the key to one's identity. Only a lord might wear silk, only royalty could wear purple or ermine, only the privileged might wear spurs or jewels, servants wore blue—England's sumptuary [clothing]laws were specific and clear. One need look only at the garment, at the surface, to learn the essential truth of birth, status, and degree.

Whereas in our world someone can choose to dress up or dress down, to dress goth or preppy or grunge or jock whatever one's social status, in the Renaissance one was supposed to dress "properly," according to social station—so of course everyone tried to dress better than his or her actual status. As a result, Philip Stubbes protested in 1583 that when "every one is permitted to flaunt it out, in what apparel he lust [chooses] himselfe ... it is verie hard to knowe, who is noble, who is worshipfull, who is a gentleman, who is not."

Regarding gender, the Renaissance viewed human biology as more or less unisex, all having the same analogously shaped sexual equipment, but men's superior "heat" even in utero made theirs external and visible, while women's inferior, "less hot" nature kept theirs internal and invisible. Women were considered to be "imperfectly formed" men (male being the ideal for the Renaissance—have things changed?). So if the sexes were structured analogously, the clothes make a huge difference in stating one's gender. Male dress equals a male; female dress equals a female. To transgress this code off stage caused ructions and prompted sermons from the pulpit or pillorying and imprisonment—especially if the person transgressed by dressing in the more privileged status of the male and took on that authority.

The question scholars ask is whether Shakespeare's heroines don disguise to be transgressive or just for temporary safety. Portia is not threatened and she chooses to travel by private conveyance; hers is not the usual disguise motive. What do we think of her disguise? Does Portia end up in a love/friendship triangle, too?
Bassanio and His Loyalties

Issues:
- motive in going to Belmont (money and/or love?)
- friendship bond and love/marital bond
- worthiness/fidelity (excuses for behavior to Antonio at top and to Portia at end)

1) "Adventuring" to Belmont
...my chief care
Is to come fairly off from the great debts
Wherein my time, something too prodigal,
Hath left me gaged.
To you, Antonio,
I owe the most, in money and in love,
And from your love I have a warranty
To unburden all my plots and purposes
How to get clear of all the debts I owe.
(1.1)

• In examining these three clauses (clarified with color), we can ask the rhetorical questions of subject, audience, values, and angle. Asking for money is always a delicate topic, especially among family or friends—that's mixing emotion and business; it can get messy. So how does Bassanio psych out the pitch?

In order to ask for even more money from Antonio in order to go to Belmont, Bassanio opens with confession—I've spent/lost all my own and your previously loaned money. I know I've got huge debts. Open, honest; I want to solve the problem. Then he makes the personal, emotional appeal within the economic confession: yes, I owe you the most money, but what really matters most to me is the love you've shown me [our friendship]. Then he uses that love as the pivot to get to the point, his new plan for clearing his debts—the trip to Belmont. Your love will be proud now that I'm trying to solve my own problem if I can get just a little more money first, right? Does he ever mention loving Portia? Does he, in fact, love Portia yet? He says she looked at him with interest. That's what we know.

• Notice that Bassanio also uses the love tactic with Portia as he begins the choice of caskets. How can we tell if his dialogue is rhetorical persuasion or truth—real love? What difference would his love make if he doesn't choose the right casket? "O happy torment, when my torturer / Doth teach me answers for deliverance!" If only. Does he heed the song?

"So may the outward shows be least themselves...." A crucial line for Bassanio and for the play. What we see and what value we automatically give it may or may not be accurate; what is really within may not concur with the "outward show."
If this insight is a result of hearing the song lyrics, then at least Bassanio gets the idea and can follow it through.
If this is Bassanio's own insight as he stands before the caskets, judging and being judged (an idea that strongly links to 4.1), then for the first time we see the substance of the inner man and not his outward show. He's been a big spender; is that really what life is all about? No, the pretty/gaudy/virtuous outside is often used just for appearance—"The seeming truth which cunning times put on / To entrap the wisest." And so he chooses the lead. This moment, if from within, gives us a man of moral insight and perhaps new awareness.
Having her father's written permission to kiss and marry Portia, Bassanio wisely turns to Portia and asks her permission, too: "As doubtful whether what I see be true, / Until confirmed, signed, ratified by you," using terms of a legal bond, the second one he's dealt with in the play.

