

The Merchant of Venice.

(2 sessions, each of 1½hour duration)

Course Outline Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, gives us two of his most interesting characters, the generous and clear-sighted Portia and the bitter, unsocial Jew, Shylock. Their encounter in the courtroom scene is dramatic conflict at its best, during which Shakespeare invites us, his audience, to ponder the issues raised and decide just where our sympathy lies.

Traditionally, Shakespeare's works have been grouped into: **tragedies, comedies, and histories**, with some scholars adding a fourth category, **romances**. *The Merchant of Venice* almost always appears in a list of his comedies, so let's take it from there.

Shakespearean comedies are one of the three (sometimes four) genres of plays by William Shakespeare, who wrote them during the closing years of the 15th and early years of the 16th centuries..A current dictionary definition of comedy is "a dramatic work that is light and often humorous or satirical in tone and that usually contains a happy resolution of the thematic conflict." However, comedy in its medieval usage had a very different meaning from modern comedy

A Shakespearean comedy is one that has a happy ending, usually involving marriage for all the unmarried characters, and a tone and style that is more lighthearted than Shakespeare's other plays. They tend to have:

- A struggle of young lovers to overcome difficulty that is often presented by elders
- Separation and unification
- Mistaken identities
- A clever servant
- Heightened tensions, often within a family
- Multiple plots

Some scholars Shakespeare break the category of Comedies into "Comedies" and "Romances." The Romances would be *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Pericles Prince of Tyre*, and *The Tempest*.

However, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, have an unusual tone with a difficult mix of humour and tragedy which has led them to be classified as **problem plays** or **tragicomedies**.

Almost all terms of literary criticism are coined by literary critics, and the term **problem play** was first used by the late-19th century literary critic F.S. Boas. It derived from a type of drama associated with a prominent playwright of the time, Henrick Ibsen (1828-1906) whose plays dealt with a social system in need of repair. (*An Enemy of the People*; *A Doll's House*; *Hedda Gabler*.) In a problem play the situation faced by the protagonist is presented as an example of a contemporary social problem. Such a play sets out to explore, through its central characters,

specific moral dilemmas and/or social problems. This approach to literary criticism provided a useful model with which to study those works of Shakespeare which had previously seemed to be uneasily situated between comic and tragic, though originally the plays nominated by Boas were all comedies, termed **dark comedies**.

The **dark comedies** are linked by their confusing tone, which shifts suddenly and sometimes violently between dark psychological drama and more straightforward comic material. Boas used the term for plays in which the resolution of the themes and debates seem awkwardly artificial and perfunctory and in the final act the deliverance of justice and the expected outcome does not occur. The definition of dark comedy varies (according to which academic or literary critic presents it) but all centre on the fact that *the plays cannot be easily assigned to the traditional categories of comedy or tragedy*. Despite ending on a generally happy note, the darker, more profound issues raised cannot be fully resolved or ignored.

So where do these “dark comedies” fit into Shakespeare’s career? Some critics have suggested that this sequence of plays marked a psychological turning point for Shakespeare, a period in his life (*last few years of 1590s – first few of 1600s*) during which he supposedly lost interest in the “romantic” comedies he had specialised in to that point – e.g. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Twelfth Night* – and turned towards the darker worlds of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. *The Merchant of Venice* (1597) *Alls Well that Ends Well* (1601) and *Measure for Measure* (1604) were produced during this so-called “transition” period.

We of the 21st century have between us the influence of the Romantic Movement (early 19th century) and Sigmund Freud, and the psychoanalytic school of psychology (early 19th century) between us and Shakespeare. As a result we are perhaps tempted to ask, why *did* Shakespeare turn towards bitter comedy and tragedy? We might suggest some of the following.

- *The Sonnets* tell a story of the poet’s discovery of betrayal, the infidelity of friends, the Dark Lady’s lust and the subsequent despair which manifested itself in the plays.
- The death of his father in 1601 was apparently a crushing blow.
- Shakespeare was an ardent admirer of Essex and the failure of his conspiracy was a crushing blow. (Essex was tried for treason and executed. Basically his crime was that he led a conspiracy in support of religious freedom.)
- He was singularly unimpressed with the mediocre James I, successor to the mighty Elizabeth I.

All very interesting, but of course it’s all speculation, based on the shaky premise that a professional dramatist’s works reflect his state of mind, just as a romantic lyric poet’s is supposed to do. We are tempted to assume that he wrote comedies when things were going well and tragedies when tragedy struck home. In fact, it’s far more likely that Shakespeare himself would have been surprised (not to say amused) to hear this when all along he thought he was writing whatever his company wanted or whatever was currently in vogue and would satisfy his audiences. We need to remember, and remember very well, that Shakespeare was first and foremost a writer/producer *of* and on occasion actor *in* plays. His day-by-day concern was bottoms on seats – drawing and enthralling an audience. And speaking of audiences, who would have attended Shakespeare’s plays?

Public theatres in Elizabethan England catered for a wide variety in levels of income, from the ‘groundlings’ to those who paid more to sit in the ‘gentlemen’s’ or “Lords’” rooms. In fact the range of social and educational levels and opinions and beliefs in the audience was just about as wide as it could be, especially as the brothels of London were close to the theatres.

When this greatest playwright was born in 1564, the English theatre hardly existed at all as an organized commercial or artistic institution. Troupes of actors roamed the countryside, performing in courtyards or in the great halls of noble houses; little better than vagrants in the eyes of the law; they lived precariously by presenting crude native tragedies, bawdy interludes, or adaptations of the classics, in exchange for a meal, a bed, or a few coins. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, however, the stage was one of London's thriving industries, supporting at least three successful repertory companies one of which -*The Lord Chamberlain's Men*--boasted the services of William Shakespeare as a resident actor, playwright, and shareholder.

