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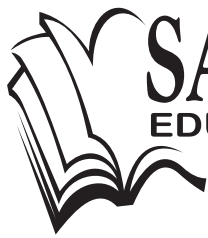
SHAKESPEARE

MADE EASY

The Merchant of Venice



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To the Teacher

As any teacher or student who has read Shakespeare knows, his plays are not easy. They are thought-provoking and complex texts that abound with romance, deceit, tragedy, comedy, revenge, and humanity shown at its very worst as well as its very best. In short, to read Shakespeare is to explore the depths and heights of humanity.

The *Shakespeare Made Easy* Activity Guides are designed by teachers for teachers to help students navigate this journey. Each guide is broken into six sections of four activities and one review. At the end of each guide is a final test, a variety of culminating activities, and an answer key. The activities are meant to aid textual comprehension, to provide creative

opportunities for the reader to make personal connections with the text, and to help busy teachers gain quick access to classroom-tested and age-appropriate activities that make the teaching of Shakespeare an easier task.

Each regular activity, as well as each culminating activity, can be modified to be an individual or a group task, and the reviews and tests can be used as quick comprehension checks or formally scored assessments. The guides may be used in conjunction with the Barron's *Shakespeare Made Easy* texts or alone. Ultimately, the *Shakespeare Made Easy* Activity Guides are intended to assist teachers and students in gaining an increased understanding of and appreciation for the reading of Shakespeare.

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Introduction to the Play

Background to *The Merchant of Venice*

The Merchant of Venice is most often considered a comedy because it ends, as most of Shakespeare's comedies do, with the promise of a triple marriage. Like *Twelfth Night*, however, the comedy is edged with darkness because of the treatment of one of the characters. In *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio is easy to dislike, but the reader feels sympathy toward him because of the way others treat him. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the Jewish businessman Shylock is dislikable, but the cruel treatment he suffers from others is very troublesome. Because Shylock is such a memorable character, many people assume that the title "The Merchant of Venice" is him. However, the merchant of the title is actually Antonio, a true and devoted friend to Bassanio.

One of the critical practices in the play is the charging of interest and the posting of a guarantee, or bond, for anyone who wishes to borrow money. This form of money-lending, called usury, was frowned upon as an unethical and unchristian way to earn money. However, in Shakespeare's era, people sometimes did need to borrow money. Therefore, many states allowed people who were not citizens to charge interest when they lent money and to extract a penalty if the money was not repaid in a timely manner. As most states would not grant citizenship to Jews, this practice became a way for many Jews in Europe to make a living.

When Shakespeare was alive, Jewish people had been exiled from Britain. That is why he set this play in Venice, Italy, where Jews were still allowed to live and work. Depictions of Jews in Shakespeare's era were often negative and cruel. Therefore, the depiction of Shylock was considered fair and balanced when the play was originally produced. However, the anti-Semitism of the play is so intense for modern audiences that Shylock's victimization and humanity is often stressed more than his selfishness and harshness.

A story very similar to *The Merchant of Venice* was an Italian story called *Il Pecorone*. It was composed by Ser Giovanni in 1378 and was still in print in Italian in 1558. However, no English version has been found. The earlier Italian story has many of the same elements as Shakespeare's version. A kind uncle borrows money from a Jew to enable his nephew to woo a rich and beautiful woman who lives in Belmonte. The agreement is that if the money is not repaid, then the uncle will allow a pound of flesh to be taken from any part of his body. And so it happens that when it comes time to repay the Jew, the uncle cannot do so. The young woman comes dressed as a lawyer and asks the Jew to take a handsome sum of money instead of the pound of flesh, but the Jew refuses. Just before the pound of flesh is taken, the woman declares that if any blood is shed the Jew will be killed. The Jew then asks for the original settlement, only to be told that he must take the pound of flesh and face the penalty. In

place as well. Props were few and large: a table, a chariot, gallows, a bed, or a throne.

However, the audience in Shakespeare's plays expected a spectacle for the price of admission. Therefore, there were many devices to produce a gasp from the audience. For example, a device in the loft of the theater could raise and lower actors so that they could play gods, ghosts, or other unusual characters. Additionally, a trapdoor in the stage offered a chance for a quick appearance or disappearance. The actors could suggest a beheading or hanging with various illusions on the stage. Sound effects suggesting thunder, horses, or war were common. Music was important, and drums and horns were often played.

