

# Knowledge Organiser

Year 9 English: Unit 4  
The Merchant of Venice



Name:

Class:

# Big Questions

Week 1	BQ: Why should we study The Merchant of Venice?
	BQ: How is Antonio presented at the start of the play?
	BQ: How is Bassanio presented at the start of the play?
	BQ: How is Shylock presented at the start of the play?
Week 2	BQ: How is Shylock presented at the start of the play?
	BQ: How can I improve my analytical writing? [Whole Class Feedback]
	BQ: How are gender expectations presented in the play?
Week 3	BQ: How are rumour and reputation presented in the play?
	BQ: How is discrimination presented in the play?
	BQ: How are revenge and justice explored in the play?
Week 4	BQ: How can I improve my analytical writing? [Whole Class Feedback]
	BQ: How are gender expectations explored throughout the play?
	BQ: How does Shakespeare build tension at the climax of the play?
Week 5	BQ: How does Shakespeare build tension at the climax of the play?
	BQ: Does Shakespeare present Shylock as a victim or a villain?
	BQ: How does Shakespeare present the character of Shylock throughout the play? [Summative Assessment]
	BQ: How can I improve my analytical writing? [Whole Class Feedback]
Week 6	BQ: How does Shakespeare introduces elements of comedy at the end of the play?
	BQ: Who is the main protagonist in the play?
	BQ: To what extent do you agree that revenge can be justified?

<b>Key Vocabulary</b>	
<b>Anti-Semitism</b>	hostility towards or discrimination against Jewish people
<b>Aside</b>	A device used when a character speaks to the audience without the other characters onstage being able to hear.
<b>Contemporary</b>	belonging to the time it was made (i.e- the views from Shakespeare's time)
<b>Depiction</b>	The way in which something is presented/ described/ portrayed in a piece of art
<b>Discrimination</b>	the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of ethnicity, age, sex, or disability.
<b>Dramatic Irony</b>	where the audience is aware of information that the characters are not.
<b>Ducats</b>	a coin previously used in Venice in the 13 <sup>th</sup> to 19 <sup>th</sup> century.
<b>Gender Expectations</b>	the roles, dress, behaviour, and appearance society expects people of certain genders to have
<b>Heiress</b>	A woman who has inherited money, property or rank due to the death of a relative
<b>Humiliated</b>	made to feel ashamed and foolish by injuring their dignity and pride
<b>Indebted</b>	owing money or owing gratitude for a service or favour
<b>Justified</b>	declared as right or having a good or legitimate reason
<b>Merchant</b>	A <b>merchant</b> is a person who trades in commodities produced by other people, especially one who trades with foreign countries. Historically, a merchant is anyone who is involved in business or trade.
<b>Patriarchal</b>	A <u>patriarchal</u> society is one that is ruled and controlled by men.
<b>Persecution</b>	(to persecute) hostility and ill-treatment, often due to race, political or religious beliefs
<b>Rhetoric</b>	the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing
<b>Segregation</b>	(to segregate) the action or state of separating certain groups of people, for example into racial or ethnic groups.
<b>Stereotype</b>	a widely held and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person

Undeservedly	to deserve something means to do something or have or show qualities worthy of a reaction which rewards or punishes as appropriate). So undeservedly means without having done anything to warrant that punishment.
Vindictive	having or showing a strong or unreasoning desire for revenge
<b>SPACE FOR ADDITIONAL VOCABULARY</b>	