The Lord Chamberlain's Men (who changed their name to *The King's Men* after James I took the throne in 1603), performed most of their plays on the multi-leveled spaces of the Globe Theatre and the Blackfriars Theatre, the latter built on the site of an old Dominican monastery, hence the name – the monks had worn black robes. (There were 3 more public theatres in Bankside – the Swan, the Rose and the Hope.) Today we are familiar with a different kind of theatre; the "modern" stage consists of a single flat playing surface separated from the audience by a proscenium arch, artificially lighted, the stage proper furnished with sets and props and peopled by actors whose costumes, gestures and speech suggest a world that corresponds closely with our own. Shakespeare's stage also held, as Hamlet put it, a mirror up to nature, but it did not do so by the same means, and its reflection tended to be less realistically detailed. Perhaps the greatest difference is that **what contemporary plays often accomplish through sets, props and costumes, Shakespeare gave his audiences almost entirely through language.** We know that we are in the Forest of Arden, for example, or on the battlements of a Danish castle, or on the seacoast of Bohemia, because the characters tell us so, not because we can see or hear for ourselves that we are; there are no trees or battlements or roaring surf but only a bare stage jutting out among the spectators, flanked by galleries and balconies and backed by an inner recess into which the action might move. Visual spectacle, though not unimportant, was secondary to dialogue; *we* speak of going to "see" a play where audiences up to the nineteenth century spoke of "hearing" one. In this way, a Shakespearean audience was far more sophisticated than a modern audience – they listened carefully to what the actors were saying and used their imagination to create the visual setting.

So, **Shakespeare is not so much a "thinker" as a writer capable of bringing thoughts to life.** He was not a philosopher or a scientist, though many people have thought of him in this way: he was a writer, a practicing playwright - obviously a highly intelligent and perceptive one possessed of a deep understanding of human nature - whose work was to make a valuable contribution to the history of ideas, to psychology, to theology, to sociology for the next 500 years, and will probably continue to do so. However, to only read Shakespeare in this way is to *misread* him, and to ignore what he did best. This purely “academic” approach has even been the basis for those now largely discredited claims that not Shakespeare but some better-educated or more aristocratic writer must have written his plays. Let’s not blunder into making the crucial error of assuming that lack of formal education means lack of intelligence.

Those of you who have heard me talk about Shakespeare on previous occasions will know that I contribute to the view that it is important to know something of the background to literature - i.e. the age in which it was produced, so I ask you to bear with me for a few moments while I indulge myself and provide a brief (very brief, don't worry!) sketch of the period known as Elizabethan Age.

The Elizabethan Age is viewed highly because of the contrasts with the periods before and after. It was a brief period of largely internal peace between the English Reformation and the battles between Protestants and Catholics and the battles yet to come between parliament and the monarchy that engulfed the 17th century. The Protestant/Catholic divide was settled, for a time, by the Elizabethan Religious Settlement and Parliament was still not strong enough to challenge royal absolutism.

England was also well-off compared to the other nations of Europe. The Italian Renaissance had come to an end under the weight of foreign domination of the peninsula. France was embroiled in its own religious battles that would only be settled in 1598 with the Edict of Nantes. In part because of this, but also because the English had been expelled from their last outposts on the continent, the centuries-long conflict between France and England was suspended during the Elizabethan era.

The one great rival was Spain, with which England was in conflict both in Europe and in the Americas (skirmishes that exploded into the Anglo-Spanish War of 1585-1604.) An attempt by Philip II of Spain to invade England with the Spanish Armada in 1588 was famously defeated, but the tide of war turned against England with a disastrously unsuccessful attack upon Spain in 1589. Thereafter Spain provided some support for Irish Catholics in a draining guerilla war against England and Spanish naval and land forces inflicted a series of defeats upon English forces, which badly damaged both the English Exchequer and economy that until then had been so carefully restored under Elizabeth's prudent guidance. English colonization and trade would be frustrated until the signing of the Treaty of London the year following Elizabeth's death.

England during this period had a centralized, well organized, and effective government, largely a result of the reforms of Henry VII and Henry VIII. Economically the country began to benefit greatly from the new era of Atlantic trade. And this was the age that gave us great literary figures: poets John Donne, Christopher Marlowe, Edmund Spenser and, of course, Shakespeare.

However, despite the heights achieved during the era, less than 40 years after the death of Elizabeth the country was to descend into the English Civil War.

Shakespeare's varied genius.

So what makes Shakespeare so "special"? Viewed in historical perspective, his work is distinguished from that of his contemporaries (Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, John Lyly) by its variety. Of the 36 extant plays he has left no two are alike, nor do any two create the same impression. While every other playwright had his distinctive manner, Shakespeare handled the most diverse subjects with an ardour almost equalled by his achievement. Of all the world's

greatest dramatists he alone displays an equal aptitude for tragedy and comedy and these plays, each of which is distinctive, *in total* provide his audience with every possible emotion.

Date of publication.

Although the absolute chronology of Shakespeare’s plays is far from certain, the consensus of opinion amongst leading modern scholars is that *The Merchant of Venice* was written *circa* 1597, just after *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and just before *Much Ado About Nothing*.

It was certainly first performed in 1598 and published in 1600 under the title “The most excellent historie of the Merchant of Venice.” *With the extreme crueltie of Shylock the Jew towards the sayd merchant, in cutting a just pound of his flesh: and the obtaining of Portia by the choyse of three chests.* (“j” was printed as “I”)

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READ PLOT SUMMARY - ISSUE *DRAMATIS PERSONAE* SHEETS

Main Sources

The story of the bond and the pound of flesh is of ancient Eastern origin; it eventually found a place in most medieval European literatures. The story of the caskets is to be found in a Greek romance of the early 9th century and is reproduced in a very suggestive form by Boccaccio in one of the tales of his *Decameron*. The incident of the elopement of Jessica and her theft of the jewels has been traced to a story by Massuccio of Salerno (*circa* 1470) and there are some similarities to *The Jew of Malta*, a play by one of Shakespeare’s contemporaries, Christopher Marlowe. However, while Marlowe’s character is brutal and unfeeling in the extreme, Shakespeare imbues his character with human pathos.

