

The Merchant of Venice Study Guide

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For

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Original Practice and Playing Shakespeare

The Shakespeare Tavern on Peachtree Street is an Original Practice Playhouse. Original Practice is the active exploration and implementation of Elizabethan stagecraft and acting techniques.

For the Atlanta Shakespeare Company (ASC) at The New American Shakespeare Tavern this means every ASC production features hand-made period costumes, live, actor-generated sound effects, and live period music performed on period instruments in our Elizabethan playhouse. Our casts are trained to speak directly to the audience instead of ignoring the audience through the modern convention of acting with a “4th wall.”

You will experience all of this and more when you see ASC’s The Merchant of Venice

Who’s Who in Merchant

Portia: The young lady of Belmont, constrained by her dead father’s edict to wait for a suitor to “win” her by picking the correct casket.

Antonio: The merchant of the title and good friend to Bassanio. He agrees to guarantee Bassanio’s loan from Shylock.

Bassanio: Young man of Venice, hoping to win Portia by picking the right casket. He does not have enough money to travel to Belmont and so

asks his
close
friend,
Antonio,
to help
him with
a loan.



Gratiano:

Bassanio’s friend and interested in Nerissa.

Nerissa: Lady in waiting to Portia.

Shylock: A moneylender in Venice.

Jessica: Shylock’s daughter and in love with Lorenzo. She elopes with him.

Lorenzo: Young man of Venice, and friend to Bassanio.

Lancelot Gobbo: Servant to Shylock and later, Bassanio.

Prince of Morocco: Suitor to Portia, who must pick the correct casket, to win her.

Prince of Aragon: Another suitor to Portia who must also choose the correct casket.

Solanio and Salarino: Friends to Antonio.

Duke of Venice: Presides over Shylock’s trial.

Tubal: Friend of Shylock

Old Gobbo: Launcelet’s blind father.

The Story

“In sooth, I know not why I am so sad” says Antonio, a merchant in Venice. He is melancholy and will not admit to his friends Solanio and Salarino why this is. They speculate about his reasons, the main one being that all his money is currently tied up in overseas ventures or perhaps he is in love? Antonio denies both reasons.

Bassanio, Lorenzo and Gratiano, young men of Venice enter at this point and Solanio and Salarino quickly (and somewhat strangely) make their exit.

Bassanio is a good friend of Antonio’s and confesses a secret. He is in love with Portia, and tells Antonio “In Belmont is a Lady

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richly left.” Bassanio is not very rich and seeks a loan from Antonio that he might travel in style to Belmont and win fair Portia. Unfortunately, all Antonio’s money is tied up in his ships and he cannot lend any more to Bassanio. He proposes that Bassanio “enquire where money is” further and Antonio will guarantee any loan Bassanio can find.

Portia, meanwhile, is recounting the idiots she is forced to entertain when they come to court her for her hand in marriage. Her father left her all his money when he died, but he also left the instruction that any man that wishes to marry Portia must first choose from three small caskets, one made of lead, one of silver and one of gold. Portia wishes that Bassanio, whom she has met briefly, would come and choose.

Bassanio, meanwhile, has met with Shylock, a Jewish moneylender in Venice, who has agreed to loan 3000 ducats, for three months, with a guarantee from Antonio. Shylock is a bit doubtful that this is good business, as all of Antonio’s money is tied up in his ships, but agrees to talk to Antonio first. Antonio shows up, and Shylock tells us in an aside, that he hates Antonio because of Antonio’s very disrespectful treatment of him, and his practice of loaning money to people at no interest, which damages Shylock’s business of loaning money with interest, known as usury in Elizabethan England. Rest assured, there is no love lost between the two men, and it appears to be quite personal on both their parts.

Shylock eventually agrees to loan the money at no interest if for “merrie sport” Antonio will instead guarantee the loan by forfeit of a pound of his own flesh, if he cannot repay the loan in time. The two men agree, although Bassanio expresses some misgivings. They go off to have the business transaction recorded.

Portia is entertaining the Prince of Morocco, who has come to try his luck at the casket game.

Launcelet Gobbo, servant to Shylock, is trying to get another job. He meets up with his old, blind father, and gets Dad to intercede on his behalf with Bassanio. Bassanio hires him on the spot. Bassanio and his friend Gratiano, who will travel to Belmont with him, go off to party the night before they plan on leaving.

Jessica, Shylock’s daughter, has been secretly plotting to leave her father and elope with Lorenzo, a Christian man. She is unhappy in her father’s house and hopes to convert after marrying Lorenzo. She steals money and jewelry from her father and escapes with Launcelet’s help.

Portia, meanwhile, has shown Morocco the three caskets. The Prince picks the gold casket but he picks wrong and leaves, much distressed. The Prince of Aragon, who shows up next, picks the silver (wrong, again!) casket.

Shylock discovers his daughter’s betrayal, and confronts Solanio and Salarino, who taunt him for his losses. Tubal tells him that Antonio has lost his ship and Shylock derives some comfort from that bit of good news.