# Key Information

<p><b>Title:</b> The Merchant of Venice</p> <p><b>Playwright:</b> William Shakespeare</p> <p><b>Genre:</b> Comedy (or tragi-comedy)</p> <p><b>Written:</b> suspected around 1596</p> <p><b>First performed:</b> 1605</p>	<p><b>The plot</b></p> <p>The central plot of the play focuses on a bond, or deal, between a Jewish money-lender and a Christian merchant in Venice.</p>
<p><b>Context</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During the Renaissance, Jewish people had been banned from living England and, in Venice, were confined to just one area of the city at night.</li> <li>• There has been some speculation that Portia was written to either flatter Queen Elizabeth I, or to express Shakespeare’s complex feelings about the Queen and her rule.</li> <li>• Similarities between the two women include her physical description, her rejection of suitors, and her use of rhetoric – particularly in the trial scene at the end of the play.</li> <li>• <b>Jacobean dramas</b> were often set in <b>Italy</b>; dramatists used this setting to explore themes related to appearance and reality, hypocrisy and corruption, but also for the dramatic potential of the multi-cultural society.</li> </ul> <p><b>Characters</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Antonio:</b> a wealthy merchant</li> <li>• <b>Bassanio:</b> indebted friend of Antonio’s</li> <li>• <b>Gratiano:</b> friend of Antonio and Bassanio</li> <li>• <b>Salerino:</b> friend of Antonio</li> <li>• <b>Salanio:</b> friend of Antonio</li> <li>• <b>Shylock:</b> Jewish money lender</li> <li>• <b>Tubal:</b> Jewish friend of Shylock</li> <li>• <b>Jessica:</b> Shylock’s daughter, in love with Lorenzo</li> <li>• <b>Lorenzo:</b> A Christian friend of Antonio</li> <li>• <b>Portia:</b> a wealthy heiress</li> <li>• <b>Nerissa:</b> waiting woman to Portia</li> </ul>	<p><b>Themes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• prejudice and discrimination</li> <li>• hatred and revenge</li> <li>• power, hierarchy and gender</li> <li>• appearance and reality</li> </ul> <p><b>Performance</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shakespeare’s audiences came from all social classes because it only cost a penny to stand in the ‘yard’ of the theatre and watch a play. The higher up you wanted to sit, the more you had to pay, so the higher the class.</li> <li>• Other performances took place in the inns of court and the private houses of the gentry and nobility: Sometimes, Shakespeare’s troupe would also perform for the monarch: Queen Elizabeth I and then, after 1603, King James I.</li> <li>• It is difficult to know whether Shylock was played for comedy or tragedy in Jacobean England, but he certainly was presented as a more malicious character in 18th century productions. From the 19th century onwards, more sympathetic portrayals of Shylock began to emerge.</li> </ul>

## Example analytical writing

### How does Shakespeare present the character of Shylock throughout the whole play?

Shylock is presented as committing some heinous acts and of forming a savage contract with Antonio which reflect his desire to physically hurt Antonio. However, Shylock only acts in this barbaric manner because of the years of torment that he has endured and, at the end of the play, the revenge that is served out to him is too extreme.

In Act 1 Scene 3, Shylock simply declares about Antonio that he “hates him for he is a Christian.” The emotive verb “hate” has connotations of extreme disdain for somebody and not of a simple dislike. Shylock explains this extreme feeling by simply asserting that he is a “Christian”, suggesting that no further explanation is needed- his Christian identity is enough of a reason. Clearly Shylock is presented as being a villain in this exchange but the ruthless side of Shylock’s character is further highlighted through his assertion that if Antonio cannot pay Shylock then he is entitled to a pound of flesh that he will “cut off and taken In what part of your body pleaseth me”. Shylock resorting to taking human flesh from Antonio is extremely barbaric and serves to present Shylock as a remorseless and vicious character capable of repugnant acts. The fact that Shylock states that he will take the flesh from wherever “pleaseth” him suggests that he will get some enjoyment out of the act which only strengthens the interpretation that Shylock is a savage villain.

Despite Shylock’s vile claims, it seems fair to argue that he only acts this way because of the persecution that he has himself experienced. In Act 1 Scene 3, Shylock has a heated exchange with Antonio where he accuses Antonio of calling him a “dog” and of “spitting” on him. These are clearly repugnant acts but Antonio does not apologise, instead he asserts that “I am as like to call thee so again, To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too”. Antonio does not even defend his actions he simply states that he will “call thee”, “spit on” or “spurn thee [again]”. The list of barbaric actions serves to highlight the extent of the persecution that Shylock experiences which is reinforced by Antonio’s lack of compassion.