REFER TO SHEET CONTAINING NOTES ON STRUCTURE

It is accepted that Shakespeare’s plots are often improbable. However, it is not in his plotting that his genius lies. His greatest artistic power lies in characterization. His characters act like *real people*, we should know them if we met them in the street, perhaps we see the when we look in the mirror! Later, have a look at the *dramatis personae*. Try to fit faces and perhaps even names to them – faces and names drawn from your own experience. We are moved by any story insofar as we feel kinship with the characters. A story with a “realistic” plot, for example, will not “grab” us if the characters are wooden, whereas even a crude plot can become alive when living people perform it.

Theme

So what was Shakespeare on about when he wrote *The Merchant of Venice* – other than creating a play people would come to see, and pay to do so? Is there a central “idea” – a unifying theme? To see *The Merchant of Venice* as all about racial prejudice is to ignore the social background of

the time in which it was written. We will see this a little later on, when we spend time examining the Elizabethan attitude to Jewry. I see the central idea of the play a wider, universal theme of of **Mercy against Justice**. Now this sounds more like Shakespeare and it is certainly an idea which embodies the central conflict in the play. So this is the way we will approach it.

It is obvious that the two central figures in the play are Shylock and Portia. However, as the play is titled *The Merchant of Venice*, we'll take a quick look at Antonio.

Antonio is obviously a popular man in Venice. Apart from Shylock he seems to have no enemies. Bassanio tells him (Act I, scene 1 line 7) "I owe you much" and in Act III, Scene 2 he tells Portia that Antonio is a dear friend, "*the kindest man/The best condition'd and unwearied spirit/In doing courtesies.*" Salarnio refers to him as "*the good Antonio/the honest Antonio*". Lorenzo calls him a "*true gentleman*" During the trial scene the Duke is liberal in praise of him. Everybody – with the exception of Shylock – speaks of his kindness. Antonio obviously helps others regularly in the same way he helps Bassanio, for Shylock complains of his "*lending money gratis.*" Indeed he seems to have a certain carelessness in money matters and is over-sure of his trading success – a dangerous, perhaps slightly cocksure confidence which leads him to sign such a dangerous bond without hesitation.

Against his good qualities we can find in Antonio an intolerance typical of the anti-Semitic feeling of his day. He condemns Shylock and admits, even after having accepted a loan from Shylock, that he will quite likely curse him as he did before. "*You called me dog, and for these courtesies/ I'll lend you monies?*" Shylock says and Antonio replies bluntly and flippantly:

*I am as likely to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.*

Antonio takes life rather seriously – indeed from the beginning he is melancholy: He speaks the opening lines of the play: "*In sooth, I know not why I am sad/It wearies me.*" - almost a pose, perhaps? It seems he had not always been like this. His friends are worried about him, and he says of himself that he has "*much ado to know himself.*" Is this a hint by the playwright that there are clouds on the horizon? But whatever Antonio's disposition, he shows strength of character and when death stares him in the face he meets it with calm resignation. Moreover, during the trial he never once hints that it is Bassanio's fault that he is in this situation. When the trial is decided in his favour his first thought is for Jessica and Lorenzo. However, we have to admit that *long before Shylock plotted against him.*, Antonio had seemed to take pride in spurning the Jew and treating him in public with rudeness and contempt. It is difficult to reconcile this discourtesy with the rest of his character - and what is more he's proud of his behaviour to the Jew. When Shylock shows a seeming kindness to him (grants the loan for what seemed at the time no cost to the merchant) Antonio takes it as a sign that "*The Hebrew will turn Christian; he grows kind.*" Kindness in a Jew is beyond Antonio's comprehension. However, we must remind ourselves that the people in Shakespeare's play, and significantly his audiences, would have viewed Jews in this way. Antonio's uncharitable treatment of Shylock reflects a nation's – a Christian nation's – intolerance of a Jewish minority, and such a persistent insult from no less than the "noble" merchant of Venice reflects this.

At the end, when we are told that Antonio's ships have come safely home we cease to be interested in his fortunes. I don't think we are left wondering about "what makes Antonio tick" but the same can't be said of our reaction to Shylock. He's is and remains an enigma. But why the happy ending? The final jesting, lighthearted scene is a concession to popular taste. I don't think *that* has changed! The Elizabethan populace at large still wants everyone to live happily ever after – except Jews, of course. This we recognise as prejudice. Can you suggest any contemporary groups which are viewed in the same way?

In fact, before we move on to the character, Shylock, we will look at the view held of Jews both in Venice, the "world" of Shakespeare's play, and by his English audiences

The Jews in Shakespeare's England.

One of the first documented groups of Jews residing in England comes from Oxford in 1075. For more than a century from this date, English Jews were not confined to ghettos, unlike many of their European counterparts. Eyewitness accounts report that during this period Jews and non-Jews visited each other's houses, indicating that they lived side by side in relative harmony. In the late 12th century, however, preparation for the Third Crusade (1189) brought a heightened level of anti-Jewish sentiment. During the First Crusade the Jews had been among the most vigorous defenders of Jerusalem against the Crusaders. The Jews had almost single-handedly defended Haifa, holding out in the besieged town for a whole month in fierce battle. When the city fell, the Crusaders gathered the Jews in a synagogue and burned them alive. During the Second and Third Crusades, a similar pattern followed, with Crusaders attacking the "Christ Killers" wherever they found them.

