

money from money is legitimate business and an art at which he is skilled. 'I make it breed as fast', Shylock proudly boasts to Antonio, comparing his own generation of profit with the ingenuity of the biblical figure of Jacob. The play also shows that money-lending is one of the only ways in which Jews were allowed to earn a living and Shylock is critical of Christians who 'lend out money gratis' (without charging interest). But Christianity forbade the charging of interest and Antonio scornfully challenges Shylock's practice: 'I neither lend nor borrow / By taking nor by giving of excess'. The Christians condemn usurers but, hypocritically, depend on the money of the Jews to underwrite their own economic projects. Bassanio has frittered away his wealth but is quite prepared to use Shylock's lending service to support his courtship of Portia, seeing it very much as a business venture.

- ◆ Find examples in the play of the differing attitudes towards usury displayed by Christian and Jew. Then research present attitudes to usury. Is it still considered wrong in some societies?

Fathers versus daughters

Both Portia and Jessica struggle to come to terms with the demands made on them by their fathers. Shakespeare gives little information about Portia's father, but he controls her destiny from beyond the grave ('so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father'), insisting that her choice of husband is dictated by the lottery of the caskets. Jessica is uncomfortable at home ('Our house is hell') and speaks of being 'ashamed' to be Shylock's daughter. She is clearly unhappy with the tediousness of her domestic life and plans to elope with the Christian Lorenzo as a way of escape.

- ◆ Although Portia's father was a Christian and lived in Belmont and Shylock is Jewish and lives in Venice, do they share any common attitudes towards fatherhood and to their daughters? Talk about this with a partner and then give a short presentation to the class on your observations.

Characters

Shylock: villain or victim?

The age-old dilemma about Shylock is this: is he tragic or is he comic? And, of course, he's both. He's one of the most complex human beings Shakespeare wrote. *Sir Peter Hall, theatre director*

He becomes that which he most abhors. He's torn to shreds emotionally by the society around him. He becomes the very thing that's reduced him . . . that's taken his humanity away.

Dustin Hoffman, actor

If the audience can love him and hate him, understand him, then not understand him . . . then you've got him. *Henry Goodman, actor*

There has always been controversy about Shylock. To some he is a miserly money-lender who delights in the prospect of cutting a pound of flesh from the noble merchant who has exposed his corrupt ways. He is a bloodthirsty fiend armed with scales and a knife, who cares more for his money than for his runaway daughter. Such a view sees him as a comic or malign villain who gets his comeuppance in the end.

A quite different perspective sees him as the victim of the society around him. Here he is a godly, clean-living family man who merely wishes to conduct his business unimpeded. He becomes a man driven to revenge by mindless persecution and the cruel theft of his only child. This view casts him as a naive, misguided soul who tries to get even within the law of those who hate him, only to be cruelly tricked and humiliated yet again.

There's no simple answer to the question 'villain or victim?', but the fact that Shylock has fascinated audiences for 400 years is evidence that he is one of Shakespeare's most human and believable characters. What follows will help you to form your own view of Shylock, although you will detect a strongly anti-racist stance in what we, the editors of this edition, have written. No one can be neutral about *The Merchant of Venice*.

Shylock and the Christians

Shylock's trouble with the Christians dates back to well before the start of the play. He speaks of an 'ancient grudge' when he first appears, and gives a vivid account of Antonio's racist bullying.

- ◆ Read lines 98–121 of Act 1 Scene 3 and make a full list of Antonio's insults and abuses against Shylock.

Despite the enmity between Antonio and Shylock, the Christian still does business with the Jew. Antonio is fully aware of the ominous terms of the bond which he signs in the presence of a lawyer. Shylock makes no secret of his intentions if his enemy can't pay up at the end of three months. Then the unthinkable happens: Antonio loses all his ships, and with them his wealth. He is not only bankrupt but also trapped by his bond with the Jew. Antonio entered willingly into the deal to help Bassanio, knowing full well what the consequences might be. Nevertheless, the Christians are outraged when Shylock claims what is lawfully his.

- ◆ Collect quotations which show Christian objections to Shylock's bond before Portia intervenes.