2) The 3.2 scene completes the casket choice with a wedding, but it removes Bassanio's plight from his own financial crisis to Antonio's, as Bassanio only now learns. Portia gives money, and he's off to Venice. But money will not answer this need; Shylock wants the bond, the pound of flesh that Antonio bound himself to give. Having had his own heart, his flesh/daughter "cut off" by losses, Shylock thinks it's time for Antonio to lose something near his heart, if not the heart itself (and along those lines is Bassanio also in some way Antonio's heart, his closest friend?).

The revenge impulse emerges from a perceived wronggrave injury, often in Shakespeare a family death/murder (and in Jewish orthodox culture, a child married outside the faith must be treated as dead; there is no further contact of any sort—so Lorenzo has "killed" his child to him).

3) Is the ring promise/give away/excuse/"new" ring like a marriage vow/sacred vow, or like a promise to make vacation plans?
Language, Links, Issues in *The Merchant of Venice*

1.1 to 1.2 • Antonio opens 1.1 with "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad." Bassanio, by contrast, enters with "When shall we laugh?"

- Portia opens the Belmont plot line in 1.2 with "By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world." Young, lovely, rich, wooed by many—life is hard. All she has to do is marry, but she gets no choice, not if she's obedient to her dead father's will. And now we hear the Bassanio who once visited Belmont described as "a scholar and a soldier"; is that the man we saw in 1.1?

1.3 • returns us to 1.1 terms with the economic bond: squandered, thieves, bond, gratis, furnish, excess, interest, lend, forfeit.

- But we hear other terms, ancient grudge, evil soul, falsehood, enemy, that make the business personal and venomous, the terms also Christian vs. Hebrew/Jew.

2.7/2.9/3.2 • the casket choice of gold, silver, lead or of gain, get, give and hazard. The metals apparently offer three distinct choices, two precious metals and one "base" metal, but like the labels there is only a choice of two, since gain and get are the same idea on the precious metals, opposite of lead’s give and hazard. If it's a choice to pick one amid the three, the odd casket out is logically the base metal, give and hazard.

3.1 to 3.2 • "a ring he had of your daughter"; 3.1 introduces the ring theme which Portia joins in 3.2, giving a ring to Bassanio, and 4.1 and 4.2 set up for her 5.1 ring sting.

4.1 • inhuman wretch, uncapable of pity, void and empty … of mercy (this of a man who has been robbed and reviled by the speakers for the duration of the play)

- Stand for law vs. must be merciful in a judicial hearing, plus bond and balance scales, flesh and blood. Shylock is first denied blood in pursuing the bond, then blood (salvation) is forced upon him by Antonio’s insistence that he convert.

5.1 • good deed vs. naughty world. Define the basis of good and naughty in this context.

**Analyzing Juxtapositions**

- Take any of the scenes above and explore its action, character, thematic, linguistic, and imagistic links to the scene on each side. How does Shakespeare "stitch" the play together and keep the idea moving in the various plot lines and character groups?
Knowing and Not Knowing: the Use of Misidentification

**How could a father not know his own son?**
First, if that father is blind, and second, if the son tells him a lie—that he is dead. The 2.2 scene between Launcelot Gobbo and Old Gobbo can seem like an off-the-wall comic interlude [what are you, blind? a really bad joke], but looking further into issues that the main plot raises, it serves as a thematic basis for the main plot's identity issues—as comic subplots will do in Shakespeare.

Shylock's household provides two instances of misidentification in Act 2—the servant's verbal misdirection with this father, and Jessica's disguise as a boy page in order to elope. Launcelot's father cannot see him; Jessica's father may see the page at the banquet, the masquers realize, but will not recognize the boy as his daughter. As it turns out, the masque is called off and the elopement proceeds.

Both of these instances set up the main plot action of Portia's disguise as the judge in 4.1, where the man she just married talks with her and does not know her; instead, he sees a bright and capable young man.

Before the courtroom scene, however, the main plot explores this issue thoroughly in the casket choice, especially in 3.2 with Bassanio's choice. He sees the outside, but has only a cryptic note from which to discern the inside. Bassanio realizes, "So may the outward shows be least themselves," a fact he promptly forgets when not in Belmont. "All that glisters" may not be gold, but seeing the inner gold is crucial for the newly married couples.