The sympathy that is created for Shylock is heightened when Shylock appeals to Antonio on a human level- a level that goes beyond religion or race and connects them to the basics of what makes a human being. Shylock asks multiple rhetorical questions and asks Antonio “If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh?” The multiple rhetorical questions are Shylock appealing to Antonio’s fundamental human compassion. However, through Antonio’s dismissal of this, the sympathy that we feel for Shylock increases despite the morally dubious acts that he has carried out. Shylock asks Antonio to consider the fact that they are the same in so many ways, which in turn makes the reader consider the bonds that unite the entire human race: We all laugh. We all bleed. We all feel pain. Race and religion do not affect these basic human characteristics.

Shylock’s desire to cut a pound of flesh out of another living man is undoubtedly barbaric and inexcusable. However, it can be partly understood through the vile persecution that he is subjected to throughout the play; Shylock is a complex character but it seems fair to assert that some sympathy is felt for him at the end of the play, even after taking into account his own morally dubious actions.

# Homework

Knowledge is power, so the more you know, the more secure you will be in your learning.

Year 9: Unit 4 Homework: <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>		
<b>Task 1:</b>  <b>Week 2</b>	Due date:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Read 'Wider Reading 1 on page 9 to 10.</li><li>• Answer the 10 question quiz on page 11.</li></ul>
<b>Task 2:</b>  <b>Week 4</b>	Due date:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Read 'Wider Reading 2 on page 12 to 14.</li><li>• Answer the 10 question quiz on page 15.</li></ul>
<b>Task 3:</b>  <b>Week 6</b>	Due date:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Read 'Wider Reading 3 on page 16 to 17.</li><li>• Answer the 10 question quiz on page 18.</li></ul>

If you have 'no homework', or you have finished all of the above, try these tasks on a weekly basis to ensure your understanding of the play is secure.

1. Create a timeline of the 5 most important events in the play's plot. Explain what each moment shows you about the play's main theme of discrimination.
2. Create character profiles for each of the main characters- include key characteristics and quotations. Bullet point 3 key moments in each character's journey and explain what they reveal about the character.
3. Research William Shakespeare's life and work. These notes could include information about the writer's personal and professional life, themes associated with his plays and any context linked to the period he wrote in.

## KS3 READING MARK SCHEME [Y7, 8, 9]

Success Criteria	Nothing to reward (0 marks)	(1 mark)	(2 marks)	(3 marks)	
<b>1 – Task and Big Ideas</b>	<i>Not evidenced</i>	Some relevance to big ideas and task. Simple approach to task and discussion.	Clear, relevant and supported approach to task and big ideas.	Thoughtful, developed approach to task and big ideas. Engages fully with the task.	
<b>2 – Quotations and references</b>	<i>Not evidenced</i>	Some quotations and/or references used but will be limited.	Relevant, clear quotations that are embedded into sentences.	Fully embedded, judicious quotations and consistent references with more than one explored per paragraph.	
<b>3 – Subject Terminology and writers' methods</b>	<i>Not evidenced</i>	Identification of some methods used by the writer with some possible use of subject terminology.	Subject terminology is used to explore a range of writers' methods.	Sophisticated and ambitious use of subject terminology to explore writers' methods. Consideration of language, structure and form.	
<b>4 – Zoom on key words + discuss effect</b>	<i>Not evidenced</i>	Some exploration and discussion exploring single words.	Clear exploration and discussion considering the connotations of single words.	Perceptive and insightful exploration linked clearly to the big ideas.	
<b>5 – Analysis of writer's purpose/ intentions</b>	<i>Not evidenced</i>	Some understanding although often explains rather than analyses. Simple comment on writer's intentions.	Clear understanding and analysis shown. Clear and relevant ideas and comments on writer's intentions.	Developed interpretation of the text. A considered and exploratory approach where layers of meaning and links between context and text are consistent.	
<b>6 – Focus on the question</b>	<i>Not evidenced</i>	Little focus on the argument throughout – tends to drift off topic at times.	Some clear focus on the argument throughout – although this is not sustained and can lose focus at times.	Consistent focus on the argument throughout – clearly addresses the question.	