Repressive measures against Jews continued to grow in England as the century wore on until finally, in 1275, they were forbidden to be money-lenders. Several more edicts against Jews were implemented at this time, including the taxation of any Jew over the age of 12 and the wearing of badges that identified people as Jewish. With the loss of their primary source of income, and thus their value to the King's coffers, Jews became expendable to the Crown and were expelled from England in 1290, not to be re-admitted until mid-17th century.

After the Expulsion, the English view of Jews began to develop, and took the form of several myths that grew in popularity through the centuries. The strongest of these myths was undoubtedly that of ritual murder, which remained in circulation in England long after the Jews had been expelled. There were several variations of this ritual murder legend, the most prevalent that of Jews kidnapping children at Easter and using them in ritual practices. It was also believed that adult Christians would be killed and their blood used for Passover ceremonies. Not one of these myths had any basis in fact; of course, instead they stemmed from fear of an unknown culture, and yet, they were regarded as truth by many. **Any modern parallels?**

Despite the expulsion of 1290, small groups of Jews sought refuge from the excesses of the Reformation (especially the Spanish Inquisition - established 1478.) in England, where they lived quietly during Elizabeth's reign. Known as *Marranos* or *Conversos*, they were people who had converted from Judaism to Christianity.

The world in which Shakespeare lived was an exceedingly dangerous one. The threat of a civil war was never far away. When Elizabeth I ascended the throne she staved off the threat of rebellion by dealing ruthlessly with any hint of treason. Many of her enemies - perceived or actual - were beheaded. Much of the plotting against Elizabeth I had its origins in the religious intolerance of the era. (Roman Catholic v Protestant.) Nevertheless, most people of Jewish descent living in England in the 16th century were not persecuted by their Christian neighbors **but** there *was* one notorious event which could hardly have escaped Shakespeare's notice and which would still have been fresh in the minds of his audiences. In 1593, a few years before *The Merchant of Venice* was written, Queen Elizabeth I's physician Roderigo Lopez was accused of trying to poison her. Lopez, allegedly in league with the King of Spain, was convicted of treason, hung, and drawn and quartered in 1594. His was a very public execution, and the fact that he was a *Marranos* led to an outbreak of anti-Jewish sentiment in the country. He was taunted on the scaffold as he died, still proclaiming his innocence. It was a clear sign that there was a latent anti-Semitism within the English public.

It is safe to say, therefore, that the image Shakespeare and his contemporaries held of the Jews was mostly unfavorable. One can argue strongly that the absence of Jews in England (apart from the atypical *Marranos*) allowed a popular negative image of the Jew to become a deeply ingrained **cultural stereotype**. Without visible flesh and blood Jews around to reveal the absurdity of that stereotype of the demonic, murderous Jew, it became an exaggerated and powerful part of Elizabethan folklore. So Shakespeare probably relied primarily upon inherited cultural stereotypes, common folk-wisdom about the demonic Jew, as well as literary sources when he sketched his character of Shylock for *The Merchant of Venice*. Being primarily a man of the theatre, he would have been heavily influenced not only by history, but also by the theatre that had preceded him. He was also an exceptionally good businessman with a keen sense of what his audience wanted. Portrayals of Jews in drama were a long-standing tradition by the time Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*. The Jew seems to have been the figure audiences loved to hate. **(Do we have a modern parallel?)**

Venetian Jewry & Medieval Usury -

There is evidence of Jews in Venice as early as the 11th and 12th century. Venice at that time was a necessary stopover for merchants on their travels between east and west – merchants who came from Germany, France, Greece and Turkey. Jewish merchants set up small businesses during their short stopovers to the city as they traveled from one place to another. This was the beginning of the Jewish community which had grown to about thirteen hundred people by the 12th century. By the 15th century it was well established.

Of all late-medieval Mediterranean cities Venice, with its cosmopolitan atmosphere, *should* have provided a relatively favourable environment for Jewish merchants. However, in reality the Jews of Venice were in a peculiar position – they were not classified as citizens (although many of them were permanent residents) nor were they regarded as foreign merchants, as they had no homeland of their own. Hence, whenever native Venetians felt that the Jews were becoming too prosperous, discriminatory laws were issued to confine them to restricted areas of trade and to subject them to arbitrary exclusions. By the close of the 16th century money-lending was virtually the only occupation which the Jews of Venice were permitted to carry out.

The importance of this situation is reflected when Shylock says of Antonio:

*“I hate him for he is a Christian;
But more, for that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.*

.....
*He hates our sacred nation and he rails
Even there where merchants most do congregate
On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift
Which he calls interest...”*

Much of the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* revolves around *usury*, which in late-medieval times did not imply exorbitant rates of interest (as it does today) but merely the price which a borrower had to pay in return for a loan of money. The Church argued that it was unjust to charge money for a loan, basing the case against usury on isolated passages from the New Testament, on the writings of the Greek philosopher Aristotle, and on the opinion of leading theologian St. Thomas Aquinas, who argued that charging of interest is wrong because it amounts to "double charging", charging for both the thing and the use of the thing. To charge for the money and for its use (by spending) is, he declared, to charge for the money twice. In actual fact, of course, no attempt was made by the opponents of usury to distinguish between money lent for immediate use (wine, food for example) and money borrowed for investment in trading or a productive enterprise intended to generate income. *But* so strong was ecclesiastical condemnation of professional money lending that Christian merchants, fearful of excommunication, cloaked their usurious activities under the guise of other activities **Modern parallels?** On the other hand, since Jewish merchants in many medieval cities were debarred from competing with their Christian neighbours in normal trading activities, the only way in which they could make their living was to become specialists in the money-lending business.