Shylock might be accused of wishing to trap Antonio, but the Christians similarly conspire against him. They invite him to dinner on the very night a gang of them help Lorenzo steal Jessica, along with a considerable portion of his wealth. Portia also carefully plans her action against Shylock. In the trial, she waits until the very moment he is going to cut Antonio's flesh to reveal the loophole she has discovered in the bond between them. Before that, she repeatedly gives Shylock the chance to back down, so adding to the humiliation she clearly wishes to inflict on him in her hour of victory. When Shylock is defeated, he is shown little of the mercy which before was so earnestly recommended to him by Portia. Half his wealth is confiscated and – far worse – he must lose his faith and convert to Christianity.

- ◆ As Portia, write your own account of your involvement in the trial. Explain your plan to rescue Antonio and defeat Shylock. Why did you show him no mercy?

How Shylock responds to prejudice

Shylock's bloodthirsty campaign against Antonio is morally indefensible. He eschews the simple purity of his normal life and degrades himself in his animal-like quest to win a pound of the Christian's flesh. His behaviour is wrong, but it is understandable. Shylock is a foreigner in his own city. He may have lived all his life in Venice, yet he is treated as an alien. Like his fellow Jews, he tries to rise above such prejudice and seeks security and success in money-lending, which he calls 'well won thrift'; Antonio disparagingly calls it 'interest'. Antonio and the Christians won't allow themselves to lend money for profit, but to

support their extravagant lifestyles they still need money loans from the Jews they persecute. Shylock has been waiting to strike back at Antonio, one of Venice's principal anti-Semites, and sees his chance when the merchant is compelled to come to him for credit.

Significantly, Shylock tries to attack his enemy within the law of Venice. He is often at pains to point out the legality of his actions, and after the loss of Antonio's ships refers obsessively and repeatedly to his 'bond'. In the trial, he openly questions the validity of Venetian justice if it is not to be enforced on his behalf. He demands that his case is dealt with according to the letter of the law, and of course this is turned harshly against him when it is revealed that he himself has behaved illegally.

- ◆ Collect Shylock's references to his legal agreement with Antonio and other comments he makes about the law. Use your findings to write several paragraphs about why it is so important to Shylock to be able to use the law of Venice against Antonio.

Shylock despises Antonio from the start of the play. His hatred is intensified by the loss of Jessica, perhaps the key to his emotional reactions from then on. In his clash with Salarino and Solanio just after Jessica's elopement (Act 3 Scene 1) he claims that his suffering and anger are produced by the Christians themselves. He blames his villainy on them, arguing that it is simply imitation of their own prejudice and cruelty.

- ◆ Reread lines 42–57 of Act 3 Scene 1. How convinced are you of Shylock's justification for his actions? Think of actual examples in history or modern times which show that racism provokes similar cruelty in its victims.

Was Shakespeare anti-Semitic in his depiction of Shylock?

Shakespeare's characters, notably in *The Merchant of Venice*, often express racist views, but whether Shakespeare himself was a racist is open to dispute. What is clear is that he understood the suffering and the behaviour which results from racial prejudice. Shylock's key speech in Act 3 Scene 1 is a plea of supreme eloquence for our common humanity. However, Shakespeare's handling of Shylock is deeply ambiguous. Shylock is intensely and movingly human, yet at the end he receives the same treatment as a stage villain. He leaves the court in Act 4 with hardly a word, apparently completely defeated. One would have thought that Shakespeare wouldn't want us to forget about him, but he doesn't appear in Act 5 and is barely mentioned

there. If Shakespeare wanted the audience to view this central character as a victim, surely he'd give him something to say or do in the final act?