## Homework 1: Wider reading 1: RSC Character Profiles

1 Shylock is a moneylender who lives in Venice. He is Jewish and receives a great deal of abuse for his  
2 religion. Shylock lends money to Antonio on the condition that if Antonio cannot pay him back by the  
3 appointed time then Shylock will cut away a pound of Antonio's flesh. As the play progresses, Shylock  
4 becomes completely fixated on his 'bond' with Antonio and desperate to claim revenge on the  
5 merchant, who has treated him badly in the past.

### **Facts we learn about Shylock at the start of the play:**

- 6▪ He is Jewish.
- 7▪ He is the father of Jessica.
- 8▪ He doesn't have 3,000 ducats himself, but knows he can borrow them from his friend Tubal.
- 9▪ Antonio is the Venetian merchant described in the title of the play. He is extremely well liked by most  
10 characters apart from Shylock. Although Antonio is inexplicably sad at the start of the play, he is in a  
11 relatively secure position. Although he has no readily available cash, he has plenty of ships carrying  
12 fortunes at sea. As the play goes on his position becomes increasingly precarious as he has entered into  
13 a dangerous deal with Shylock, which nearly costs him his life.

### **Facts we learn about Antonio at the start of the play:**

- 14▪ He is a Christian.
- 15▪ His wealth is spread across a number of cargo ships.
- 16▪ He is very close friends with Bassanio.
- 17▪ He has a passionate dislike for Shylock, a Jewish moneylender.

18 Bassanio is a young Venetian gentleman who is a close friend of Antonio's and in love with Portia. In  
19 order to woo Portia he needs money and so asks Antonio for a loan. It is this request which results in  
20 Antonio becoming 'bound' to Shylock and in danger of losing his life.

### **Facts we learn about Bassanio at the start of the play:**

- 21▪ He is a scholar and a soldier.
- 22▪ He is a close friend of Antonio's.
- 23▪ Bassanio has lost his own wealth.
- 24▪ He needs money to go to Belmont and woo Portia.

25 Portia is a wealthy heiress who lives in Belmont. Her father has died and in his will wrote that anyone  
26 wanting to marry his daughter must succeed in a specially designed challenge. Suitors have to choose  
27 between three caskets (either gold, silver or lead), guessing which one holds Portia's portrait. Portia is  
28 not at all keen on most of the men who have tried to win her, however she does fall in love with  
29 Bassanio. Ultimately she plays an essential role in ensuring that Antonio's life is saved, as she prevents  
30 Shylock from claiming his 'pound of flesh'.

**Facts we learn about Portia at the start of the play:**

- 1▪ She lives in Belmont.
- 2▪ Her father has died.
- 3▪ She is considered to be very beautiful by lots of men.
- 4▪ She is unable to choose her own husband.

5

6 Nerissa is Portia's waiting woman and friend. They have a close relationship and Nerissa both teases  
7 and advises her boss. She also assists Portia in helping to get Antonio freed and goes with Portia to  
8 Venice, dressed as a lawyer's clerk. Nerissa falls in love with Bassanio's friend Gratiano, who asks for her  
9 hand in marriage after Bassanio 'wins' Portia.

**Facts we learn about Nerissa at the start of the play:**

- 10▪ She lives in Belmont.
- 11▪ She is Portia's waiting woman.
- 12▪ She has been working for Portia since Portia's father was alive.
- 13▪ She has a close friendship with Portia.

14 Jessica is Shylock's daughter and at the start of the play is living in his house. She is in love with a  
15 Christian, Lorenzo. Jessica knows that her father will never give his consent for her to marry a Christian  
16 and so she plans to secretly escape one night in order to run away with Lorenzo, marry him and convert  
17 from Judaism to Christianity.

