



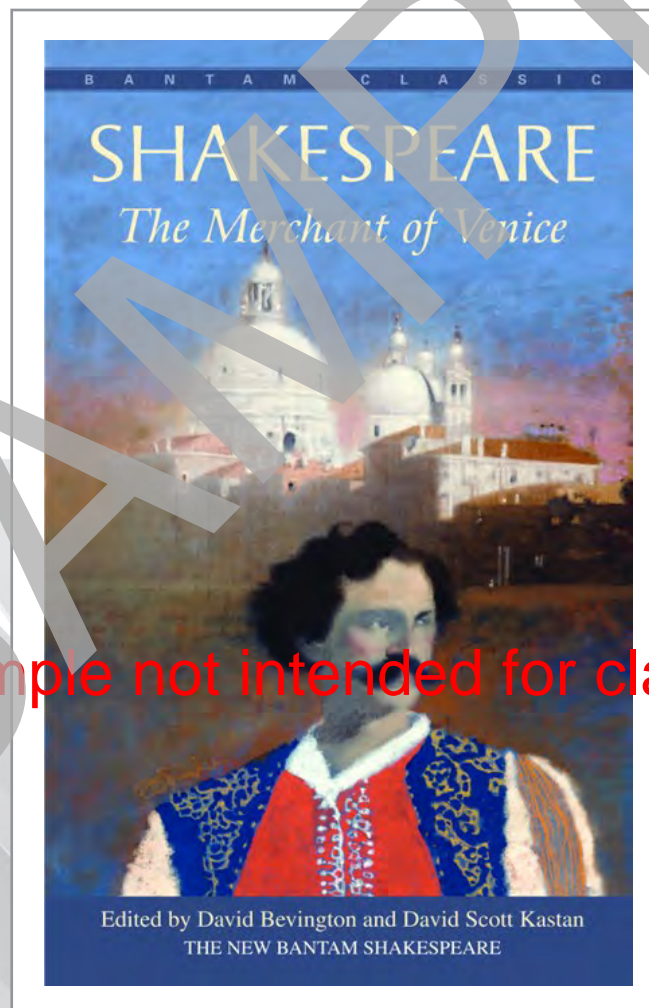
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

The Merchant of Venice

William Shakespeare



This is a sample not intended for classroom use.

READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

The Merchant of Venice

William Shakespeare

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Plot Summary

Bassanio falls in love with the lovely, wealthy Portia and asks his friend Antonio for a loan so that he can marry her. Antonio's wealth is tied up in his ships, which are at sea, so he agrees to sign a note for his friend. Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, gives Bassanio 3,000 ducats with the understanding that Antonio will give a pound of flesh if he fails to repay the loan in three months. When the ships sink, Shylock demands his pound of flesh, but Portia disguises herself as a lawyer and saves the day (for Antonio). Shylock, on the other hand, loses all—including his daughter and his faith.

Background on the Playwright

Shakespeare's exact birthdate is unknown, but he was baptized on April 26, 1564, in Stratford-on-Avon, England. His father, John, was a prosperous wool, leather, and grain merchant, as well as a town official. His mother, Mary, was the daughter of a gentleman farmer. It is known that young William attended school and studied Latin and literature. In 1582, he married Anne Hathaway, a woman eight years his senior. They had three children: a daughter, Susanna, and twins, Hamnet and Judeth.

In 1586, Shakespeare left Stratford to become the stage manager of "The Theatre" in London, so named because it was the only theatre in town. He soon joined the acting company of The Theatre, and with Richard Burbage and William Kemp he performed at court in many plays.

Shakespeare's earliest works were produced in 1591-02, including several of the histories and *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *Comedy of Errors*. In 1592, he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*. It was followed in quick succession by *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Shakespeare made an important business move in 1599 when he joined Richard Burbage and several other actors to build the Globe Theatre. He was a shareholder in the Globe and a part-owner of a company of actors called Lord Chamberlain's Company, later known as The King's Men.

Many of Shakespeare's plays were produced at the Globe, where he had both financial security and a first-rate acting company to produce his plays. This was his greatest writing period. In 1599-1600, he wrote *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*. Between 1600 and 1611, he wrote the tragedies for which he is so well remembered: *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, among others. During this time he also wrote 154 sonnets which were published in 1609. Late in 1608 or 1609, Shakespeare and his partners purchased the Blackfriars Theatre to use as a winter location for play production.

In 1611, at the height of his fame and popularity, Shakespeare moved back to Stratford. His son died at this time. He sold out his interests in London, although he did continue to write and travel to the city until his death in 1616. Not until 1623 was an edition of his collected plays published in what is now called the First Folio.