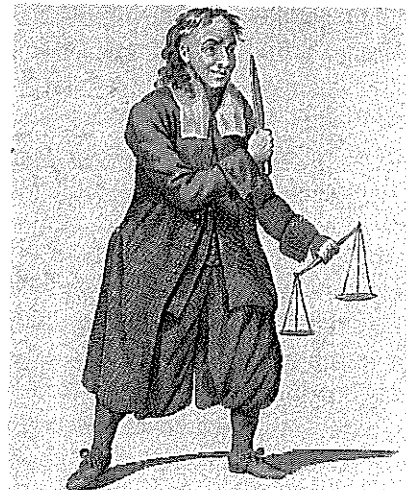
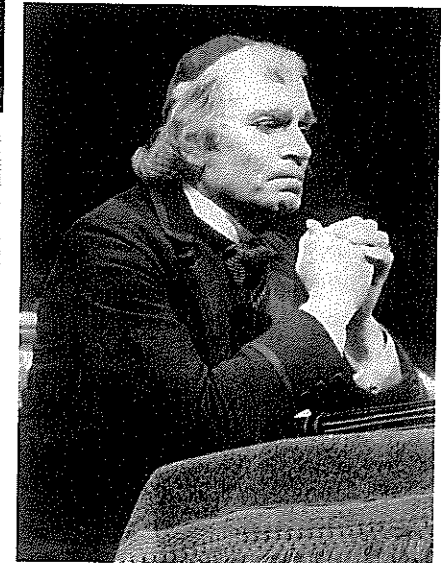
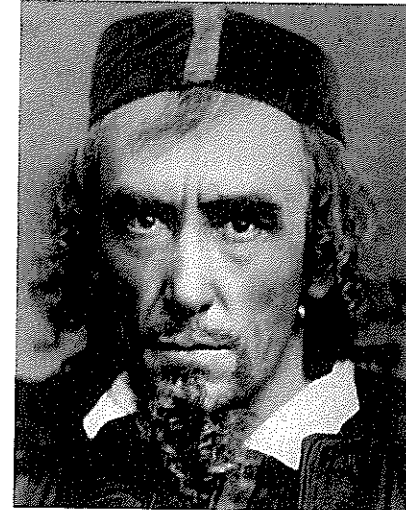
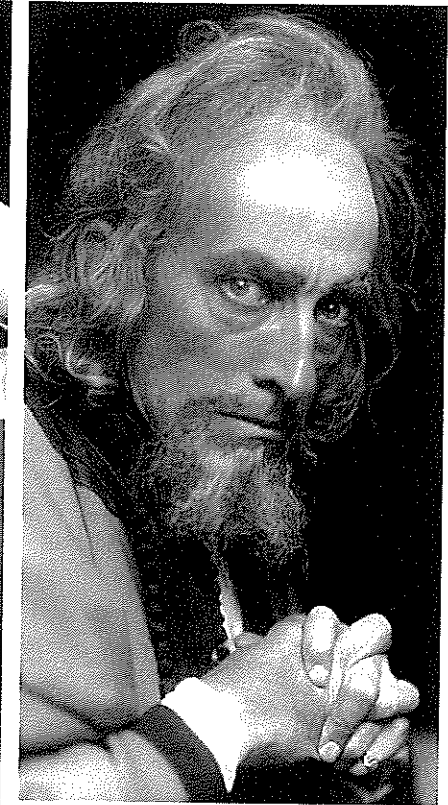
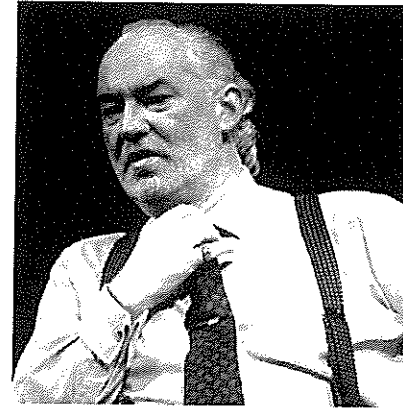
- ◆ Your school or college drama group wishes to stage *The Merchant of Venice*, but is opposed by the head or principal, who fears that the play might offend ethnic minority groups in the school and the local community. The head calls a meeting for those involved. Decide who would be present and improvise this difficult encounter in front of the rest of the class. Everyone, including those observing, has the right to stop the action to ask questions, to express opinions, and to ask for or offer advice.