Most important to the sense of spectacle were the costumes worn by the actors. These were elaborate, colorful, and very expensive. Therefore, they often purchased these outfits from servants who had inherited the clothes from their masters, or from hangmen, who received the clothes of their victims as payment for their services.

Though Shakespeare's stage directions are sparse, definition of a few key terms will be helpful for the reader. The following is a brief glossary of stage directions commonly found in Shakespeare's plays.

Selected Glossary of Stage Directions in Shakespeare's Plays

Above: an indication that the actor speaking from above is on a higher balcony or other scaffold that is higher than the other actors

Alarum: a stage signal, which calls the soldiers to battle; usually trumpets, drums, and shouts

Aside: words spoken by the actor so the audience overhears but the other actors on the stage do not. An aside may also be spoken to one other actor so that the others on stage do not overhear.

Calls within: a voice offstage that calls to a character on the stage

Curtains: Curtains were fabrics draped around a bed that could be opened or closed for privacy.

Draw: Actors pull their swords from their sheathes.

Enter: a direction for a character to enter the stage. This can be from the audience's right (stage left) or the audience's left (stage right).

Enter Chorus: a direction for an actor to come to the center of the stage and offer some introductory comments, usually in blank verse or rhyming couplets. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Chorus delivers a sonnet, a form of poetry associated with love.

Exeunt: All characters leave the stage, or those characters named leave the stage.

Exit: One character leaves the stage.

Flourish: A group of trumpets or other horn instruments play a brief melody.

Have at: Characters begin to fight, usually with swords.

Pageant: a show or spectacle of actors in unusual costumes, usually without words

Prologue: an introduction spoken by the Chorus that gives an overview to the audience and invites them into the play or scene

Retires: A character slips away.

Sennet: a series of notes sounded on brass instruments to announce the approach or departure of a procession

Singing: a signal for the actor to sing the following lines as a tune

Within: voices or sounds occurring offstage but heard by the audience

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Introduction to Shakespeare

A Brief Biography of William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 to John and Mary Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. His birthday is celebrated on April 23. This is memorable because April 23 is also the day Shakespeare died in 1616.

Shakespeare was the eldest of nine children in his family, six of whom survived to adulthood.

William Shakespeare's father worked with leather and became a successful merchant early in his career. He held some relatively important government offices. However, when William was in his early teens, his father's financial position began to slide due to growing debt. After many years, John Shakespeare's fortunes and respect were restored, but records indicate that the years of debt and lawsuits were very stressful.

Historians assume that young Will went to school and took a rigorous course of study including Latin, history, and biblical study. In 1582, at the age of eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, who was three months pregnant.

Studies of Elizabethan family life indicate that Anne's situation was not unusual since it was accepted that the engagement period was as legally binding as the marriage. The couple had a daughter, Susanna, followed by twins, Hamnet and Judith. Not much is known about Shakespeare during the next seven years, but his name is listed as an actor in London by 1592. This was a difficult time for the theater

because measures to prevent the spread of the plague regularly closed the theaters.

Between 1594 and 1595, Shakespeare joined the Chamberlain's Men as a playwright and actor. The acting company featured actor Richard Burbage, and they were a favorite of Queen Elizabeth I. During this time, Shakespeare was writing such plays as *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Even though Shakespeare was enjoying great success by the time he was 32, it was dampened by the death of his son, Hamnet, in 1596. Soon after, Shakespeare refocused on his home in Stratford where he bought an estate called New Place, with gardens, orchards, and barns in addition to the main home. He still maintained a home in London near the theater.

In 1599, Shakespeare wrote *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, and *As You Like It*. The Globe Playhouse was up and running, with Shakespeare a 10 percent owner. This means that he was able to earn 10 percent of any show's profits. This business position helped him solidify his wealth.

In 1603, Shakespeare's reputation earned his acting troop the sponsorship of James I, who requested one play performance per month. Their name changed to the King's Men. By this time, Shakespeare had written and performed in almost all of his comedies and histories. He was proclaimed the finest playwright in London.



