

## **A TASTE OF SHAKESPEARE**



## **THE MERCHANT OF VENICE**

**Produced by  
Eugenia Educational Foundation**

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**Teacher's Companion**

# **Teacher's Companion to THE MERCHANT OF VENICE**

## **Program Description**

A Taste of Shakespeare is series of videotapes intended for high school and college students. In each video, actors tell the story of a specific play, act out the key scenes, and comment on what is going on. The purpose of the series is to connect students to Shakespeare's characters; dissolve difficulties with Shakespeare's language; and create a forum for discussion. The videos range in length from 35 minutes to 55 minutes, and are intended as an introduction to the high school or college Shakespeare unit. The Teacher's Companion enclosed with each videotape suggests class activities, topics for discussion, and additional reading.

## **Production Notes for The Merchant of Venice**

In early productions of this play, Shylock the Jew was portrayed as either a buffoon or a bloodthirsty beast. In more recent productions - especially at Stratford, Ontario - he has been shown in a more sympathetic light, but still as a violent, dangerous man. In our production, we present a more balanced view: Shylock has been very badly treated by certain Christians and he yearns for revenge. He goes too far when he seeks the life of his main persecutor, but he is never a threat to the community at large. He is essentially

an intelligent, dignified man who can no longer bear being humiliated. In our video, the actor who plays Shylock provides the narrative links between key scenes and the commentary on other characters. We essentially show the action from Shylock's point of view: the view of a man who is **foreign** to the society in which he lives, and who is made to suffer because he is **different**.

The Christian characters in the play reflect a culture that is indifferent to the feelings of **foreigners**. They care only for themselves and each other. They are so secure in their position in society that they believe they can treat **non-citizens** like dogs, and get away with it. Shakespeare shows them in all their selfish indifference and intolerance, and leaves it up to the audience to note that this behaviour is not right. Because the Christian characters are glamorous and charming, it is easy to overlook their cruel behaviour.

## **Cast and Characters in order of appearance**

Shylock, a wealthy money merchant - Brian Tree

**Antonio**, a wealthy shipping merchant - Richard McMillan

**Bassanio**, a charming but bankrupt young man with no visible means of support - Stuart Hughes

**Portia**, the clever, beautiful, rich young Lady of Belmont - Ann-Marie MacDonald

**Nerissa**, Portia's delightful personal maid and confidante - Tamara Gorski

**The Prince of Morocco**, a dignified suitor to Portia - Tyrone Benskin

**The Prince of Arragon**, a very foolish suitor to Portia - Eric Weinthal

**Gratiano**, an outspoken friend of Bassanio's, - Daniel Kash

**Tubal**, a friend and confidant to Shylock - Tyrone Benskin

**The Duke of Venice** - Tyrone Benskin

## Key production personnel

Writer, Director, and Co-Producer - Eric Weinthal  
Producers - Ada Craniford, Doug Craniford  
Music Composed and Produced by David Hind-Smith  
Music Engineer - Tim Browne  
Director of Photography - Tom Durnan  
Costume and Prop Design - Chris Bryden

## Key scenes presented in the videotape:

I.i.1-5	"In sooth I know not why I am so sad...."
I.i.130-39	"To you Antonio,/ I owe the most...."
I.i.161-82	"In Belmont is a lady richly left...."
I.ii.1-7	"By my troth, Nerissa...."
I.ii.20-25	"But this reasoning in not in fashion...."
I.iii.1-24	"Three thousand ducats...."
I.iii.38-75	"How like a fawning publican he looks...."
II.i.1-22	"Mislike me not for my complexion...."
II.vii.13-79	"Some god direct my judgment...."
II.ix.9-81	"I am enjoined by oath to observe...."
III.i.22-61	"You knew, none so well as you...."
III.i.70-118	"Here comes another of the tribe...."
III.ii.1-85	"I pray you tarry, pause a day or two...."
III.iv.56-78	"Come on, Nerissa, I have work in hand...."
IV.i.17-390	"Shylock, the world thinks...."
IV.i.181-99	"The quality of mercy...."
V.i.89-265	"That light we see is burning in my hall...."

All scenes have been edited to fit the format of approximately 50 minutes, and certain characters in the play are not presented.

## **Suggestions for small group discussion, before viewing the videotape:**

What would you do under the following circumstances:

1. You are a recent immigrant to America and are facing a certain amount of discrimination from your classmates. One day, the classmate who has given you the roughest time asks you for a favour. How would you respond?