Given the Antonio/Bassanio friendship, Portia's saving Antonio and proving herself to be as articulate, smart, reliable, and quick as anyone in court shows that women can equal not just witty pages but grown men. Well coached by her kinsman, she carries off the legal judgment with authority. The men are in her debt (and again we link to a major theme).

The issue of self-knowledge takes a central role in Act 1, when "I have much ado to know myself" concludes Antonio's opening comment, and the reply is "You are marvelously changed." He is not the only one in the play who is so, though his change seems unintentional.

Another appearance that gets comment is Shylock's, but Antonio is sure he is not mistaken: "O what a goodly outside falsehood hath" and "The Devil can cite scripture for his purposes." Just by looking on the Jewish gabardine he suggests the inside is corrupt and damned.

Once we link the knowing/not knowing of a relative or spouse to the appearance/reality issue, Portia's other wooers become relevant as well. If there is prejudice against Shylock, there also seems to be an edge of prejudice against the Moroccan prince, who knows the world well enough to say, "Mislike me not for my complexion" (2.1). Portia is gracious to him, but comments on that very complexion after the prince leaves. Aragon, for his part, as a Spanish prince would raise Renaissance English hackles about both Catholicism and the recent Armada attack. Portia's initial commentary on her prospective wooers also shows cultural stereotypes in action.

To what, if any, extent are the play's characters packets of assumptions and prejudice walking and talking their way through the action? Are assumptions/prejudice or knowing/not knowing foregrounded in *Merchant*?
Above: Late 19th-century stage stars Henry Irving and Ellen Terry as Shylock and Portia (as judge).

Above, Laurence Olivier, as Shylock the Victorian gentleman indistinguishable from other gents in his top hat, and right, as the moneylender in yarmulke (National Theatre/later taped for television and DVD, 1970/1973).

Warren Mitchell as Shylock at the trial (BBC/DVD, 1983)

Henry Goodman as Shylock in a 1930s setting (National Theatre and DVD, 1999)

Jonathan Pryce, at Shakespeare’s Globe, 2015, which ended with his baptism

From the 2004 Michael Radford film, Lynn Collins as Portia and as Portia disguised at trial; Jeremy Irons and Joseph Fiennes as Antonio and Bassanio; and Al Pacino as Shylock.
Justice and Mercy on Trial: 4.1, or the Way of the World?

The long 4.1 scene can be divided into six sections (you may want to discuss how you see the action dividing):

1) Shylock defends the legality of his claim in face of a call for mercy from Duke and others.
2) A new judge and his clerk are admitted and credentialed to hear the case.
3) The new judge hears the case, repeating the need for mercy in the face of Shylock’s demand for law, extending through the sentence.
4) The stipulation that there be no blood shed through alternatives denied and Shylock’s first attempted withdrawal.
5) ‘Law has another hold’ on Shylock through Antonio’s requests and Shylock’s exit.
6) Thanks to the judge and clerk; requested remembrance, the ring, denied, then sent.

Thus, the justice/mercy debate occurs three times in the scene—at the top, with Portia hearing the case, and as the Duke and Antonio meet out “mercy” to Shylock (1, 3, 5 above).

About 1) At first, the Venetian Duke requests mercy; then Bassanio offers double the money and tries to reason with Shylock. Shylock stands firm:

Duke: How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none?
Shylock: What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?

The Duke is ready to dismiss the court, thus denying Shylock his gratification today, unless Bellario appears to hear the case. Instead, we get Bellario’s substitute.

About 2 and 3) The new lawyer/judge covers the justice/mercy ground again, making a case for how “you” stand for justice and “we” for mercy/salvation and rendering deeds of mercy.

Bassanio offers money (which he thought could pay all his debts), but money will not answer this need. Shylock wants the bond, the pound of flesh of the bond. Having had his heart, his flesh/daughter “cut off” by losses, it’s time for Antonio to lose something near his heart (and perhaps he has). The revenge element of the plot is singularly well placed in a court of law, because it is the perceived denial of law/justice that prompts the desire for revenge.

