

Orlando Shakespeare Theater
In partnership with UCF

STUDY GUIDE
For

The Merchant
of Venice

March/April 2009

Introduction

The goal of the Orlando Shakespeare Theater in Partnership with UCF is to ensure that all patrons experience the best quality theater that the region and nation has to offer. With that, it is important to us that each audience member gets the most out of every performance he or she attends. This is why a number of years ago we developed a concept to bridge the gap between our younger audience members and the often complex language of Shakespeare and various other playwrights used in the season. The plays of a season come to life with the creative exploration of certain themes, character analyses, and modern parallels that many middle through high school students can identify with. It is our hope that this will kindle the desire for students to learn more about Shakespeare and other notable works long after the curtain closes. Enjoy the experience!

Meet the Characters

Shylock's household and friends

Shylock – A Jewish usurer (moneylender for profit) who lives in Venice. He is abused by Christians and frequently complains of his mistreatment. He especially loathes Antonio, a local Christian merchant. In revenge, he demands that a pound of flesh be cut from Antonio as agreed in their contract when Antonio cannot pay back a bond (loan) that they had agreed on. While Shylock is ruthless and obsessed with money, he also has some real human moments of suffering.

Jessica – Shylock's only child. She hates her father and living in his house. She falls in love with Lorenzo, elopes with him, and converts to Christianity, abandoning her father forever. She also steals all of Shylock's money, which seems to upset him as much if not more than the loss of his daughter.

Launcelot Gobbo – A clown and servant that makes a lot of clever puns. He also abandons his master, Shylock, to go and work for a kinder one, Bassanio.

Tubal – A Jew living in Venice and Shylock's friend.

Other People in Venice

Antonio – He is the merchant of the play's title. He loves his friend Bassanio so much that he agrees to be the guarantor for Shylock's very dangerous contract. He is hateful to Shylock but loving to his friends.

Bassanio – a very close friend of Antonio's. He asks to borrow money from Antonio so that he may go to win his true love, Portia. This leads to the deal with Shylock that gets Antonio into trouble. When Bassanio goes to Belmont, he chooses the right casket that holds Portia's portrait and marries her.

Leonardo – Bassanio's servant. He helps to prepare a feast at Bassanio's command. **Lorenzo** – A young gentleman and friend of Bassanio. He falls in love with Jessica, Shylock's daughter. He helps her escape her father, and they elope to Belmont.

Gratiano – A friend of Bassanio's who accompanies him to Belmont. He is raucous and outspoken. While in Belmont, He falls in love with Portia's lady-in-waiting, Nerissa, and marries her.

Salerio – A gentleman in Venice and friend of Antonio's. He goes with Jessica and Lorenzo to Belmont, and returns to Venice for Antonio's trial. He is always with his friend, Solanio.

Solanio – A gentleman in Venice and friend of Antonio's. He is Salerio's counterpart, they are a sort of team.

The Duke of Venice – The ruler of Venice and moderator in Antonio's trial at the end of the play. He sends for a Judge ("*a learned Doctor*") to rule on the forfeiture of the bond. He adheres to the law.

People in Belmont

Portia – A young wealthy woman living in Belmont. Her father has died and left her a fortune. However, in his will he forces her to marry whichever man chooses the correct of three caskets. She marries Bassanio and goes to Venice disguised as a lawyer to save her new husband's friend, Antonio. Portia is a smart, independent woman who takes matters into her own hands very cleverly.

Nerissa – Portia's lady-in-waiting, best friend, and cohort. She talks and listens to Portia talk about everything. She marries Gratiano and goes with Portia to Venice disguised as her law clerk.

The Prince of Morocco – A suitor to Portia. He asks Portia to look past the color of his skin and consider him as a husband. Like all of the others, he must face the trial of the caskets. He chooses the gold casket, which is wrong.

The Prince of Arragon – Another of Portia's suitors. He is very arrogant. In the challenge to win Portia, he chooses the silver casket, which is also wrong.

Balthazar – One of Portia's servants. Portia sends him to her friend Doctor Bellario to get materials for her plan.

Stephano – Another of Portia's servants.

Plot Summary

Act One:

The play begins in Venice, where Antonio, a local merchant, is feeling very sad but cannot explain why. His friends Salerio, Salanio, Bassanio, Gratiano, and Lorenzo gather with him and try to cheer him. Despite Gratiano's urging him to be merry, Antonio cannot be cheered. Bassanio, who is not very good at business, asks his friend Antonio to lend him money so that he can go and impress his love, Portia.

Antonio, who is still waiting for his ships to come in before he can have any money available, tells Bassanio to go find a money lender and to use his reputable name as a guarantor for a loan.