**Facts we learn about Jessica at the start of the play:**

- 18▪ She is Shylock's daughter.
- 19▪ She is Jewish, but determined to convert to Christianity.
- 20▪ She is friends with Lancelet, Shylock's (Christian) servant.

21 Lorenzo is a Venetian and a Christian, who is friends with Bassanio, Gratiano and Antonio. Lorenzo is in  
22 love with Jessica, Shylock's daughter and helps her to escape from her father's house so that they can  
23 run away and marry.

**Facts we learn about Lorenzo at the start of the play:**

- 24▪ He is a Christian.
- 25▪ He is a friend of Bassanio's.
- 26▪ He is in love with Jessica.
- 27▪ He dislikes Shylock.

28 Gratiano is a Venetian man who is friends with Bassanio and Antonio. He is renowned for his wild and  
29 boisterous behaviour and heavily insults Shylock at the start of the play. Gratiano accompanies Bassanio  
30 to Belmont and falls in love with Nerissa, Portia's waiting woman.

**Facts we learn about Gratiano at the start of the play:**

- 31▪ He lives in Venice.
- 32▪ He is friends with Bassanio and Antonio.
- 33▪ He is known for his wild behaviour.
- 34▪ He falls in love with Nerissa.

# Homework Quiz 1

	<u>Question/ Answer</u>	<u>Mark</u>
1.	Why does Shylock receive a great deal of abuse?	
2.	What does Shylock want if the loan can not be paid back?	
3.	Who treated Shylock badly in the past?	
4.	Where is Antonio's wealth held?	
5.	Why does Bassanio need a loan?	
6.	How does Portia feel about the men who have tried to woo her?	
7.	How is Nerissa disguised when they go to Venice?	
8.	Why does Jessica escape from her father's house?	
9.	Who does Jessica want to marry?	
10.	What is Gratiano renowned for at the start of the play?	

## Homework 2: Wider reading 2:

### Recognizing Shylock's Humanity in The Merchant of Venice

Source: <https://teachingshakespeareblog.folger.edu/>

May 11, 2016 | By Amber Phelps

1 “I don’t have to condone it to understand it. The pain that people feel is real.”

2 While most watched DeRay McKesson, Baltimore native and #blacklivesmatter activist, deliver these  
3 words in April 2015 (describing the unrest that occurred shortly after Freddie Gray’s funeral through  
4 the screens of their television), my students and I watched it live while on the front lines of the unrest  
5 in Baltimore; our school located just a few, short miles from both Baltimore’s City Hall and the  
6 Sandtown-Winchester community.

7 During the unrest, we also happened to be analysing Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* in  
8 preparation for our production of the play.

9 One of the formative assignments that my seniors complete while we are in our “second-draft reading”  
10 of the text—a deeper, analysis driven reading of the text that occurs after we have read it for plot— is  
11 to have them explore LUNA (the Folger’s digital image database) and search for various renderings of  
12 the play’s main characters. We observe costuming, posture, proxemics, props, and other items to  
13 inspire the portrayal of our characters, unearth possible ideas for set design, and consider the socio-  
14 political context’s impact on various productions.

15 I’ve done this lesson for the past three years and the Folger’s rich (and growing) LUNA digital collection  
16 is certainly a reason for me to continue. We careen through images of Charles Macklin’s 18th century  
17 portrayal of Shylock as a merciless miser and artist E.G. Lewis’ 1863 painting of Shylock that portrays  
18 him as a cruel caricature of Jewish culture—an archetypal portrayal of Jews common during Elizabethan  
19 theatre.

20 Below are the images we encountered:



Charles Macklin as Shylock; ca. 1777-1780  
(Image: Folger Shakespeare Library)



Shylock, from *Merchant of Venice* by E.G.  
Lewis, 1863. (Image: Folger Shakespeare  
Library)

21 A final, familiar image that the students select is John Gilbert's visceral painting of an angry Shylock  
22 storming out of the courthouse after Portia's verdict stripped Shylock of his religion and wealth in Act  
23 IV, scene i.