About 4) A production must decide whether Portia knows the “blood” loophole when she enters or whether she perceives it during the action (it has been played both ways). Whichever choice is made changes the tenor of the scene. Either she makes one extended step-by-step demonstration of the Venetian law as it pertains to Shylock and his bond, making him culpable for acting on it, or his response to her question about a doctor, lest Antonio “bleed to death”— “Is it so nominated in the bond? … ’Tis not in the bond” prompts an answer. (Or directors and actors may find other paths, as you may, to the psychology of this scene; consider it.)

The law that had seemed to grant Shylock options or his bond now denies him anything but his bond; he cannot now take the money and be “merciful” as he had been asked to be earlier. He cannot get even his principal back, only the flesh, so Shylock starts to leave.

About 5) The scene completes its 180º turn, as Shylock is now classified as an “alien” who has threatened the life of a “citizen,” a dilemma that puts his goods and his life in others’ hands.

They say they will be “merciful”; the Duke remits his life and says humbleness may lessen seizure of half his goods into a lesser fine. Antonio, however, wants use of the other half of Shylock’s goods for a bequest to Lorenzo, and for this “favor” Shylock must become a Christian and sign a will leaving everything to Lorenzo and Jessica.

Offering someone the chance for salvation (through baptism) was seen as mercy by Christians in the Renaissance; forcibly changing someone’s religion today often seems less than merciful. We must watch how the production handles the moment.

About 6) With the ring request, Portia flips the action so she and Antonio force Bassanio to weigh their loves in a different set of scales. Antonio pleads, “Let [the judge’s] deserving and my love withal / Be valued ‘gainst your wife’s commandment,” and Bassanio sends the ring. It’s not over.
Additional Discussion Points for The Merchant of Venice

Pursuing the Implications of Basics

• **A Bond**—a major element linking the plot lines and settings of the play is the bond, which is legal and financial and potentially deadly in Venice but which is romantic and marital—and perhaps financial and sexual—in Belmont.

Look at some of the array of denotations of the word *bond* and consider how these aspects work in the play and serve as links between the groups and individuals:

• an emotional and relationship commitment such as friendship or marriage
• an agreement uniting people
• an assurance
• a legal document
• a financial arrangement
• something that ties, such as police restraints (one’s bonds/bondage)

*• means of joining or holding together*

Antonio and Shylock have a bond—a legal bond and in how many other senses?

Bassanio and Antonio have a bond—kinship, friendship, and any other senses?

Portia and her father have a bond—familial and cultural; how many aspects does it have?

Bassanio and Portia have a bond—a romantic/sexual attraction, and in how many other senses?

*• Setting: Why these particular settings for this play? Why a dynamic mercantile and financial urban center and a distant mountaintop landed estate, home of wealthy gentry? What historical, social, and cultural dynamics might be in play? Do both settings say “money” but in different ways? If so, how so? How might those different ways figure and shape the action and dynamics of the play? What is the effect of establishing these comparisons and contrasts in the play?*

• **Genre:** The genre issue, as discussed earlier, is currently a major consideration with this play.

If you are reading the play, decide what you think the genre is and make your case.

If you are just attending the production, decide which genre the production puts the play in and make your case.

What balance of serious vs. fun/amusement does the play have? What balance does the production have? How does that balance affect our sense of the play’s “message”?

Gain and Loss

• **A Defining Image:** How much of the play’s action and dynamic of relationships is driven or defined by the basic idea of gain and loss, economic or otherwise?

What are the implications of having gain and loss permeate the play in this way?

Look at individual instances and trace the impact through the play. How does Shakespeare use gain and loss and to what end?

• **Loans Then/Loans Now:** Antonio signs a bond; he asks for a loan of 3,000 ducats for 3 months, promising to repay them at the end of that time. There are stated consequences if he does not pay.

Compare his bond with taking out a loan in our world—a car loan, an educational loan, the varieties of house loan (set interest mortgage, variable interest/ballooning mortgage, etc.), and pursue the details and implications of default on the individual.

• **What places are the “Venices” of our world?** Where are the centers of financial activity and gain/loss? Are there other social/cultural tensions in those locales? Is there a cultural or social elite? How might that dynamic compare to the play’s dynamic?

Cultural Identity

• **Cultural identity:** and the question of who is “us” and who is “them” ricochets through *The Merchant of Venice* and also through many aspects of the modern world at home and abroad. Compare/contrast the way cultural/social/religious identity works in the play and how its dynamics appear in modern thought and action.