Shylock's changing portrayal

In the early days of English theatre, Shylock was performed to match the way he is described by his Christian enemies. He was presented as a comic villain, grotesque, outrageously caricatured as the miserly money-lender. He later became evil and terrifying, a villain who was incapable of humour and who was stubborn, malicious and threatening. In the nineteenth century, Edmund Kean broke away from this widely accepted view by portraying him as an intelligent and vulnerable character whose dignity and isolation made him increasingly sympathetic. Shylock's pleas for humanity and understanding became central in performance. Emphasis on his 'Hath not a Jew eyes?' speech softened the harshness and repulsion which had earlier characterised him. This changed him from a comic character to much more of a tragic one. He became less of a villain, more of a victim, whose hatred and desire for revenge exposed the injustice and intolerance of the society in which he lived.

More recent critical character studies have explored his usury and his Jewish background more fully and placed his Jewishness at the heart of his conflict with the Christians. He is widely viewed as a foreigner, an outsider, even an alien within the social context of the play. He is seen as vital to the play's exploration of religious and cultural identity, and is central to the play's moral impact.

- ◆ Try to arrange the opposite sequence of photographs of past Shylocks in chronological order. What do these images suggest about how these different actors portrayed him?
- ◆ In your own production, how would you want Shylock to be played? As the director, write some notes for other members of the company, justifying your ideas. Include a sketch of an appropriate costume design.



Antonio and the Christians

Venice is almost completely characterised by friendships between men. The Christians are 'friends' but are largely a band of merchants and traders bound together by a group identity. They oppose the Jews and the Jewish practice of usury. They profit from trade. The Venetians are competitive and commercially driven, conscious of status and hierarchy, although they seem to have idle hours to spend.

Antonio

Antonio is the merchant of the play's title (although an eighteenth-century version of the play renamed it *The Jew of Venice*). Traditionally, he has been seen as an affluent gentleman, at ease within refined social and economic circles, very much associated with the values and attitudes represented by Venice. Antonio is generous to Bassanio but loathes Shylock. The reason for his sadness at the start of the play is left unresolved, although in many modern productions his loneliness and sadness have been attributed to homoerotic feelings for Bassanio. He is quite willing to die under Shylock's knife as long as he can see Bassanio one last time. Some productions ensure that he is left isolated at the end of the play as the married couples celebrate.

Bassanio

Like the other male Christian characters, Bassanio belongs to a wealthy, privileged class in Venice, but as a result of his reckless spending he is impoverished as the play opens. He conforms to the Elizabethan model of a gentleman as 'a scholar and a soldier'. He might love and desire Portia, but he also views marriage to her as a business opportunity and he quickly assumes the role as head of Belmont. His friendship for Antonio is strong (Antonio is 'The dearest friend to me, the kindest man' and a 'true friend'), powerful enough to postpone his marriage to Portia as Antonio nears his trial. But Bassanio is passionately attracted to Portia, whom he describes in heightened, romantic terms as: 'fair, and – fairer than that word – / Of wondrous virtues' and a 'demi-god'.

Gratiano, Solanio and Salarino

These three men are united not only by their friendship but by their violent hostility towards Shylock. Gratiano's withering attacks peak during the trial scene. Solanio and Salarino gloat over Shylock's loss of his daughter and his jewels, then taunt him publicly and excruciatingly about Jessica's elopement.

Women in Venice and Belmont

Venice is ruled entirely by men. Women have no role at all in trade, politics or law. It seems that they cannot even own property. As soon as Portia enters Venetian society by becoming engaged to Bassanio, she gives him all her wealth as well as her own freedom:

This house, these servants, and this same myself

Are yours, my lord's.

Act 3 Scene 2, lines 170–1

Patriarchy rules in Belmont as well as Venice. Portia might be head of the household at the start of the play, but her father still controls her destiny, even from the grave. When she escapes from her father's will, she subjects herself immediately to her husband's authority. From now on she will be known as 'Lord Bassanio's wife' rather than Portia.

- ◆ Read through the scenes in Acts 1–3 in which women appear. Make a list of all the ways in which their lives are restricted.
- ◆ Turn to the cast list on page 1. Rank each character in order of social status as perceived by a) the Duke, b) Jessica, c) yourself.