In Belmont, the young and beautiful Portia complains to her lady-in-waiting and friend Nerissa that she cannot choose who she will marry. She is bound by her late father's will, which declares that there be laid out on display three chests: one of gold, one of silver, and one of lead, and any hopeful suitor must choose from among these. Whoever chooses the correct chest wins Portia's hand in marriage. The two women remember and ridicule all of the men who have tried and failed at the task. They also fondly reminisce about Bassanio, who came to visit once.

In Venice, Antonio and Bassanio find Shylock, a Jewish moneylender and ask him to lend three thousand ducats, a very large sum of money. Shylock says to the audience how much he hates Antonio for being Christian and for stealing his business by offering interest-free loans. He cannot pass the opportunity to get revenge on Antonio. He agrees to lend the money interest-free for three months. However, if the money is not paid in that time, Shylock will get to take a pound of flesh cut out from Antonio's body as penalty. Bassanio at first refuses that Antonio take such a risk, but Antonio agrees to the bond, insisting that in three months his ships will have come in and he will have more than enough to pay Shylock.

Act Two:

Portia receives the Prince of Morocco, a Moor who brags of his brave exploits and asks her to look past his dark skin. She is kind to him but tells him he must face the trial of the caskets to win her.

Back in Venice we meet Launcelot Gobbo, a clown and servant, who is comically debating with himself whether or not he should leave his cruel master, Shylock. His old blind father (Old Gobbo) comes along with a present for Shylock and Launcelot plays with him before revealing that he is his son and that he is running from Shylock's house to go and serve Bassanio. Bassanio enters and together young and old Gobbo ask to work for him. He agrees and they leave. Bassanio then meets up with Gratiano, who asks to go with him to Belmont. Bassanio assents, but reminds Gratiano not to be too wild or offensive, as he can be sometimes. Jessica, Shylock's daughter, says goodbye to Launcelot and that she will miss him. She gives him a letter for Lorenzo, whom she knows he will see at Bassanio's house. Jessica reveals that she is in love with Lorenzo and will become a Christian to marry him.

Launcelot finds Lorenzo with Gratiano, Solerio, and Solanio getting ready for a party. Launcelot delivers the letter to Lorenzo. As Launcelot is leaving to invite Shylock to the dinner party, Lorenzo tells him to say to Jessica that he will come.

Shylock is very suspicious of Bassanio's invitation to dinner, but decides to go anyway to spite them. Hearing that there are Christian revelers in masks in the streets, before Shylock leaves he orders Jessica to lock up the house and stay inside. Launcelot tells Jessica that Lorenzo is coming for her.

Lorenzo, Gratiano, and Solerio arrive outside Shylock's house in masque. Lorenzo calls for Jessica and she appears at the balcony disguised as a boy, ready to steal away. She gives Lorenzo a casket filled with Shylock's gold and runs away with the revelers to Bassanio's party. Antonio comes along and reminds Gratiano that it is almost time for Bassanio and him to set sail for Belmont.

In Belmont, it is time for the Prince of Morocco to choose a casket in hopes of winning Portia's hand. The first casket, made of gold, reads "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire." The second, of silver, reads "Who chooseth me, shall get as much as he deserves." The third, made of lead, reads "Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath." After much deliberation, Morocco chooses the casket made of gold, because he believes "what many men desire" is Portia, and therefore choosing this casket will give him Portia. This is, however, the wrong choice and Morocco leaves immediately as promised, very sad.

In Venice Salerio and Salanio, friends of Antonio, talk about everything that has happened. They speak of how Bassanio and Gratiano set sail for Belmont. They also talk of how Jessica and Lorenzo have left together and Shylock's reaction to this. Shylock cried in the streets about his daughter running away and stealing all of his ducats (money) and precious jewels. They also recall Antonio's bond with Shylock, and mention that Antonio told Bassanio not to worry about it again.

Another suitor, The Prince of Arragon, arrives at Portia's house to face the trial of the caskets. Like Morocco before him, he debates over the caskets and their messages. He chooses the silver casket, because he thinks a lot of himself and feels "as much as he deserves" is quite a lot, including Portia in marriage. But this is incorrect as well and he leaves immediately. A messenger comes to Portia to tell her that a wonderful new suitor is approaching. Nerissa, who accompanies Portia, hopes that it is Bassanio come to try and win Portia.

Act Three:

In Venice, Solanio and Salerio are in the street talking about Antonio's bad luck. Antonio's most promising venture, a ship full of goods, has wrecked, causing Antonio to lose a lot of money. Shylock comes along, still cursing his daughter. Antonio's friends ask Shylock if he will really take a pound of flesh if Antonio cannot pay. Shylock says that he certainly will, mostly to satisfy his revenge on Antonio for his anti-Semitism. Salanio and Salerio leave to

go to Antonio's house. Shylock's friend Tubal, who has been looking for Jessica, comes along. He tells Shylock that he has not found Jessica, but has heard of how she is spending Shylock's money extravagantly. This greatly upsets Shylock, but he is cheered by Tubal's other news of Antonio's shipwrecked venture.