How would you feel?

2. You feel uneasy with people of a different colour, culture, or religion than yourself. How do you behave toward these people? How do you justify your behaviour? What do you think is causing your discomfort? What circumstances might change the way you feel?

3. You are a penniless young man in love with a rich girl. How honest would you be with her about your circumstances? How would you get her to marry you?

4. Your father has devised some tests that a young man must pass before he can marry you. What might these tests be? How carefully would you honour them?

5. You are deeply in love with someone and your best friend wants to know what is special about him/her.. How would you describe the person you love? How would you describe the things about you that he/she thinks are equally special? Could either of you be mistaken?

6. Your worst enemy is at your mercy. What would you do? What has he/she done to you? Why has he/she done those things? (Make up a situation if you have never been in one.)

7. Under what circumstances would you risk your life for a friend? Under what circumstances would your friend risk his/her life for you? Is this something that friends should do for each other?

8. What power games do you play in relationships? What power games have been played on you? How do you determine whether or not you hold the upper hand? What is a power game?

## **Activities to be undertaken after seeing the video and while reading the text:**

1. Choose a group of classmates to help you prepare a dramatized reading of one of the scenes (not necessarily one that was shown in the video.) Be sure you know exactly what each person in the scene is saying. Present the scene to the class.
2. Form a group made up of at least two, and preferably three religions in the class. Have each member of the group write down a description of the most important beliefs of their own religion. Do not sign any names or indicate what religion is being described. Have one member type out the various descriptions, hand them out at random to each of the people in the group, then have each person write down what religion he/she thinks has been handed to them. Read everything aloud to find out how accurate the labels are. Make charts showing the similarities and differences among the various religions. Have each person take a religion that is not their own, and describe what would be difficult about following it, and what would be enjoyable.
3. Consider the topic, "Money and love." Write five debatable assertions on this topic. Make up several teams, and debate, using examples from the play to back up your arguments. Or, choose one of the controversial assertions and write an essay on it.
4. Research the difference between Tragedy and Comedy, and argue why you would put the play in one group or the other. Show that there are arguments for both sides.

## **Important issues in the play:**

### **1. The double-sidedness of characters and events:**

A discrepancy between appearance and reality:

"All that glisters is not gold."

Portia pretends to be "an unlessoned girl" when she gives herself to Bassanio in marriage, but then she shows up in court as a learned lawyer, and with the ring trick, she gets her husband completely under her thumb. She gives a magnificent speech on the subject of "mercy" to Shylock, but then treats him with cruelty and cold contempt.

Bassanio appears to be a wealthy man, giving rich gifts and wearing fancy clothes, but in reality he is not only broke, but deeply in debt. He woos Portia like a lover; yet he is also a fortune hunter who promises his friend Antonio that after he has won his wealthy lady, he will pay Antonio back all he owes.

Antonio is supposedly the kindest man in Venice, but he treats Shylock shamefully, and sees nothing wrong in his contemptuous behaviour toward the Jew.

Shylock pretends to make a friendly joke by not taking interest from Antonio, but really is hoping to take his life. The "happy ending" is highly ironic. Portia now has all the spendthrift Christians living at Belmont at her expense; and so long as she is married to Bassanio she has to look after all his penniless friends.

The theme of the three caskets is that you cannot trust appearances. By the end of the play, all the characters have learned that this is true.

### **2. Power shifts in the play:**

At the beginning Antonio is rich, Bassanio is bankrupt, Portia is bound by the terms of her father's will, Jessica is "imprisoned" in Shylock's house, Shylock is a wealthy but humiliated man.

Antonio lends money to Bassanio, then loses all his ships on the high seas and is in danger of losing his life to Shylock. The power moves from Antonio to Shylock when Antonio borrows money from him and signs the bond of flesh. In court, Shylock thinks he has power over Antonio until Portia shows him how few rights "outsiders" have in the state of Venice.

When Bassanio chooses the right casket, Portia hands power over herself and her wealth to her new husband. But when she finds out he is bankrupt and in debt, she takes back the ring - pledge of her subjection to him - and takes back her power. After the "merry fooling" about the rings at the end of the play, Bassanio knows where the real power in the marriage lies.