Shylock’s concern about Antonio’s habit of giving loans free of interest is therefore understandable since it could become a direct threat to his only means of livelihood.

But we will leave Shylock for a while (with reluctance – he is such a fascinating and enigmatic character) to look at Portia.

Portia has an edge to her, an intellect which is unusual among Shakespeare’s woman characters. (The other character which comes to mind is Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*.) It must be admitted that Shakespeare’s women are not always strongly drawn, but Portia is strong enough to play the part of a man and yet loses nothing of her womanly nature in the process. The heiress of Belmont, however, has the dignity becoming her social position. Although wealthy, she is generous, as she shows when she offers to help Antonio. She displays the bearing of a lady when in the company of the Princes, keeping her sharp comments on them for after they have left.

Yet, in spite of the class from which she comes, she is not above discussing her problems with her loyal servant nor, for that matter, is she above accepting Bassanio, who is clearly intellectually and socially her inferior. She possesses a sharp wit, often ringed with satire. We see

something of this when she discusses with Nerissa the various suitors who have called to seek her hand in marriage.

*Thus hath the candle singed the moth!
O these deliberate fools! When they do choose
They have the wisdom by their wit to lose.*

Her wit in this instance displays a sharp tongue as well as a ready ability to sum up character. Yet she is pleasant and gracious to the Princes of Morocco and Arragon before they make their choice. Once they have chosen wrongly and left, however, as we have just seen she puts them in their boxes very neatly!

When it comes to her decision to attend the court in Venice in the guise of a lawyer, Portia is attracted to the idea not only because she feels sufficiently capable to be of use to Antonio, but also because she will gain pleasure from the trick she intends to play not only on the court but on Bassanio and Gratiano. When Nerissa asks her if it is likely that their disguises are going to be successful, especially in tricking their husbands, Portia replies that there will be no problems, and proceeds to gleefully anticipate the fun that is to come.

*“.....I'll hold thee any wager
That we shall think that we are accomplished
With what we lack. I'll hold thee any wager,
When we are both accoutered loke young men,
I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two,
And wear my dagger with the braver grace,
And speak between the change of man and boy
With a reed voice, and turn two mincing steps
Into a manly stride, and speak of frays
Like a fine bragging youth, and tell quaint lies,
How honourable ladies sought my love,
Which, I denying, they fell sick and died –“*

However, once inside the courtroom we see a sober and serious Portia. It is to be in the trial scene that Portia's intellectual properties are best brought out. Her ability to reason surpasses that of anyone else present and her speech about the quality of mercy is magnificent in its logic, its poetry and power and above all its humanity.

The Duke first asks Shylock if he intends to continue with the case, and asks for a “gentle answer.” Shylock refuses. The Duke asks how he can expect mercy if he is not willing to grant it. Shylock replies:

*“..... So do I answer you.
The pound of flesh which I demand of him
Is dearly bought, 'tis mine, and I will have it.
If you deny me, fie upon your law!
There is no force in the decrees of Venice.*

Is stand for judgment. Answer; shall I have it?

At this point, the disguised Portia arrives and is given permission to address the Court. When Antonio admits to his liability under the bond and his inability to repay what is owing, Portia says, *“Then must the Jew be merciful.”*

“On what compulsion must I? Tell me that” says Shylock.

Then comes the speech by Portia which is one of the best known in all of Shakespeare.

*The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest,
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings,
But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
It is enthroned in the heart of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.....*

When Shylock responds by declaring:

*“My deeds upon my head! I crave the law,
The penalty and forfeit of my bond.”* **(note** *“My deeds upon my head”!* The words are prophetic.)

Portia declares, *“There is no power in Venice/
Can alter a decree established,
‘Twill be recorded as a precedent.....”*

and an exultant Shylock cries, *“A Daniel come to judgment!
Yea, a Daniel!
O wise young judge.....”*

The events from here on are human conflict at its most telling – not physical but emotional conflict. We watch Portia lay Shylock bare, layer by layer. We'll follow developments a step at a time.

1. Portia gives the Jew one final opportunity to *“Be merciful./ Take thrice thy money, bid me tear the bond.”* But the triumphant Shylock refuses.
2. She asks that he at least allow the presence of a surgeon to sop Antonio's wounds, *“Less he do bleed to death.”*

3. *“Is it so nominated in the bond?”* asks Shylock

4. *“It is not so expressed, but what of that?
T’were good you did so much for charity.”* replies Portia.

5. *I cannot find it; ‘tis not in the bond”* Shylock replies, little knowing that he is digging a deep, dark hole for himself. His fiendish joy is not to last much longer.

6. The young lawyer, the young Daniel pronounces, *”...you must cut this flesh from off his breast./ The law allows it, and the Court awards it.”*

7. *Shylock’s gleeful “Most learned judge!” is, however, cut short by Portia:*

*Tarry a little, there is something else.
This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood;
The words expressly are ‘a pound of flesh,
Take then thou bond, take thou thy pound of flesh,
But in the cutting of it if thou dost shed
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
Are by the laws of Venice forfeit
Unto the State of Venice.*

8. Now it is Gratiano who cries: *“O upright judge! Mark, Jew. O learned judge!*

The irony for Shylock is that he has been defeated by his own weapon – the letter of the law. (But what about the penalties imposed on him by the Court? One can’t help but be a little uneasy about them. We’ll talk about that a little later.)

One observation needs to be made, however. While being impressed by Portia’s powerful performance, we see that not all is nobility. She shows a certain cruel delight at the turning of the tables on Shylock. And as we are to see, the “quality of mercy” which she so eloquently pleads for Antonio is not extended to Shylock. That’s known as hypocrisy.