24 Usually students are very quick to write this image off and merely describe it as a visual rendering of  
25 Shylock's rage after he loses his wealth. However, in 2015, my seniors, immersed in the aftermath of  
26 Freddie Gray funeral, saw this image differently.



Shylock After the Trial by John Gilbert. (Image: Folger Shakespeare Library)

27 The other LUNA images that positioned Shylock as a merciless monster felt so limited in attempting to  
28 capture the scope of that character and his pain. We saw this painting as an image capturing the  
29 consequences of when we fail to recognize each other's humanity. As the media shone an unforgiving  
30 light on Baltimore, my students recognized Freddie Gray and Shylock were the same in this moment.  
31 Both were convicted before the trial ever began. It was understood by everyone that neither Freddie  
32 Gray nor Shylock would receive unbiased justice, but it was the status quo's dehumanizing failure to  
33 recognize The Other's actual right to exist that inspires outrage. In that courtroom, Shylock is not only  
34 stripped of his wealth and religion—he is officially stripped of what makes him human, and the court  
35 that was meant to deliver impartial justice was positioned to deliver this verdict before Shylock entered  
36 the room. Shylock is stripped of his life because he was never considered to be human.

37 Shylock's rage and fury is captured so well in this image such that it enriches our understanding of the  
38 rage and fury that we saw in Baltimore's Sandtown-Winchester community in April 2015 when a  
39 community recognized that for decades Baltimore governmental institutions and elected leaders failed  
40 to recognize their voices, their humanity, their pain.

41 McKesson's words were now apt to describe our new understanding of Shylock's unquenchable thirst  
42 for revenge: "I don't have to condone it to understand it. The pain that people feel is real."

43 Ask the communities that still remain just below boiling point because of the deaths of Trayvon Martin,  
44 Eric Garner, Tamir Rice and Sandra Bland.

45 The following week, I divided my seniors into groups of 3-4 and had them do a close-reading exercise  
46 using Shylock's monologues in the play. They first read the speeches to full stops, paraphrased, and  
47 annotated for figurative language, imagery, sound, and structure.

48 Although some of Shakespeare's most eloquent writing exists in verse throughout the play (including  
49 Portia's famous "quality of mercy" monologue in Act IV, scene i), Shylock's monologues show  
50 Shakespeare's ability to use prose to do some serious heavy lifting in developing the character of  
51 Shylock. He packs his speeches full of rhetorical questions, vivid images, parallel structure, and striking  
52 metaphors; many of the same tools that we see utilized in some of the prominent speeches that  
53 sprouted from the Civil Rights movement.

54 Shylock's monologues read as pieces of rhetoric—tools for Shylock to make his case for the Venetian  
55 community to recognize his humanity and see him as a whole human. A case that goes  
56 unacknowledged and unheard in the streets and markets of Venice.

57 In Act III, scene i we see Shylock switching from first-person pronouns to the collective plural pronoun  
58 of "we" to suggest that he is not only pleading for the Venetian community to recognize *his* humanity,  
59 he's also pleading for them to see the pain that was inflicted upon the entire Jewish community at the  
60 hands of the Venetian Christians.

61 His monologues are pieces of rhetoric that serve in the name of social justice.

62 Prior to the court scene, Shylock warns the Venetians: "The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it  
63 shall go hard but I will better the instruction" (Act III, scene i).

64 We certainly do not have to condone Shylock's course but we can certainly understand it and use it to  
65 enhance our students' understanding of the rhetoric used to sustain social justice movements  
66 throughout history and the consequences that appear as a direct result of a community feeling that  
67 their pain and humanity has gone unrecognized. If we don't, history teaches us that pain can easily  
68 become unmitigated rage.

