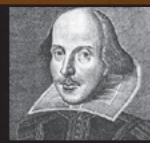




The Plays of William Shakespeare



The Merchant of Venice Study Guide

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Special Note on Shakespeare's Plays

A first encounter with Shakespeare can be a challenging experience for high school students. The spelling is often nonstandard, the vocabulary is difficult and archaic, and the cadence and structure are unfamiliar. These barriers to understanding the story could cause a student to become frustrated with the literature and give up. To enhance the students' appreciation and understanding of *Merchant of Venice*, we urge instructors to carefully consider the edition your students will read. We suggest selecting an annotated edition that uses standard spelling but retains the original sentence structure. We recommend *The New Folger Library Shakespeare* editions, and our line references will be to the Folger edition. Other editions may have slightly different line numbering due to differences in formatting and typesetting, particularly in prose text, so the reader may have to search around somewhat for the exact text referred to in the study guide. In most instances we have included the words at the beginning of the referred to lines to make the passage easier to find [e.g., Act 3, scene 1, lines 280–301 (“O pardon me”)].

In addition, since Shakespeare wrote his plays to be performed and not merely read, we recommend the use of video or audio recordings of *Merchant of Venice* as part of the learning process. These may be available through your local library. We advise letting students watch or listen to the play before actually reading it. This helps familiarize the students with the story and the language and makes in-depth study of the text easier. Note that every performance is an interpretation, however, and so may not match perfectly with the text. Some versions of the play are recommended at the end of this study guide, but our recommendations are not meant to be an exhaustive list.

Synopsis

“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” —James 2:12, 13

The Merchant of Venice is a story of love, friendship, prejudice, and justice. In the beginning of the story we meet the impulsive and carefree nobleman Bassanio. He is in love with Portia, the rich heiress from Belmont. Portia is being courted by many great and wealthy men from around the world. Without sufficient funds to court Portia, Bassanio turns to his good friend Antonio, a wealthy merchant, to supply him with enough money to support his journey. Because Antonio has invested all his money in ships that are at sea, Antonio is forced to borrow 3,000 ducats from the greedy Jewish moneylender Shylock.

Shylock, bitter and angry from being mistreated by Antonio in the past, forces him to sign a bond. Shylock sees this as his only possibility for revenge for racist insults and financial hardships that he has suffered from Antonio. Shylock agrees to lend the 3,000 ducats without interest provided that Antonio forfeit a pound of flesh from his body if the bond is not repaid. Antonio lightheartedly signs the bond, ignoring the protests of Bassanio.

Meanwhile Bassanio and his outspoken friend Gratiano travel to Belmont to woo Portia. In Belmont, Bassanio is given a test—a test of character given to each of Portia’s suitors. The suitor is made to choose one of three caskets—gold, silver, or lead—based on their cryptic inscriptions. The lover who selects the correct casket, according to her father’s will, earns the right to marry Portia. Those who do not choose correctly must agree to never court Portia again.

At the same time, Lorenzo, an artist-friend of Bassanio’s, and Jessica, the daughter of Shylock, elope, taking with them some of Shylock’s ducats and jewels. Shylock is furious at the double loss of his daughter and his ducats. But then word comes that Antonio’s ships have been lost at sea, and he is unable to repay his debt to

Act III

Vocabulary:

Look up the following words and write the dictionary definitions.

racism _____

discrimination _____

persecution _____

prejudice _____

racial slur _____

Questions:

1. Read scene i, lines 52–72. In this passage Shylock talks about getting revenge on Antonio. List five reasons why Shylock is angry with Antonio.

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Was Antonio right to treat Shylock the way he did? Why or why not? Why is Antonio's behavior surprising?

2. Most action in a story centers around a conflict (a problem) and its resolution (solving the problem). When speaking of his relationship with Shylock, Antonio says: "I oft delivered from his forfeitures many that have at time made moan to me; therefore he hates me." From Antonio's point of view, this is the root of their conflict. How did Antonio help people?

Why would Shylock dislike it if Antonio helped others?

How would Shylock's greed affect his feelings about Antonio's actions?

What are some other reasons not mentioned in the above passage that could explain why Shylock hates Antonio?

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3. In scene v, Lancelet Gobbo jokes that if all the Jews are converted to Christianity, the price of pork will rise. (scene v, lines 20–25) Why does he say this? (See Deuteronomy 14:8; Acts 11:4–10.)

Dig Deeper:

4. What if Shylock was not discriminated against by others? How would he be a different person? How do you think he would treat others?
5. What does the Bible say about discrimination? See Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11.
6. Write a one-page paper describing whether, and how, you think Shylock would change if he were not treated so cruelly.

Extra Assignment:

In the play Shylock must endure many anti-Semitic comments by non-Jews. This is one reason he is such an angry person. Today racism is still a problem. Look through a newspaper or news magazine and find an article on racism. Write a short report about racism in the United States or other countries.

Answer Key

Note: Most of the questions in Progeny Press study guides deal with students' understanding and interpretation of issues in the novel; therefore, most answers will be individual to the student. Progeny Press answer keys are designed to be as inclusive as possible for the teacher and/or parent, giving enough background and information to judge whether the student has grasped the essence of the issue and the question. We try to point out some directions students' answers might take, which directions might be best, and some errors that may appear. Students are not expected to answer as completely as the answers provided in the Answer Key.

Act I

Vocabulary:

1. bitter or unhappy looking. 2. Antonio worries too much or takes life too seriously. 3. Gratiano talks a lot. 4. Portia is rich or well off (because of an inheritance) 5. Antonio will try to borrow some money. 6. Antonio loans money without charge, making the interest rates for moneylenders lower.

Questions:

1. Bassanio wants to borrow 3,000 ducats to woo the rich heiress, Portia. Bassanio has wasted his money in the past, so he does not have the funds to do it himself. All of Antonio's money is invested in ships, so he must borrow the money. Antonio is forced to sign a bond that would require him to surrender a pound of flesh if he does not return the money on time. Antonio must make the agreement to borrow the money from his enemy, Shylock. Antonio is unselfish, willing to take risks, and a loyal friend. (Answers may vary on the last part of the question.)
2. Any man who wishes to marry Portia must choose between three caskets. One is gold, one is silver, and one is lead. If the suitor chooses the correct casket, he will have the right to marry Portia. If the suitor chooses the wrong casket, he must leave immediately. Portia's father devised this method of choosing a husband for her.
3. Shylock did not want to eat with Antonio and Bassanio for many reasons: 1) They were cruel to him 2) They were Christians. They and Shylock had mutual religious prejudices. 3) A Christian may eat food (like pork) that is considered unclean to a Jew.
4. Antonio is a risk taker. He is generous. Antonio uses his money to help others. Shylock is greedy and miserly. He uses his money carefully to gain profit. Shylock uses his money selfishly.
5. Antonio and Bassanio do not respect Shylock or the Jewish religion. Shylock is treated terribly by Antonio. It is shocking because Antonio treats everyone else in the play in a Christian manner. Shylock was spit upon and kicked by Antonio. Shylock is angry because of the way he has been treated. He hates Antonio, not only because he is a Christian, but because of his cruel behavior.
6. tricky, cunning, cruel, bloody, sneaky (Answers may vary.) Shylock wants revenge, so he has devised this bond as a way to get back at Antonio.
7. Answers will vary.
8. A hypocrite is one who says one thing and does another thing. A hypocrite may also instruct others to do the very thing they are not doing.
9. When we talk it takes no effort or sacrifice, but to do what is good and right takes time, effort and diligence. Words without action are only words. Just because someone can speak about correct behavior