4. Have students group words from the Shakespearean vocabulary list below into two categories—those that look familiar (although today’s meaning may be different) and those that are no longer commonly used. Then have them fill out a chart like the one that follows the list.

methoughts (1.3.66) rheum (1.3.114) nay (2.2.75) knave (2.3.12)
 wherefore (2.5.12) patch (2.5.45) gentle (2.7.78) cozen (2.9.37)
 smug (3.1.43) cur (3.3.18) accoutred (3.4.63) remorse (4.1.20)
 rehearsed (4.1.361) unthrift (5.1.16) paltry (5.1.147) scrubbed (5.1.162)
 strange (5.1.278) bedfellow (5.1.284)

a.	words that look familiar	today's meaning	Shakespeare's meaning
b.	words that look "Shakespearean"	what I predict the meaning might be	what I discovered to be the actual meaning in the play

5. Have students bring in pictures or examples of some of the concrete terms, such as

argosies (1.1.9) shaft (1.1.140) death's-head (1.2.50) throstle (1.2.59)
 ducats (1.3.62) livery (2.1.2) penthouse (2.6.1) sepulcher (3.2.96)
 rasher (2.5.24) gaping pig (4.1.47) platens (5.1.59) Argus (5.1.236)

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9. Did you find anything puzzling about this act? To understand this act, what do you think is the single most important question to consider?

Prediction

Which casket will Bassanio choose—and why?

Supplementary Activities

Literary Analysis: Masque

The masque was a form of entertainment in England in the 16th and 17th centuries originally consisting of pantomime and dancing, but later including dialogue and song, presented in elaborate productions given by amateur and professional actors. Have students point out the references to a masque in this scene. (*Solario and Solanio prepare for a masque later that evening; Shylock instructs Jessica to close up the house if masquers appear in the streets.*)

Soliloquy

Soliloquy is the act of talking while or as if alone. A soliloquy consists of lines spoken by a character that are meant to represent the character's unspoken thoughts and feelings. While soliloquizing, the character ignores or is oblivious to any hearers present.

Point out the lines spoken by Jessica, alone on the stage, at the end of Act 2, Scene 5. What do these lines show about how Jessica is feeling? (*She is looking forward to the break from her father as she goes to Lorenzo.*)

Writing Ideas

1. You are Jessica. Write a letter to your best friend about how you have run off with Lorenzo. Describe your plan and explain why you put it into effect. Also, tell how you feel about both men—and about what you have done.
2. Write a soliloquy for Portia in which she muses aloud about two of her suitors—the Princes of Morocco and Aragon. Imagine that she is thinking about the conversation she might have had with her father—had he been alive.

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Music

1. Choose some contemporary songs the suitors or lovers in the play might sing. Prepare an oral presentation of the songs, discussing how they are related to the play.
2. Recast one of the scenes in the play as a “music video.”
3. Tape a selection of pieces that you would use at various points in the play.
4. Listen to Randy Newman’s “Dixie Flyer” about Jews in New Orleans during WWII. Do the lyrics remind you of Jessica and her father in any way?

Research

1. Several artists have illustrated scenes from *The Merchant of Venice*. Learn more about a book publisher named John Boydell who opened his Shakespeare Gallery in 1789—and changed the course of English painting by creating a market for “history painting.” Find some of these paintings/drawings and learn more about the artists.
2. Create a timeline that sets the events in *The Merchant of Venice* against an historical backdrop. Include the status of Jews in England on your timeline.
3. Research some of the mythical and biblical allusions in the play.
4. Devise a questionnaire about women’s rights and/or love and marriage. Include at least ten questions and try to get at some of the ideas expressed in the play (e.g., “Should decisions about what the wedding will be like be made equally by both partners?” “Do you think housework should be shared equally by husband and wife?”) Administer the questionnaire, tally the answers, and write a short report on your findings. Report to the whole group on what you found—and what this shows about attitudes in our times—and in Shakespeare’s.
5. Find out how German Nazis subverted *The Merchant of Venice* to their own ends.
6. Historically, how has Shylock been portrayed in various productions since Shakespeare’s time? How are these productions a reflection of their times?

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Current Events

1. Use resources such as the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* or do a search on the Internet for news articles, advice columns, ads, comics, etc. that are somehow related to situations in *The Merchant of Venice* (e.g., displays of anti-Semitism, loan sharking, legal turn-arounds on technicalities, interfaith marriages). Create a bulletin board or poster of such items, with captions that explain the parallels with *The Merchant of Venice*.
2. Find references in newspapers and magazines to *The Merchant of Venice*. These might be reviews of stage productions, allusions in headlines, advertisements, etc. Create a poster display or scrapbook.