## Homework Quiz 3

	<u>Question/ Answer</u>	<u>Mark</u>
1.	What was the class preparing during the unrest?	
2.	How did E.G Lewis' 1863 painting portray Shylock?	
3.	Why were Freddie Gray and Shylock the same?	
4.	What inspired outrage at the status quo?	
5.	Why was Shylock stripped of his life?	
6.	How did the students first approach Shylock's monologues?	
7.	What does Shakespeare include in Shylock's speeches?	
8.	Which pronouns does Shylock use in Act III Scene I?	
9.	Fill in the missing words: "The villainy you _____ me, I will _____, and it shall go _____ but I will _____ the instruction"	
10.	What can pain easily turn into?	

## Homework 3: Wider reading 3- Value in The Merchant of Venice

*This article first appeared in Around the Globe, the membership magazine for Shakespeare's Globe*

The valuation of property and people – particularly women – in Shakespeare's Venice reflects contemporary anxieties nearer home, suggests Farah Karim-Cooper.

1 The casket trial scenes in *The Merchant of Venice* sometimes provoke laughter in performance and are  
2 noted by Shakespearean scholars as an expression of Elizabethan cultural and racial stereotypes. But  
3 these scenes also gesture towards one of the most vital concerns in the play: value. The notion of what  
4 is valuable and how we determine the value or worth of an object, an individual or a vow, sits at the  
5 heart of each character's story in the play, including the central one of Shylock the Jew and his  
6 demands for his bond.

7 Value is a term that is also intrinsically linked to the representation of women and their status in the  
8 play as commodities, or objects to be won or stolen, like jewels; in fact, the emphasis on jewels and  
9 rings in the play is a continual reminder of this association. In the stories of Portia and Jessica,  
10 Shakespeare highlights the various conditions under which women were viewed as property in  
11 Elizabethan England. The language of Bassanio and Portia's courtship, for example, is dominated by  
12 words pertaining to commerce: 'thrift' (1.1.175), 'value' (4.1.434), 'debt' (3.2.307). This highlights for us  
13 the fact that marriage was a contract, a negotiation underpinned by property and money

### **Luxury and materialism**

14 As such, Venice was a symbol of luxury in Shakespeare's London. Its geographical position made it an  
15 intermediary between Europe and the East and its authorities and business leaders were tolerant of a  
16 variety of races and cultures. They saw the economic advantages of exploiting the skills and perceived  
17 business acumen of, for example, the Jews. As a result, Venice came to be associated with material  
18 wealth and exotic goods; objects of all descriptions, perfumes, textiles and ingredients were traded and  
19 imported to Europe's shores via Venice and its enterprising merchants. The traveller Thomas Coryat  
20 whose 1611 account of his travels tells us that he had the 'sweetest time' he ever had in his life in  
21 Venice, 'and partly for that she ministred unto me more variety of remarkable and delicious objects  
22 then mine eyes ever surveyed in any city before'.

23 With this backdrop of luxury, Shakespeare's play brings to light the ways in which anxieties about an  
24 overemphasis on goods and money was beginning to permeate English culture. This is especially true  
25 with regard to the fears English moralists had about the effect of excessive materialism on England's  
26 women in particular. In 1616 the English writer Barnabe Rich lamented that 'we have spoyled  
27 the *Venetian Curtizans* of their alluring vanities, to decke our *Englishe* women in the newe fashion'. He  
28 begs English women not to entangle themselves with 'Lady fashions', whom he imagines 'meeteth and  
29 converseth with Ladies and Gentlewomen, some shee teacheth to paint themselves, some to powder  
30 their periwigs'. Curiously, what Rich is satirising is a custom among noble women of Venice, who  
31 'formed a society and (elected offices) for learning and testing new discoveries in the cosmetic arts'.



## Wives, daughters, jewels

1 What would Shakespeare's original audiences have thought of the portrayal of women in this play?  
2 Jessica, Shylock's daughter, is especially complex given her status as a Jew who converts to Christianity,  
3 steals her father's jewels and marries a Christian clandestinely. Her behaviour would have been seen by  
4 a portion of the audience as acceptable and by another portion as unacceptable because of her  
5 disobedience. Disobedient daughters were frowned upon, of course, in Elizabethan England, but as we  
6 know, Jessica is the daughter of a Jew, which complicates responses to her actions. Crucially, when she  
7 goes missing, Shylock's response is shock and dismay, not just because she has gone, but because she  
8 has stolen his casket of jewels. She was also his property, and both his jewels and his daughter have  
9 been stolen from him. His affection for his long-dead wife is also expressed in his lamentation that the  
10 ring he associates her with is missing. Wives, daughters, jewels: they are all property that when stolen  
11 can be equally dismaying, provoking equivalent feelings of loss. But Jessica makes a choice. The value of  
12 that choice is still up for debate.