The three women in the play have very different personalities. None the less, they all marry friends of Antonio at roughly the same time and are all involved in the defeat of Shylock. All adopt disguises as men in order to effect that defeat. Both Portia and Jessica are victims of their fathers' patriarchal authority and control. Portia may not marry freely. Jessica, perhaps frustrated by her father's over-protectiveness, decides to convert to Christianity.

- ◆ Study the pen portraits that follow. Check how far you agree with each, then write a short essay of your own on each of the women, or attempt the activity that follows each portrait.

Portia

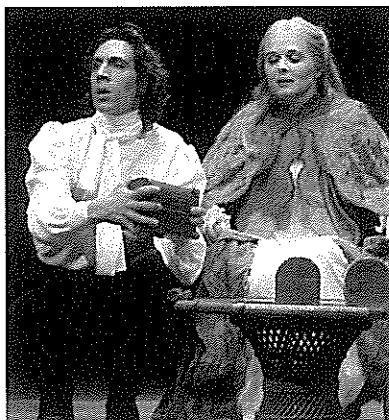
Most criticism points to the inconsistencies in Portia's presentation. She has many seemingly paradoxical identities:

- the dutiful daughter, compliant to her dead father's will
- the innocent young woman ('unlessoned . . . unschooled, unpractised')
- the 'mortal-breathing saint' who possesses 'god-like amity'
- the hard-headed and calculating lawyer who is fully conversant with the tricks of the legal trade
- the advocate of mercy who ruthlessly destroys Shylock

- the innocent virgin who knows all about male sexuality
- the racist mocker of the suitors she finds unfavourable
- the wealthy and independent woman who nevertheless gives herself willingly to her husband's authority
- the mocking, teasing and barbed tormentor of her husband in the 'rings' test.

Key questions arise when thinking about Portia. Is she an innocent, virtuous heroine or a devious manipulator who subverts the meaning of what she says? Is she fundamental to the preservation of the male values and attitudes of Venice and Belmont or does she stand for female resistance in a male world, taking on and defeating men at their own game? Will being subservient to a man like Bassanio suit Portia?

- ◆ Study the two pictures below. Talk together about how they reveal different aspects of Portia's character. Then write a short essay on the complexities of the way that Shakespeare presents Portia.



Jessica

Jessica is ashamed to be Shylock's daughter and views her life at home as 'hell'. Only the joking of Lancelot relieves the domestic gloom. She is perhaps frustrated by her father's over-protectiveness and killjoy attitude. She willingly becomes involved in a Christian plot and schemes against her father behind his back. She plunders

from him much of his money and jewels, including a turquoise ring of great sentimental value, which later she is alleged to have squandered. In order to elope with Lorenzo, she dons the disguise of a man. On arriving at Belmont she is apparently shunned by the Christians whose religion she will soon embrace.

Questions that arise when considering Jessica include: does she willingly condemn her father's pursuit of revenge in Act 3 Scene 2, or does she seek to ingratiate herself with her Christian hosts? Is she really a huge admirer of Portia (as she claims in Act 3 Scene 5, lines 63–71) or does she have little reason to like or respect her? How will she fare married to Lorenzo, whom she teasingly accuses of 'Stealing her soul with many vows of faith, / And ne'er a true one'?

- ◆ Imagine you are a journalist for a women's magazine. It is now ten years after the play ends. For a 'Where Are They Now?' feature you decide to trace and interview Jessica. Write your article, giving details of how she feels about the events of the decade before, and how her life has changed since then.

Nerissa

Nerissa is more than a servant to Portia; she is almost a lady-in-waiting or confidante (see picture on p. vi). Portia trusts her completely and she takes orders from Portia without question. Nerissa has common sense and a practical approach to life, displaying humour and worldly wisdom in her attitude to Portia's suitors and to men in general.

In spite of the fact that she has no illusions about men, why does she fall for Gratiano? She can identify that Bassanio 'was the best deserving a fair lady' but apparently ignores the fact that her own husband is a show-off and a racist bully. After watching the lengthy, ritualistic courtship of Portia, why does she agree to Gratiano after knowing him such a very short time? How will she cope with such a husband?

- ◆ Nerissa volunteers to be interviewed for a local radio feature on 'Life at Belmont'. Script her contribution, making clear her attitudes to her life with her mistress and her new husband.