Central though Portia’s role in the play is, Shakespeare does not develop her character very deliberately or fully. He shows her in snatches, albeit some of them memorable, as in the trial scene, and in other little things, such as her tactfulness in keeping her friend Antonio free from the quarrel about the rings. But in no way is she as complex a character as Shylock. The Portia we are shown can be regarded as a compound of intellect and romance – a merry-hearted, sensible and queenly Renaissance lady who blots her humanitarian copy-book only once, when she delights in playing cat-and-mouse with Shylock. **How do you feel about Portia?** We’ll talk about that later as well.

Perhaps before moving on to the dominant character in the play – Shylock - we should touch upon Bassanio, if only because Portia expresses pride in being his wife, and we have come to value her judgment!

Bassanio is introduced to us as a reckless and extravagant fortune-hunter. In his favour he puts his position honestly before Antonio, without excuses or pretence. And, for all his seeming shallowness he *is* a better judge of character than Antonio – he warns his friend that he does not like the mix of “*fair terms and a villain’s mind*” as embodied in the bond. He also shows himself to be a loyal friend.

However, one senses a seeming inconsistency in his portrayal. His involvement in the casket plot does not, to use a phrase, quite “jell”, or perhaps in this computer-age should say “it does not compute.” We first meet him as someone in serious debt because he is a spendthrift Surely this is not the kind of person likely to pass over gold and silver and choose lead? An inconsistency in character? Has Shakespeare “slipped up” here? Not really.

In any play, there will be characters that fuel the action – things happen because of the kind of person they are. In this play, of course, that’s Portia and Shylock. They are, as we say, central to the action, to the overall theme/s. Indeed, in Shakespeare’s tragedies, such characters **are** the plot – consider Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth – especially Macbeth.

There will also be other “secondary” characters, drawn more sketchily. I’d tend to put Antonio in this category. We learn *something* of the real person, but only those elements which are relative to the action of the play. Then there are the *dues ex machina*, improbable characters used to resolve a situation or untangle a plot. These originated in classical Greek drama when a *mechane* (machine) would lower an actor representing a god come to resolve an impossible/improbable situation. Perhaps Bassanio’s role in the casket plot falls into this category. He certainly serves the producer’s, that is Shakespeare’s, purpose by resolving the romantic (and unlikely and fanciful) casket plot.

NOW

Shylock.

The critical problem of Shylock’s character overshadows any other single element of the play. Shakespeare, either as an Elizabethan with the political and racial prejudices of his time or as a good business man (*give ‘em what they want*) provides the typical or traditional Jew expected by his audience. A dissenting body of critics, however, insist that *The Merchant of Venice* is a satire on religious bigotry and a plea for toleration. When we have finished our discussion it will be for you to make your own decision. And remember - when it comes to thinking that we might actually find ourselves clear on what Shakespeare was about, he seldom gives answers, just questions. I know I’ve dared to suggest a unifying theme for the play – I can scarcely believe that I’ve been so presumptuous. Will Shakespeare is probably out there somewhere penning an amused response at this very moment.

So – is *The Merchant of Venice* an anti-Semitic play? This is far from the only way to look at it, indeed I’d argue that it’s a *dangerous* way, because it leads us to interpret the play using 21st century values. Because Shakespeare uses universal themes – ideas/issues common to all men at all times - reading and viewing his plays *will* inevitably prompt us to reflect on the issues as they apply to *our* world. That’s fine - as long as we don’t take the fatal step of assuming that our

social mores are the same as those of the 16th century and make judgments based on this - good, bad, immoral etc - after all it's only a couple of centuries ago that it was socially acceptable to own slaves! Some slave-owners treated their slaves well, some treated them abominably. It's not the situation a man finds himself in, but how he reacts to it which will reveal character. Times change, human nature does not. That's how Shakespeare's plays work, and work so well that we're still viewing and discussing them 500 years after they were written.

Shylock seems, outwardly, to be the villain of the play. He sets out to exact a pound of flesh from Antonio, outwardly a good Christian. However, things go much deeper than this. Shakespeare gives reasons for Shylock's actions - if they are acts of hatred, it is not unfounded hatred. When Salereo questions his desire for revenge, Shylock replies:

If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew what should his sufferance be by example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute and it will go hard but I will better the instruction.

While our first impression is of a bitter, revengeful Shylock it soon becomes clear that Antonio has given Shylock ample reason to seek revenge - and many of the other Christian characters exhibit the same behavior. On examination, we can see that it is not just Shylock's Jewish-ness which is a problem, but also the hypocrisy displayed by the Christians in the play. It is actually Antonio who shows an unfounded hatred. Treated as something inhuman, a 'dog' or a 'cur,' Shylock not unnaturally responds..."with tooth and claw" Shylock does admit to hating Antonio for being a Christian, but he adds that his hatred also stems from reasons other than religion. Antonio spits and kicks Shylock whenever he comes in contact with him and gives no reason for this, beyond the fact that Shylock is not a Gentile. :

There is also abundant evidence in the play of Shylock's passion for money, the loss of his daughter seems to affect him less than the loss of "his ducats". He cries that he would gladly see Jessica dead at his feet so long as the money lay with her body. But Shakespeare blurs the issue somewhat. (Typical!) We remember that Shylock's most anguished cry is in response to the news that something of special value, a value which transcends money, has been taken by his daughter and sold by her for a monkey. He cries to his friend Tubal:

".....Thou torturest me, Tubal. It was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys."

Now *there's* a touch of humanity we hadn't expected.

Indeed money is the standard by which everyone is judged. Speaking to Bassanio, Shylock refers to Antonio as "good" - but *good in the sense that he is a man of some wealth* (we still speak idiomatically of someone being "*good for that loan.*") Shylock's hatred really arises from the fact that Antonio lends money without charging interest.