## Hierarchies in flux

13 When we meet Portia in Belmont we see that although she is a noble or patrician woman with wealth  
14 and status, she is also imprisoned by her father's decree that whichever suitor passes the casket test  
15 shall marry her. Shakespeare presents marriage metaphorically as a form of containment and trafficking  
16 of women, specifically within aristocratic circles; in this case, a daughter is being controlled from the  
17 grave. The suitors are told to guess which casket holds Portia's likeness (or miniature portrait) and the  
18 actual woman will be the prize. The fact that one casket is gold, one silver and the other lead means  
19 that Shakespeare is asking us to think carefully about value: the value of precious materials and the  
20 value of women placed side-by-side deliberately. We know the outcome of the trial. Bassanio's victory  
21 is helped along by a woman who is much more than just an object to be valued. She manipulates the  
22 outcome herself, allowing, for example, a song with clues in its rhymes to be sung while Bassanio  
23 deliberates upon the caskets. And once Bassanio wins the trial, we realise that Portia has won  
24 something too. She claims her own prize. Her skill and intelligence is clear when she disguises herself as  
25 a lawyer, winning the more important trial and later tricking off, then forcing her wedding ring back  
26 upon her husband's finger.

27 If you had known the virtue of the ring,  
28 Or half her worthiness that gave the ring,  
29 Or your own honour to contain the ring,  
30 You would not then have parted with the ring (5.1.199–202)

31 In a play in which some people do not get what they want, Portia seems to do quite well regardless of  
32 an atmosphere that elides women with property. Portia's trick demonstrates that in a money-centred  
33 world hierarchies are in flux and women, though especially linked to materiality and consumerism  
34 within the context of the play, are shown to have more freedom to get what they want by manipulating  
35 the patriarchal structures that attempt to hold them in place.

## Homework Quiz 3

	<u>Question/ Answer</u>	<u>Mark</u>
1.	Which term is intrinsically linked to the representation of women?	
2.	Why was Venice's geographical location useful?	
3.	What types of objects were traded and imported through Venice?	
4.	Who was afraid of the effect excessive materialism had on women?	
5.	Why would Jessica's behaviour be seen as unacceptable?	
6.	Why is Shylock in shock and dismay when Jessica goes missing?	
7.	How is Portia imprisoned?	
8.	What are the suitors looking for inside the casket?	
9.	How does Portia manipulate the outcome of the riddle for herself?	
10.	What does Portia disguise herself as?	



## Wider reading list

### Other Shakespeare plays—full texts available online

#### Tragedies:

***Hamlet***— The story of Hamlet, the young Prince of Denmark, who vows to avenge his father's murder at the hand of his brother, Claudius.

***Othello*** - The story of Othello, the Moor of Venice, who is manipulated by the vengeful Iago into believing his wife Desdemona has been unfaithful.

#### Comedies:

***Much Ado About Nothing***— a play about misunderstandings, love and deception. Soldiers Benedick, Claudio and Don Pedro arrive at Leonato's house in Messina. Claudio falls for Leonato's daughter, Hero., and together they plot to make the bickering Benedick and Beatrice fall in love.

***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** — A story of order and disorder, reality and appearance and love and marriage. Four Athenians facing romantic troubles run away into the forest only to have fairies intervene in their relationships.

### Useful Websites for Research:

<https://www.rsc.org.uk/>

<https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/>

<https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/>

<https://www.bl.uk/>

<https://www.sparknotes.com/>

<https://www.cliffsnotes.com/>