



 Prestwick House

# Activity Pack

## THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Pre-Reading

### Exploring Relevance to a New Generation

**Objectives:** Exploring the relevance of Shakespeare's drama in contemporary times

You have probably wondered why you should read things written before you were born—especially Shakespeare. The simple answer is that good literature, no matter how ancient, prevails and inspires. The deeper answer is that the issues, desires, and dilemmas faced by people hundreds of years ago are still faced by people today, and literature reflects this. We continue to read the old tales because they are relevant to our experiences today.

#### Activity

1. Brainstorm a list of ten works you are familiar with that were created by an earlier generation. Consider such genres as myths, folktales, epics, novels, and song lyrics.
2. For each work, identify the central issue or conflict.
3. Go through your list and circle those that you believe to be relevant to your life and your generation.
4. Choose the plot of one work on your list and develop a more modern version of the tale. You may write your version in whatever format you desire—epic poem, song, short story, myth...be creative! Provide a title.
5. Write a brief paragraph explaining how you altered the original work in order to “speak” more relevantly to your own generation.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Act I****Personal Reflection****Objective:** Identifying your own role**Activity**

In Scene I, Antonio says, "I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano/A stage, where every man must play a part, And mine is a sad one."

If the world is a stage, and we are all actors, what is your role? Think of the activities you participate in, the groups you belong to, and your role in your family. Write two paragraphs that explain your role in the world today and how you feel about it.

Next, think of the role you want to play in the future. How will your role change as you mature? Will you still be doing the same things when you are 25, 45, or older? Why or why not? Write two paragraphs on what you hope your future role will be. End with a concluding paragraph that contrasts your present role with your future. You should write at least five paragraphs.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Act I****Understanding Allusions**

**Objective:** Understanding the importance of allusions and relating them to characters

**Activity**

An allusion is a reference to a person, place, poem, book, etc., which is not part of the story, that the author expects the reader to recognize. Shakespeare uses several allusions in this act to enhance the play.

Choose four allusions from the list below and research their meanings using the library, the Internet, or both. Next, explain how these allusions add extra meaning to the play and what additional meanings they convey about the characters.

- Janus
- Nestor
- Sir Oracle
- Colchos' strond
- Diana
- Rialto
- Nazarite
- "my tribe"
- Jacob
- Laban
- Abraham

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Act II

### Understanding Figurative Language

**Objective:** Interpreting figurative language of various types within a drama

Figurative language is a way to use in a non-literal fashion for the purpose of description or emphasis. Shakespeare is famous for his use of figurative language in his various dramas and sonnets. As you read *The Merchant of Venice*, you will discover figurative language in many different forms, which are described below.

- **Metaphor:** an unlikely comparison of two dissimilar things.
- **Allusion:** when an author makes a figurative or symbolic reference to an historical event or other literary work.
- **Simile:** a comparison of two unlike things using the terms “like” or “as.”
- **Metonymy:** using a related item to stand for a different item.

In the following chart, several examples of figurative language from scenes I through VI of Act II are given. Identify which type of figurative language is being used in the first space, and then explain the comparison in the second space.

After you have completed the above chart, search the remaining scenes of Act II to see if you can find two more examples of figurative language.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Act II****Letter Writing****Objective:** Writing to characters in the play

Most of the conflicts present in *The Merchant of Venice* become apparent very early in the play. Many times these conflicts, which seem complex and insurmountable to the characters involved, actually have very simple solutions.

**Activity**

After reading Act II and pondering the various conflicts that exist, choose two characters that you believe might benefit from some sound outside advice. Write each of these characters a letter with instructions on how to handle the situation. Try to use language that simulates Shakespeare's Elizabethan language.

**Example:**

Excerpt from a letter to Portia:

I pray you, fair Portia, cast thy father's will upon the winds and to Bassanio fly—why shouldst thou sacrifice the deep and honest affection his heart holds for thee? Consider the needs of the living and desist from pleasing a graveyard's whim...

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Act III****Motif****Objective:** Identifying motifs that contribute to theme

*The Merchant of Venice* contains several motifs—recurring structures, ideas, or contrasts that help develop the play's major themes. Among these motifs are: sticking to the letter of law, deception or disguise, and obedience to parents (or the lack thereof). Although these motifs may be seen throughout the play, they are quite visible in Act III.

**Activity**

For each scene listed, at least one example has been quoted that supports one of the above motifs. Look back at Act III and the indicated scenes to refresh your memory of the circumstances, and, in the space provided, determine which motif has been represented. In the next column, explain how this is so. The first has been done for you as an example.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Act III****Newspaper Reporting****Objective:** Writing a news story about the play

Good news reporters must be keen observers of the events that they cover, especially when their reports have the potential to influence the general public. Mass distribution of bad information can potentially disrupt an entire nation and endanger life, property, and relations with other nations. Because of this, reporters and editors must use caution to release only factual, objective reports.

**Activity**

Imagine you are a reporter who has traveled back through time to report on events in *The Merchant of Venice*. Choose a single event from the list given below to report on. Observe what you can from the characters involved with the event and record answers to the fundamental news questions: who, what, when, where, how, and why? Once you've acquired these answers, write an article covering the event. Be sure to include an attention-getting headline.

**Event Choices:**

- Portia's father writes a stipulation for potential suitors for his daughter's hand in marriage. In order to win her hand, they must choose from three chests the one that contains her portrait...
- Many suitors decide not to risk their futures by trying for Portia's hand...
- The Princes of Morocco and Arragon try and fail to win Portia's hand...
- Jessica, Shylock's daughter, runs away from home, taking with her a sizable amount of money and a certain ring...
- Antonio's ships are wrecked on the Goodwin Sands in the English Channel, making his repayment of the loan from Shylock impossible...
- Antonio is thrown in prison for failure to pay his bond to Shylock, the Jewish moneylender...

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Act IV****A Life in Brief**

**Objective:** Exploring character through the creation of life boxes

A character life box is a grouping of thoughtfully chosen items that would be particularly significant to or representative of a character in a work of literature. Consider the major characters in *The Merchant of Venice*: Antonio, Shylock, Portia, Bassanio, and perhaps Jessica and Lorenzo. Choose one whose character you would feel comfortable exploring in detail, and then, using the following guidelines, create a life box for that character.

**Guidelines:**

- Choose at least four items your character might use daily, have as a keepsake, or be represented by in some fashion.
- Find a quotation from the play that would justify each item. The lines can either be spoken by your character or another character in the play. Attach the quotations in some fashion to each item—using a tag and string, for example, a staple, or paperclip.
- Place the items in a container of some sort, such as a shoebox, shopping bag, or gift box, for example. Decorate it in a manner that represents your chosen character.

Once all life boxes have been created, you will present your choices and justifications for each to the class.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Act IV****Examining Emotions**

**Objective:** Exploring character through examining emotions

*The Merchant of Venice* is a comedy, but it contains many of the same emotions that can be found in one of Shakespeare's tragedies. The inclusion of negative emotions and human fallibilities—even in humorous drama—is one of the many factors that adds to the realism—and thus entertainment value—of Shakespeare's drama.

**Activity**

The **Emotions Chart** on the next page contains a list of quotations from Act IV that are representative of some emotion experienced by the characters. Identify the emotion represented and indicate the character experiencing the emotion.