It is equally easy to find evidence of Shylock's love of (or should that be lust for) revenge. When Antonio's friend Salerio says to him: "*Why, I am sure if he forfeit thou wilt not take his flesh. What's that good for,*" Shylock replies:

To bait fish withal: if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated my enemies and what's his reason? I am a Jew.

Then, when misfortune prevents Antonio from repaying the debt within the set time, Shylock isn't concerned with offers to settle in cash, even when more than the due amount is offered. Mercy was a quality unknown to Shylock, for he rejected all the appeals for it from everybody that he waive his "right" to the pound of flesh. Indeed, his rejection of Bassanio's offer of "ten times three thousand ducats" shows that his love of revenge came even before love of money. This lust for revenge makes his behaviour even more appalling when he whets the knife during the trial scene. He is even more merciless in refusing the proposal that a surgeon should be in attendance on Antonio when the flesh is cut.

But all attempts to hound the revengeful Shylock do not succeed. The desertion of his servant Launcelot, for example, is doubtless meant to further discredit Shylock in the eyes of others. However, Launcelot's testimony to the reason for his desertion bears little weight – his real excuse for running from the Jew to the Christian is that Bassanio "gives rare new liveries" and that, in Bassanio's service, he has a better chance of becoming familiar with (now there's a euphemism for you) "eleven widows and nine maids." Thus, what we learn of Launcelot serves to justify Shylock's reproof of him rather than to convict the money-lender of an "evil disposition". Note how Launcelot condemns himself out of his own mouth. (Irony at work) The skill of characterization is to have a character reveal himself by what he says and does, or on occasion what he fails to say and do. Shakespeare is the ultimate practitioner of this art.

The behaviour of Lorenzo and his friends in scheming Jessica's elopement is no less likely to wound by its flippant callousness. Shylock is invited to dinner by Bassanio, whose friends are scheming to steal away his daughter and, as a truly gratuitous piece of cruel fun, they are bringing her, disguised as a torch-bearer, to the very banquet where her father is to be a guest. All that prevents the enactment of this revolting joke is not anyone's consideration for Shylock's feelings, but mere chance – the winds change direction and the masque is postponed so some of the conspirators can set sail for Belmont.

BUT, the worst stab – the unkindest cut - of all comes from Jessica's own actions during her elopement. She flippantly desecrates all that her father holds sacred and destroys the foundations of his universe. To be blunt, she shows herself to be disloyal, deceitful and a thief. Sprightly and charming she might have been – loyal, kind and honest she was not. When he hears of her elopement, and of her actions, Shylock is driven from distraction to maniacal frenzy.

*"My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
Justice! The law! My ducats and my daughter!
Double ducats, stol'n from me by my daughter!
And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones,
Stol'n by my daughter! Justice!"*

Shylock is now ready for the mood he displays in the Trial Scene, becoming, as the presiding judge says, “*a strong adversary, an inhuman wretch incapable of pity.*” Certainly Shylock’s fury has brought out his cunning. The Duke’s invitation to him to show human gentleness and love only reminds him of the cruelty he suffered at the hands of Christians, and of which he had spoken so eloquently earlier in the play.

Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? 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.

Shylock becomes an instrument of vengeance – the law of the Christians will become in his hands the greater law of the Biblical prophets, in this case, “*an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*”. This is a quote from the Old Testament (sometimes called “the history of the Jews”) Exodus 21-23-line 27ff. It is based on the principle of *retributive justice*, also known in Latin as *lex talionis* (law of retaliation.)

He is impervious to entreaty and unruffled by abuse, a towering figure, dominant over the little men who spit at him – *until the arrival of Portia*. She attempts to turn the argument of the case towards the consideration of mercy and humanity, but with frenzied fanaticism Shylock sees it only as an attempt to “*lay perjury upon his soul*”. Thereafter, Portia toys with Shylock as a cat does with a mouse it is about to kill, leading him from hope to hope, until she finally pounces. We realise that, with her knowledge of the intricacies of Venetian law, she could have won the case very quickly and in a few words. By keeping Shylock on the rack of expectation and despair, she gains a professional triumph, albeit at the expense of the very “quality of mercy” she had previously pleaded.

As the broken Shylock leaves the Court with the simple plea “*I am not well*” we find ourselves more than a little uneasy about the penalties imposed upon him. To lose his money to a Christian, the man who had stolen away his daughter would have been devastating. But to be forced to convert to Christianity? Now’s that would have been more than humiliation, that would have stripped his life of meaning. We are left feeling that it is one thing to punish a man, entirely enough to destroy him. In this situation, who is the avenger?

And let us be honest about the supposedly pleasant characters in the play. Venice might have romantic associations, and many of the scenes are comparatively jovial, but Antonio is cruel to Shylock, Bassanio is a spendthrift, Gratiano vulgar, Portia obviously enjoys turning Shylock on the rack and honesty is certainly not the strongest point of Lorenzo and Jessica. Shylock towers above all the rest- grand, it is true, but scarcely amiable! **Comment? The modern rat race?**

So – is the play tragedy or comedy? Romance? All three? By asking these questions are we suggesting that the play is flawed? Or is it perhaps a slice of life itself – a mixture of the serious and the light-hearted, of tragedy and comedy, of love and hatred, of justice and injustice, of hope and despair? Let’s revisit the definition of **dark comedy** which we considered earlier.

The **dark comedies** are linked by their confusing tone, which shifts suddenly and sometimes violently between dark psychological drama and more straightforward comic material. (This is certainly true of *The Merchant of Venice*.) “Dark comedy” is a literary term coined at the end of the 19th century for plays in which the resolution of the themes and debates seem awkwardly artificial and perfunctory and in the final act the deliverance of justice and the expected outcome does not occur. The definition of dark comedy varies (according to which academic or literary critic presents it) but all centre on the fact that the plays cannot be easily assigned to the traditional categories of comedy or tragedy.