In Belmont, Portia tries to delay Bassanio from choosing a casket just yet. She knows that if he chooses incorrectly he will have to leave, and she is nervous about this because she loves him. Bassanio insists on choosing right away, because it is torture to wait. Portia becomes very poetic and calls for music to play while Bassanio chooses. He chooses the modest casket of lead. Inside he finds Portia's picture, which means he may marry her. Portia, filled with joy, gives him a ring as a symbol of her love. Bassanio vows never to remove it from his finger. Gratiano and Nerissa then announce their love for each other, and the couples decide to have a double wedding. Jessica and Lorenzo arrive, persuaded to follow to Belmont by Salerio, who comes with a letter for Bassanio. The letter is from Antonio, telling of his lost fortunes and his imminent doom at Shylock's hands. He asks Bassanio to come back to Venice so that he may see his dear friend one

last time. When Portia hears this and sees Bassanio upset by the news, she gives him money to pay back Shylock and sends him immediately to Venice to save his friend.

In Venice, Shylock has a jailer arrest Antonio and will force him to keep the bond. Antonio says that even the Duke cannot help him, he must obey the law. He goes sadly along with the jailer.

Act Four:

In this short act, the Duke of Venice summons Antonio to tell him that there is nothing he can do to save him from Shylock's morbid contract. As a last resort, the Duke beckons for Shylock in his court and asks for him to have mercy on Antonio. Even after a witty interchange with several characters, Shylock remains resolute on carving out a pound of Antonio's flesh. The trial continues as planned, only to be intercepted by the ever so clever Portia

disguised as a male lawyer. Without question, Portia has found the loophole to save Antonio from the knife. The contract that Shylock drew up called for a pound of flesh, but not a drop of blood. Even more, Shylock winds up falling prey to an age old ordinance that says a Jew must give up half of his land to the state and half to any man that he unsuccessfully sues. Moreover, Shylock must beg for his life to the Duke, and before the Duke can make a decision, Antonio steps in and begs for Shylock's life provided that he convert to Christianity. With great reluctance, Shylock tells the men to send the "deed" to his home so that he may sign it.

Act Five:

In this final act, the focus is back toward the lovers. Nerissa and Portia are in Belmont berating their lovers, Gratiano and Bassanio as to the whereabouts of the ring they gave as a token of their love. Gratiano and Bassanio shamefully tell them that they gave the ring as payment to a doctor and his clerk who were Nerissa and Portia in disguise. Once this trick is revealed the men are able to breathe again and Antonio's ships come in with much profit.

Themes:

Discrimination in Medieval Times vs. Modern Day

A recurring theme throughout the story is discrimination. With respect to The Merchant of Venice, discrimination takes the form of racism and prejudice against Shylock because he is a Jew and a money- lender.

Example #1

In medieval times there were strict rules for Christians not to borrow or lend money from other Christians, but there was nothing forbidding such exchanges between a Christian and a Jew. In addition to theological reasons, Christians looked down on Jews not only for being money - lenders but also for charging an interest fee depending on the amount borrowed.

Example #2:

Aside from the hatred showed to Shylock by many characters, there is also racism that comes from Shylock's daughter Jessica. While she is a Jew, her skin is the same color as the Christian Venetians, which allows her to assimilate into society with ease.

Example 3:

Just before the Prince of Morocco comes to try his hand at guessing the right casket, Portia says to Nerissa: "if he should have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil I had rather he should shrive me than wive me." In this statement Nerissa is saying that it does not matter if he is a nice-looking well-bred man; he is black, which is frowned upon in her society.

A Paraphrasing Activity

Challenge: A Commonality of All Humans Is that We All Have the same blood running through our veins. In Act III Shylock makes this general appeal in one of the most famous speeches in Shakespeare. Paraphrase the following section on a separate sheet of paper.

I am a Jew. 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 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.

Love will Find the Loop Holes

Do you know of anyone who has gotten themselves into the trouble and your concern for their well being forced you to search for loop holes to help them out? Explain.

Question and Answer:

1. Is it okay to help someone out of a situation even if it means being deceptive as Portia did at Antonio's trial?
2. Think of an instance where you might have to ask a favor from someone that you normally mistreated as Antonio did to Shylock.
3. At the beginning of the play, Antonio is complaining that the ship he has money invested in have not come in yet, nor is it certain that they will due to unforeseen storms on the high seas. What investment is this like in our time?
4. Are the rich obligated to give to the poor? Why or why not?
5. Are you opposed to interracial and or inter-religious relationships/marriage? Why or why not?
6. Pause for History: How have the roles of women changed from the renaissance until now? (Research assignment: Why is this significant? Why must Portia disguise herself as a man to gain access in the courts?)
7. Why might Antonio choose to let Shylock live?
8. What do you think is most important to each of the characters: money, love, religion, or justice?

