

consistently uses verse, perhaps because the scene is serious, and he is in the company of high-status characters.

The verse of *The Merchant of Venice* is mainly blank verse: unrhymed verse written in iambic pentameter. It usually has ten syllables per line, and each line has five beats or 'stresses'. This line of Portia's is marked to show the stressed (/) and unstressed (x) syllables:

x / x / x / x / x /  
Behold, there stand the caskets, noble prince.

- ◆ Read the line aloud in unison with your partner, but pronounce each syllable very clearly, almost as if each one were a separate word. As you read, beat out the five-stress rhythm (e.g. clap hands, tap the desk).
- ◆ Now turn to lines 33–7 in Act 1 Scene 3. Repeat what you have just done. Can you find the rhythm? When you have found it, try the exercise again with verse spoken by another character. The choice is yours!

By the time Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, he was becoming more flexible and experimental in his use of iambic pentameter. End-stopped lines are less frequent and there is a greater use of **enjambement** (running on), where one line flows into the next, seemingly with little or no pause. You will find examples of both in Shylock's speech, Act 1 Scene 3, lines 33–7.

### Language and gender

The language of the characters is determined not only by their social class but also partly by their gender. An important question to consider is whether there is a male way of speaking which is different from a female way. Most of the men in the play are preoccupied with matters of finance and the law. The women, though conscious of the importance of wealth, are trapped into hatching love plots on the fringes of male activities. Portia has an interest in the law, but has to resort to dressing up as a man before she can act on behalf of her husband's best friend.

- ◆ Read through the entirely male Act 1 Scene 1 and collect examples of words connected with business and commerce.
- ◆ Now read through Act 1 Scene 2 to find the main topic of the women's conversation. Can you find any other important differences between the language of the two scenes? Write an essay

setting out your views, with examples, on whether or not you think there is distinctive 'men's language' and 'women's language' in *The Merchant of Venice*.

### Shylock's language

**Repetition** Different forms of linguistic repetition run through the play, contributing to its atmosphere, creation of character and dramatic impact. Three of the most frequently repeated words are 'Jew' and 'Jews' (used nearly seventy times), 'bond' (around forty times) and 'ring' (thirty-seven times). Their repetition is a clear indication of major preoccupations of the play.

Repetition is a distinctive feature of Shylock's speech. His first four speeches in the play (Act 1 Scene 3) reveal his careful, calculating mind: 'Three thousand ducats, well'; 'For three months, well'; 'Antonio shall become bound, well'; 'Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound'.

Other repetitions reveal different aspects of his personality: his implacable insistence that 'I'll have my bond' (repeated five times in thirteen lines), his anguish at his losses ('My daughter! O my ducats!') and his enthusiastic praise of Portia in the trial scene when he thinks she will award him his bond ('O wise young judge').

- ◆ Find several examples of Shylock's repetition. Write a few paragraphs about how they increase the dramatic effect of the scenes in which he appears and reveal something about his character.

**Shylock and religion** Shylock is an outsider and cannot be categorised with either the wealthy or the poor Christians. The content of his language is also markedly different. He disapproves of the Christians' prodigal, extravagant behaviour, preferring a quiet and simple life in keeping with his strict religious faith. These characteristics are reflected in his language, and his adherence to his faith is intensified through the misfortunes and grief that afflict him.

While the Christians refer to the lurid stories of classical mythology, Shylock speaks of Old Testament morality tales. These frequent references to the Bible would have been familiar to many of the Elizabethan audience who, by law, had to attend church regularly.

- ◆ Collect examples of Shylock's references to the Bible. Consider what effect they may have on a) an Elizabethan and b) a modern audience's reaction to his character.