Despite ending on a generally happy note, the darker, more profound issues raised cannot be fully resolved or ignored.

And it is the last sentence which is the most telling. Remember, I warned you that Shakespeare seldom provides answers, rather he poses questions: He leaves us asking ourselves the following questions.

- Why did Shakespeare call his play *The Merchant of Venice* and not *The Jew of Venice*?
- Does Portia practice what she preaches in her “quality of mercy” speech?
- Is Shylock justified in his hatred of Christians?
- Does Shylock receive justice from the court?
- What about the condition that he convert to Christianity? Justice or revenge?
- In the end, what is our attitude towards him – contempt, respect, pity?
- Some critics claim that the play would have been better finishing when Shylock left the stage, that the final scene is an anti-climax. Why do you think Shakespeare included it?
- Does the prevailing tone of the play lean towards the tragic or the comic?

Shakespeare put one of his most eloquent speeches into the mouth of this "villain":

*Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs
dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with
the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject
to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means
warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer
as a Christian is? 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?*

Did Shakespeare know any Jewish people?

Jewish communities were first established in England with the arrival of William the Conqueror in 1066. Although Jews soon began to play key roles in English economic development and flourished as doctors and tradesmen, they could not escape the rampant anti-Semitism that swept

Europe. Jews were subjected to vicious persecutions, including charges of the ritual sacrifice of Christian children, which culminated with their expulsion in 1290 by Edward I. The exile lasted until 1655, when Jewish scholar Manasseh ben Israel obtained Oliver Cromwell's assent for Jews to return to London. Thus, the Elizabethan people knew little about Jews, other than the false information handed down through years of propaganda.

Many people feel that *The Merchant of Venice* is anti-Semitic. Others believe that Shakespeare rises from the bigotry of the day, pleading for religious tolerance through Shylock's famous speech, "I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?" (3.1.62). What do you think?

And then, of course, there is the 64,000 dollar question:

Can mercy and justice co-exist?

Once again, what do *YOU* think?

To the course-leader.

Below is a plot summary which could be used as a handout.

The Merchant of Venice – Plot summary.

Act 1.

On meeting his wealthy friend, Antonio, Bassanio reveals that he has a plan for reviving his own fortunes and for paying off his debts. In the town of Belmont, not far from Venice, lives a wealthy young woman named Portia; if he can secure some money Bassanio is sure he can win her as his wife. Although Antonio has no ready funds at hand to help his friend he arranges to borrow three thousand ducats from Shylock, a wealthy Jew. Shylock agrees to the loan on the condition that if at the end of three months the debt has not been repaid he is to be entitled to cut a pound of flesh from any part of Antonio's body. However, confident that some of his merchandise-laden vessels still at sea will have reached Venice by then, Antonio agrees.

Act 2.

Portia has many suitors for her hand in marriage. According to the strange conditions of her father's will, any man who wants to marry her must choose between three caskets – gold, silver and lead – and hope to find a message which says Portia is his. Choosing the golden casket the Prince of Morocco finds a skull and a mocking message, while the Prince of Arragon chooses the silver and discovers "the portrait of a blinking idiot." After both these suitors have been dismissed news arrives in Belmont that the light-hearted Bassanio, accompanied by his mercurial friend Gratiano, has arrived to court the heiress.

Act 3.

Undeceived by the ornateness of the gold and silver caskets, Bassanio correctly selects the leaden box. Meanwhile, Gratiano has been courting Nerissa, Portia's waiting-woman. It is planned that both couples will be married at the same time, and to seal the agreement Portia and Nerissa give the successful suitors rings which they emphasise must never, under any circumstances, be parted with, as such action would signify the end of their love. Soon afterwards Lorenzo, an artistic young friend of Bassanio arrives in Belmont with Jessica, Shylock's daughter, with whom he has eloped. Bad news then arrives – Antonio's ships have been lost at sea and Shylock is demanding full payment of the loan or his pound of flesh. Portia arranges for the double wedding to take place at once and then sends her husband back to Venice.

with her dowry of six thousand ducats in an effort to placate Shylock. Then, leaving Lorenzo and Jessica in Belmont, the resourceful Portia disguises herself as a doctor of law and sets out for Venice, accompanied by Nerissa as her "clerk".

Act 4

Portia arrives at the court of justice as the trial is beginning... The presiding Duke believes her to be "a young doctor of Rome" and allows her to present her opinion on the dispute. Shylock refuses to accept "thrice the sum" owing and demands his pound of flesh. Portia, however, on examining the bond, reveals that it contained no clause permitting Shylock to have any blood with the flesh; thus, should one drop of Antonio's blood be shed, according to Venetian law all of the Jew's property would be confiscated. The defeated Shylock then offers to take the money, but the disguised Portia claims that by threatening the life of a Venetian citizen Shylock has forfeited the bond and therefore all his property is liable to seizure. The decision is Antonio's; he declares he will accept nothing for himself but insists that half the Jew's fortune should be immediately be ceded to Lorenzo and Jessica and the rest willed to them on his death. In addition, Shylock is to convert to Christianity. After the broken old man leaves the court Portia refuses any fee for her services, but asks instead for the ring which she had given Bassanio, while Nerissa also manages to obtain Gratiano's. The "lawyer" and her "clerk" then hurry back to Belmont.

Act 5.

Pretending to discover that their husbands' rings are missing, Portia and Nerissa accuse them of being unfaithful. After teasing the protesting husbands to the full, the women reveal the identities of the "lawyer" and her "clerk". Jessica and Lorenzo are told of their inheritance and, to complete the happiness news arrives for Antonio that some of his ships have berthed safely in Venice.