ACTIVITY 1

Introducing the Melancholy Antonio Act one, Scene 1

Background Much like the sad Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*, in this play, the melancholy Antonio listens as his friends try to explain to him why they think he is sad and what he should do to make himself feel better.

Directions Answer the following questions based on the speeches in Act one, Scene 1 to get a sense of what Antonio is like and what might be the cause for his sadness. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. What does Salerio assume is the cause of Antonio's sadness? (lines 8–14)
2. According to lines 23–40, what occupies Salerio's thoughts most of the time?
3. According to lines 41–45, why is Antonio not overly concerned about his money and investments?
4. According to Solanio, there are two types of extreme personality types. What are they?
5. Besides money, what else does Antonio rule out as the reason for his melancholy?
6. When Gratiano enters, he gives a rather long speech about the foolishness of wallowing in melancholy, and he describes one type of man that really irritates him. In your own words, describe this type that Gratiano disdains.
7. When Bassanio enters, the focus shifts to his worries and problems, which are primarily financial in nature. What does he ask of Antonio?
8. What does Antonio's willingness to help his friend (repeatedly) show about him?

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ACTIVITY 2

Portia's Assessment of Her Suitors

Act one, Scene 2

Background On his deathbed, Portia's father created a riddle for her future suitors: whoever correctly chooses between caskets of gold, silver, and lead wins her hand in marriage. In this scene, Portia discusses her many suitors with her maid.

Directions Paraphrase what Portia has to say about each potential suitor.

	Portia's Assessment of Suitors
Neapolitan Prince	
Count Palatine	
Monsieur Le Bon	
Falconbridge (English Baron)	
Duke of Saxony's Nephew	
Bassanio	

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ACTIVITY 3

Introducing Shylock

Act one, Scene 3

Background Shylock is one of Shakespeare's most controversial characters; some declare him a villain and some a misunderstood hero.

Directions Shylock has many lines in this scene that provide insight into his character. Answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. What is a good man to Shylock? (lines 14–17)
2. Why won't Shylock eat with Bassanio and Antonio? (lines 29–34)
3. Why does Shylock dislike Antonio? (lines 36–40)
4. How does Shylock plan to get the better of Antonio? (lines 41–47)
5. What is the penalty if Antonio is unable to repay Shylock within three months? (lines 140–148)
6. How does Shylock make light of this penalty? (lines 157–167)
7. After this scene, would you characterize Shylock as a good or bad man? Why?

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ACTIVITY 4

Character Assessment

Act one

Background This first act provides insight into the essential values of each of the characters.

- Directions**
1. First, decide how important the following values are to Antonio, Bassanio, and Shylock by giving each a rating of 1 to 4, 1 being least important and 4 most important.
 2. Find a line from Act one that supports your assessment, and write a brief explanation. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

Values	Antonio	Bassanio	Shylock
Loyalty/ Friendship	Rating: Line/explanation:	Rating: Line/explanation:	Rating: Line/explanation:
Wealth	Rating: Line/explanation:	Rating: Line/explanation:	Rating: Line/explanation:
Happiness	Rating: Line/explanation:	Rating: Line/explanation:	Rating: Line/explanation:
Honesty	Rating: Line/explanation:	Rating: Line/explanation:	Rating: Line/explanation:
Appearances	Rating: Line/explanation:	Rating: Line/explanation:	Rating: Line/explanation:

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ACTIVITY 5

Review

Directions Based on the events of the first act, decide whether the following statements are true or false. Write T for true and F for false on the line provided.

- _____ 1. Antonio is worried about his loan from Shylock.
- _____ 2. Bassanio forced Antonio to borrow money from Shylock.
- _____ 3. Portia's suitors must defeat each other in hand-to-hand combat in order to win her hand.
- _____ 4. Antonio has two months in which to repay Shylock.
- _____ 5. Shylock is a Christian.
- _____ 6. At the beginning of the play, Bassanio is depressed but doesn't know why.
- _____ 7. The woman Bassanio wishes to court lives in Belmont.
- _____ 8. Nerissa has many suitors.
- _____ 9. Shylock and Antonio are old friends.
- _____ 10. A pound of flesh will be taken from Bassanio if he doesn't repay Antonio's loan for him.

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