Bassanio has arrived, to court Portia, and everyone is on pins and needles, hoping he will choose the correct casket. He does (hint: it’s the lead one) and Portia gladly marries him. Gratiano has fallen in love with Nerissa and gladly marries her. Salerio arrives at that moment, with Jessica and Lorenzo in tow, to deliver the bad news from Venice. Portia sends Bassanio with double and triple the amount of the loan, to help her husband’s dear friend out. After they leave, Portia determines to disguise as a boy and follow her new husband back to Venice, as a joke. She leaves Jessica and Lorenzo in charge of her estate while she and Nerissa are gone.

The Duke of Venice has been asked to preside over the forfeiture of Antonio’s bond to Shylock. He asks Shylock to be merciful and have pity on Antonio. Shylock will not and demands his payment. The Duke is

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troubled deeply and has sent to a wise Doctor of Law named Bellario, for advice.

In walk Portia and Nerissa, disguised as a young male lawyer “Balthazar” and his clerk. Balthazar asks Shylock to be merciful and explains that “Though Justice be thy plea, consider this, That in the course of Justice, none of us should see salvation.” Shylock wants justice, not the repayment of the loan, and since “there is no power in Venice can alter a decree established” he, by law, can have his pound of flesh. As Shylock prepares to take his lawful due, Balthazar warns him that by law he can take no more or less than an exact pound of flesh, nor can he have any blood. If he takes anything else, his lands and goods are confiscated. Shylock cannot do this and asks for his principle, instead. Balthazar will not agree to this, since he already refused it once in open court. In fact, he will not let Shylock go at all, until all his goods, lands and money are turned over to Antonio and the Duke, partly in trust for his new son-in-law and daughter. Before Shylock can leave, Antonio is allowed to decree two things: the return of half his goods, but also, that Shylock give up his religion and convert to Christianity. Mercy, indeed.

Portia, still disguised as the lawyer, asks Bassanio for the ring she had given her new husband, as payment for a job well done. At first he refuses to hand it over but Antonio eventually changes his mind. When everyone gets back to Belmont, much gaiety ensues as Portia and Nerissa tease their seemingly faithless husbands. All is revealed in the end and everyone happily reconciles.

Before a Performance, Think About This:

What is mercy in this play?

Who is capable of mercy? Who deserves mercy? What do you believe?

Why has Shylock remained such an indelible character for us?

What do you think are Shylock’s strong points? What are his weaknesses? Are these character traits that you recognize? What has made him this way?

Base lead versus tawnee gold:

What does Bassanio’s speech in Act III, scene ii mean to you? It starts with “So may the outward shows be least themselves....”

Which casket would **you** choose?

Theatergoing Then and Now:

Find out what the typical Elizabethan audience was like and imagine what a performance might have been like back then. What is different about theatre going nowadays? The answers may surprise you! Clue: What would this play be like to watch outside, in the light of day?

During a Performance, Watch And Listen For This:

Notice what we hear about Shylock before his first entrance. Notice what others say about him after his first entrance. What do we hear about Antonio from other people, especially Bassanio? What does Antonio do- what does he say about other people? Whose actions speak louder than words and whose words speak louder than their actions?

After a Performance, Talk About This:

Religion and the Elizabethan Age:

Do some research and discover for yourself what the Elizabethan experience of religion might have been.

Which religion was “Elizabethan” anyway?

How many people of Jewish faith lived in England during the period that Shakespeare wrote The Merchant of Venice?

How does your own concept of other peoples and other faiths reflect or conflict with an Elizabethan understanding of those people or that faith?

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Original Practice Theatre:

Does directly addressing the audience affect what you think and feel about the characters? Does it affect your understanding of what is going on onstage? Does it interfere? Why do you think Shakespeare wrote his plays this way? What are the benefits to the actor and/or audience? What are the risks?

Words Invented by Shakespeare and Used for the First Time in this Play:

Compromise
Green –Eyed
Laughable
Rival
Undervalue

Find for yourself where they appear in the play! Can you spot them in performance? Do they mean what you thought they meant?

For Further Information/Exploration:

Websites:

Mr. William Shakespeare and The Internet:
<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/>- this site contains excellent resources and is a great metasite.

Shakespeare's Globe website

www.shakespeares-globe.org

Books:

The Merchant of Venice Folger Edition

Shakespeare and the Jews James Shapiro

Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human
by Harold Bloom

Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare by Isaac Asimov

Staging In Shakespeare's Theatres by Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa

Shakespeare A to Z by Charles Boyce

Our performance text is:

The Applause First Folio of Shakespeare in Modern Type, Neil Freeman

For more information on the First Folio of Shakespeare go to:

<http://web.uvic.ca/shakespeare/Annex/DraftTxt/index.html>

Movie Versions:

The Merchant of Venice, 2004, with Al Pacino as Shylock, and Joseph Fiennes as Bassanio.

Definitions of Words Invented for Merchant:

Compromise- to bind by mutual agreement; to come to terms

Green-eyed- Jealous – WS was the first to modify jealous with “Green-eyed” and the term has remained hyphenated to this day.

Laughable- humorous or funny; ridiculous or silly

Rival- having or making the same claim; competing.

Undervalue- to rate as inferior; to rate below the real worth.