Shylock, at the beginning, can make whatever terms he wants when he grants Antonio a loan. At the end he is utterly ruined: having lost his only daughter, his religion, his wealth and his livelihood. He is utterly powerless and alone. Antonio, at the beginning, is a wealthy powerful merchant, able to help his friends and humiliate his foes. At the end — even though Portia tells him that some of his ships have safely returned — he is a sad, lonely man who has lost his best friend to marriage, and seems incapable of finding romance himself.

Jessica begins by feeling that she is a prisoner in her father's house. At the end she is more or less Portia's servant, at least until she inherits her father's money when Shylock dies.

Portia is "bound" by her father's will - the conditions he makes for her marriage - but she cheats in the casket scene with Bassanio, giving him all kinds of hints about which casket to choose. So she gets the man she wants, though he turns out not to be what he seemed. Although she has



power over everyone at the end, she is now bound in marriage to a man who married her to a large extent because of her fortune.

### **3. Race hatred:**

The traditional approach to Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice presents the play as a romantic comedy in which Portia - the beautiful, brilliant, young Lady of Belmont - outwits the bloodthirsty designs of Shylock - an avaricious, vengeful, grotesquely comic old Jew. By her actions, she saves the life of Antonio - the friend and sponsor of Bassanio, her new husband - and she brings about the happy ending of the play.

A careful reading of the text shows that Shakespeare presents the young people of Venice and Belmont as light hearted adventurers, who humiliate a proud old man past endurance, and rejoice when he is utterly destroyed. Shylock is a legitimate money merchant, making his living by lending money at interest, one of the few professions open to Jews at that time. He has been insulted, mocked, and spat upon countless times by Antonio and his friends. Now, all of a sudden, Antonio approaches him for a loan, and Shylock makes a half mocking bargain to show that money is not his only goal. Shylock's bargain is: a pound of Antonio's flesh if he defaults on the loan. When Antonio does default, Shylock sees his opportunity to revenge a lifetime of ill treatment, and demands his pound of flesh. Unfortunately for him, he does not know that "foreigners" do not have the same rights as citizens in 16th century Venice. And Portia - pretending to be a learned and merciful Doctor of Law - triumphantly strikes him down.

Students are encouraged to examine times in their own lives when they were badly treated because of being different, or foreign born. They are also asked to remember

times that they behaved badly toward people of a different nationality, religion, or race. The issue of whether or not we have the right to strike back at those who persecute or ridicule us, should be carefully examined, in the context of our civic rights and responsibilities.

#### **4. Father-Daughter relationships:**

Shylock tries to protect his daughter from frivolous young men who will marry her for her father's wealth. He also forbids her to go out with Christians. She falls in love with a penniless Christian, and robs her father of money and jewels when she runs away. Part of Shylock's punishment at the end is to sign a deed leaving his faithless daughter and her Christian husband whatever money he still has left when he dies.

Portia's father set up an elaborate test for all the men who would woo his daughter, trying to ensure that only the right kind of man would win her. But Portia, refusing to be bound by her father's will, cheats when a man she fancies appears on the scene. So she ends up with the kind of man the test was specifically designed to eliminate.

#### **5. Choices:**

In this play many problematic choices are made. Antonio foolishly signs a contract that puts his life at risk if he defaults. Shylock seeks a pointless revenge rather than asking for interest on his loan to Antonio, and ends up losing all he has. Portia chooses a charming young husband, who loves her to some extent for her money. Bassanio thinks he has won the "golden fleece," and finds himself firmly under his wife's thumb.

The three caskets symbolize the difficulty of making the right choice in a world where appearances often deceive.

## **Recommended Text:**

New Penguin edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, edited by W.M. Merchant (1967)

## **Recommended Reading:**

John Gross, *Shylock: A Legend and its Legacy* (1992)  
Alexander Leggatt, *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love* (1974)  
Sigmund Freud, "The Theme of the Three Caskets," (1913),  
"On Creativity and the Unconscious," (1958) A.D. Moody,  
"An Ironic Comedy," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "The Merchant of Venice"* (1970) John Wilders, ed., *The Merchant of Venice: A Casebook* (1969) Hermann Sinsheimer, *Shylock: The History of a Character or the Myth of the Jew* (1947) B.N. Nelson, "The Userer and the Merchant Prince," in *The Tasks of Economic History*, VII (1947) 104-22. Roberta Curiel and Bernard Dov Cooperman, *The Venetian Ghetto* (1990) Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta* (ca. 1590) The Arden Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, edited by John Russell Brown (1955)

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