

English 202 in Italy

[Official course title: English 280-1]
World Literature I
Dr. Gavin Richardson

Text 2:

Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

EDITION: Any; the Folger Shakespeare is recommended.

READING JOURNAL:

In a separate document, write 3-5 thoughtful sentences in response to each of these reading journal prompts:

1. Act 1 scene 3 features the crucial loan scene. At this point, do you think Shylock is serious about the pound of flesh he demands as collateral for Antonio's loan for Bassanio? Why or why not?
2. In 2.3. Jessica leaves her (Jewish) father for her (Christian) husband. Does her desertion create sympathy for Shylock? Or do we cheer her action? Is her "conversion" an uplifting one?
3. Shylock's speech in 3.1.58-73 may be the most famous of the entire play. After reading this speech, review Ann Barton's comments on the performing of Shylock and write a paragraph on what you think Shylock means to Shakespeare: "Shylock is a closely observed human being, not a bogeyman to frighten children in the nursery. In the theatre, the part has always attracted actors, and it has been played in a variety of ways. Shylock has sometimes been presented as the devil incarnate, sometimes as a comic villain gabbling absurdly about ducats and daughters. He has also been sentimentalized as a wronged and suffering father nobler by far than the people who triumph over him. Roughly the same range of interpretation can be found in criticism on the play. Shakespeare's text suggests a truth more complex than any of these extremes."
4. In the trial scene of Act 4, why won't Shylock accept the 6,000 ducats Bassanio offers, or the 30,000 pledged later? Given his character of greed, why does he insist on taking a pound of Antonio's (economically useless) flesh?
5. With Act 5, the lovers are reunited and all is well; Bassanio and Portia leave to consummate their marriage, and Antonio is once again alone. Is Antonio returned to a position of sadness and loneliness in which we found him in Act 1? Explain your answer.

QUIZ STUDY SHEET: You will have a 10-question matching quiz based on the information found on the study sheet below.

William Shakespeare

The Merchant of Venice

Pre-Reading Study and Information Sheet

Genre & date: Comedy, ca. 1596.

Plot Synopsis (adapted from <http://www.sonyclassics.com/merchantofvenice/flash.html>). In addition to knowing the basic plotline, you will be responsible for knowing the important characters in **boldface** below.

“Set in the lavish era of 16th century Venice, Shakespeare’s most powerful play follows the interlocking lives of a captivating assortment of classic Shakespearean characters.

***Bassanio** is the typical Elizabethan lover and aristocrat: young, impulsive and romantic whose lavish lifestyle has left him deep in debt and desperately in love with the fair **Portia of Belmont**. But to win her hand, he must prove his worth. To prove his worth, he must not only raise money he doesn’t have, but he must also correctly solve the riddle of matrimony bequeathed by Portia’s late father.*

*Determined to call Portia his bride, Bassanio employs the support of his dear friend **Antonio**, a successful merchant residing in Venice. But with no word from his trading fleet, Antonio is short of resources and must use his credit for a loan. This loan comes in the form of **Shylock**, a Jewish loan shark.*

Yet, all is not as it appears between Antonio and Shylock. Antonio has publicly denounced Shylock and other Jews for their practice of usury (loaning money at exorbitant rates of interest), and consistently hurts their business by offering loans with no interest. This set of circumstances, along with the persecution of Jews at the time, has made Shylock spiteful towards Antonio, who jumps at the chance to have the merchant in his debt.

However, this time Shylock decides to offer his loan at no interest; instead, he demands a pound of flesh from Antonio if his loan is not repaid on time. Confident that Bassanio will return his good fortune three times over, Antonio agrees to the unusual terms.

*As Bassanio travels to Belmont with **Gratiano** to woo his beloved, other events threaten to ruin his quest before it is fulfilled. Portia, in the company of her lady-in-waiting **Nerissa**, has already been welcoming potential suitors, who at any time could solve the mystery of her father’s will which states that she must marry the man who correctly chooses one of three caskets.*

*Then Antonio’s trade ships fail to produce any profit for the merchant. And, **Shylock’s daughter Jessica** impulsively elopes with Bassanio’s friend **Lorenzo**; in the process, she escapes with a fair amount of her father’s personal wealth.*

Upon hearing of his friend’s set of circumstances, Bassanio leaves Belmont and rushes home to find a solution to Antonio’s predicament. But before Bassanio can arrive home, the loan is

declared in default and the distraught and semi-deranged Shylock demands his pound of flesh from Antonio in order to fully seek his revenge.

The Duke, the reigning power in the city, has called a legal expert to the court to proceed over these extraordinary hearings. Is Antonio truly in default on his loan? Is the payment that Shylock is asking for justified? Can Bassanio return in time to save Antonio? In true Shakespearean fashion, all is not as it seems in a story wrought with morality, revenge, redemption and love."

Critical Terms: usury: Loaning money at exorbitant rates of interest, a practice condemned by Christian society during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Dr. Roderigo Lopez: A Portuguese Jewish physician accused of plotting to poison Queen Elizabeth. The case of Lopez heightened Anti-Semitic feeling in Shakespeare's England. Lopez was hanged, drawn, and quartered in London in 1594.

Critical Themes:

- ❖ Two ways of reading Shakespeare:
 1. The thoroughly Renaissance Shakespeare: A man of his time in his promotion of Anti-Semitic attitudes.
 2. The postmodern Shakespeare: A man whose play exposes the flaws of his society; his play show the evils of his age and he knows it. We should apply the dramatic principle. *Shakespeare* is not anti-Semitic, the *Venetian culture* is.

Which one is correct?

- ❖ Dante on the genre distinction of comedy:

The title of the work is, "Here beginneth the *Comedy* of Dante Alighieri, a Florentine by birth, not by character." To understand which, be it known that *comedy* is derived from *comus*, "a village," and *oda*, which is "song"; whence comedy is, as it were, "rustic song." So comedy is a certain kind of poetic narration differing from all others. It differs, then, from tragedy in its content, in that tragedy begins admirably and tranquilly, whereas its end or exit is foul and terrible; and it derives its name from *tragus*, which is a "goat" and *oda*, as though to say "goat-song," that is fetid like a goat, as appears from Seneca in his tragedies; whereas comedy introduces some harsh complication, but brings its matter to a prosperous end, as appears from Terence, in his comedies. And hence certain writers, on introducing themselves, have made it their practice to give the salutation: "I wish you a tragic beginning and a comic end." They likewise differ in their mode of speech, tragedy being exalted and sublime, comedy lax and humble....**And hence it is evident that the title of the present work is "the *Comedy*." For if we have respect to its content, at the beginning it is horrible and fetid, for it is hell; and in the end it is prosperous, desirable, and gracious, for it is paradise.** If we have respect to the method of speech the method is lax and humble, for it is the vernacular speech in which very women communicate.

- Note: Al Pacino plays Shylock in a lovely film version of this play (2004); rated R for a few naughty bits in director Michael Radford's attempt to depict a decadent Christian Venice. In our library media center.