

Advanced Placement in  
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

**The Merchant of Venice**

by William Shakespeare

written by Tom Zolpar



**Prestwick House**

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# The Merchant of Venice

## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. evaluate Shakespeare's development of a potentially stereotypical character beyond stereotype.
2. trace the development of the following themes in this play:
  - the question of mercy versus justice
  - the distinction between appearance and reality.
3. examine Shakespeare's use of figurative and rhetorical devices, specifically and analyze their contribution to the overall tone, mood, and aesthetic appeal of the play.
  - epistrophe
  - malapropism
  - puns and wordplay.
4. identify the main plot and three subplots of this play and analyze their interrelationships.
5. analyze the plot and subplots in terms of the five-act dramatic structure.
6. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam.
7. respond to free-response essay items similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Exam.
8. offer a close reading of *The Merchant of Venice* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the play.

## Introductory Lecture

*The Merchant of Venice* is believed to have been written between 1596 and 1598. Although classified as a comedy in the First Folio edition, the play is best known for the character of Shylock.

The title character is the merchant Antonio, however, not the Jewish moneylender.

### INTERNATIONAL SATIRE

Portia's description of her suitors in Act I, scene ii, and her conversations with the Prince of Morocco and the Spanish prince, Arragon, serve as vehicles for Shakespeare to poke fun at several of England's rival nations, particularly those nations whose royalty had caused, or were currently causing, Queen Elizabeth difficulties.

- The Neapolitan prince, who is so proud of his ability to shoe his own horses, is most likely Spanish. The Kingdom of Naples had long been a prize coveted by both the French and Spanish. During Elizabeth's reign, Naples was ruled by Spain.
- The County Palatine would be a high-ranking official, particularly in German remnants of the Holy Roman Empire. The County Palatine could possibly have ties to the Vatican. His somber disposition might be (the secretly Catholic) Shakespeare's pandering in a comic way to the biases of his English Protestant audience. Portia's reference to rhenish wine when discussing the Duke of Saxony's nephew suggests that the specific palatinate this somber official governs might be the Rhineland Palatinate in southwestern Germany. If this is the case, then the somber County Palatine might be a Calvinist. As English Calvinists were always eager to close the theaters because of their "immorality," it makes sense that Shakespeare would want to mock them in his play, portraying them as joyless.
- The French lord, Monsieur Le Bon, described as possessing the worst traits of the previous two suitors, clearly expresses the long-standing English distrust and dislike of the French. At the writing of *Merchant* (1596—1598), the execution of Mary Queen of Scots for a suspected Catholic conspiracy against Elizabeth (1587) and the Spanish Armada (1588), a planned invasion of Protestant England by Catholic Spain with the intent of deposing the Protestant Elizabeth and restoring England to the "true Church," were still very fresh in the minds of Shakespeare's audience.
- The young baron of England has no education to speak of. England was allied with the other protestant nations on Northern Europe; and a bias against the studies and languages of predominantly Catholic Southern and Western Europe made the English appear provincial and simple in the eyes of much of the rest of Europe. Notice, however, that Shakespeare does have Portia comment that the English baron is the best looking of all of the suitors ("a proper man's picture").

# The Merchant of Venice

## Act I, Scene I: Venice

1. What are the two reasons suggested for Antonio's sadness?

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2. Why do Solanio and Salerio leave when Bassanio and company enter?

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3. What is significant about the fact that Gratiano also mentions that Antonio looks sad or unwell?

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4. Why is it difficult for Bassanio to ask Antonio for money?

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5. What is Bassanio's plan for getting money to pay off his debts? What is Antonio's response?

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6. What does Antonio's suggestion foreshadow?

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**Act II, Scene I: Belmont**

1. What is the final condition stipulated in Portia's father's will regarding the contest of the caskets? What is the dramatic or narrative purpose of introducing such a condition?

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**Act III, Scene II: Belmont**

1. Why does Portia not want Bassanio to rush into making a choice?

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2. What dilemma does Bassanio's presence create for Portia?

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3. Explain the intent of the wordplay in which Portia and Bassanio engage.

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4. Why does Shakespeare have Portia call for music now, when no music accompanied the other suitors' choices?

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5. Why does Bassanio reject the gold and silver caskets?

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6. What examples does Bassanio offer to illustrate his understanding that appearances can be deceiving?

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7. Why does Bassanio choose the lead casket?

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7. Explain how coincidence is probably going to affect the outcome of Antonio's trial?

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8. What is the main point of Portia's "quality of mercy" speech?

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9. What bit of humor does Shakespeare introduce into this scene?

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10. What is bathos, and where is it found in this scene?

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11. What plot element does Portia's line, "Tarry a little; there is something else," most likely introduce?

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12. What point does Portia emphasize by denying Shylock even the return of his original loan?

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**Act V, Scene I: Belmont**

1. What do all of the mythological lovers to whom Jessica and Lorenzo allude in their love scene have in common?

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2. What does Launcelot's entrance introduce into this scene?

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3. What is the gist of Portia and Nerissa's conversation as they approach Portia's house? What purpose does it serve in the context of where it occurs in the play?

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4. What is the meaning of Gratiano's line to Nerissa?

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5. How does the audience know that Portia and Nerissa are teasing their husbands and not being vindictive when they threaten to commit adultery with the doctor of law and his clerk? What narrative technique is this?

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6. What are the specific elements of the overall happy ending of this comedy?

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