Bloom's Literature

How to Write about Merchant of Venice

Reading to Write

Though *The Merchant of Venice* is dominated by the figure of Shylock, and the tragedy of the Holocaust and continuing discord in the Middle East make the play's discussion of Judaism especially resonant to modern audiences, *Merchant* also offers many other exciting prospects for the writer. The play has a deep cast of characters whose actions and motives are intriguing. It functions as a snapshot of changing economic realities in early modern Europe. Moreover, it has significant formal consequences for Shakespeare's future career, especially his comedies.

*Merchant* also has one of the dramatist's finest set pieces. You could write an essay entirely about the trial scene of act 4, scene 1, analyzing the virtuoso display of dramatic action and characterization on display, as Shylock pushes ahead with his claim on Antonio's flesh, while the entire judicial and political authority of Venice presses back against him. Although Shylock trusts in nothing more than the letter of the law, you could construct an essay by observing the ways in which the accumulated machinery of the state works consciously and deliberately against him. Particularly worth noting and incorporating into your essay are any shifts in sympathy you sense as the scene progresses: While you might begin the scene resenting Shylock for his unrelenting malice, by the end of the scene a modern audience might find it difficult to take any pleasure in the thwarting of Shylock and the punishment meted out to him. The scene concentrates the play's action, skillfully condensing so many of the work's core themes and concerns. As a result, a close reading of it will allow you to synthesize many broader elements of the play. What might such an essay consider? Here is perhaps the most memorable and often-quoted passage from the scene. Portia, disguised as a learned doctor called to adjudicate on the dispute between Shylock and Antonio, lectures Shylock on the need to be compassionate and release Antonio from the bond.

The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.
… It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest to God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
To mitigate the justice of thy plea,
Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there. (4.1.179–200)

You might begin by observing an obvious point about the passage as a whole: It is profoundly eloquent. Without question, the speaker, Portia, is a remarkably intelligent and assertive woman. As these are probably Portia's most recognizable lines of the play, a close reading of them could be a starting point for character analysis. Besides displaying rhetorical skill, consider what these words say about their speaker. Traditionally, Portia was viewed as one of Shakespeare's most admirable heroines, but her currency dipped in the late 20th century. Why? Compare this speech to Portia's treatment of Shylock moments later. Also, what does it say about the socially constructed limits of Portia's authority that she must speak these words disguised as a young man?

The opening lines of the speech praise the value of mercy, implicitly contrasting this value with Shylock's remorseless determination to execute Antonio. But as Portia gives her argument a religious turn, she sets up another contrast that goes straight to the heart of the play's action. Comparing Christian to Jew in Shakespeare's Venice might make for a very strong essay indeed. Here Portia proposes a Christian model of mercy, acknowledging that no person can be saved without the ultimate mercy of God,
thus urging compassion among humans in their worldly affairs. If this sentiment is supposed to represent the Christian species of forgiveness, what is implied (or assumed) about the Jewish model? Commentators have traditionally viewed this as a conflict between two interpretations of law: the Christian one focusing on the spirit of the law, with the Jewish one bound to the letter of the law. You might look for evidence of this dualism throughout the play. However, it might be wise to ask if this really is the full extent of what Shakespeare has in mind. After all, such a theological statement would be little more than an eloquent voicing of stereotypes. To look for more than this in the play, you should contextualize Portia's speech, locating it within the scene and within the play as a whole. After all, the most important thing to seek out in this play might be irony. Look for ways in which the Christian characters of the play say one thing and do another; they are so often guilty of the same practices for which they hate and condemn Shylock. Portia's speech here is followed almost immediately by an extremely harsh and merciless punishment of Shylock, one that both denies him his bond and strips him of his identity and dignity. From this perspective, Portia's famous speech on mercy is a fake, a cruel trick no less disguised than its speaker.

Finally, this speech raises an important point about Shakespeare's authorial presence and intention. It is, of course, impossible for us to know what the dramatist wanted to say, what he thought and felt. Nonetheless, for centuries writers have spent ink and paper attempting to do just that. The Merchant of Venice provides you with a truly magnificent opportunity to participate in this time-honored tradition. To what extent are the lines quoted above—and others like them throughout the play—ironic, or to what degree do we as modern readers and writers insert that irony because we wish to find it? In other words, what balance should we strike between what we hope is the spirit and what we can see is the letter of the play?

**Topics and Strategies**

Every essay requires a focus; you cannot write about everything in the play at once. The section on how to write an essay shows you a number of ways to turn a focus into a thesis, observations into arguments. However, the starting point is nearly always finding an initial focus and making first observations. What follows is a discussion of The Merchant of Venice geared toward helping you make the most of the budding ideas you will have as you read the play. By no means should you feel limited to these topics, however.

**Themes**

When approaching some of the themes in this play, first look to see if Shakespeare appears to make the theme you are considering a point of contrast between Shylock and the Christians of Venice. Next, you might strongly consider asking whether any simple dichotomy (Christian mercy versus Jewish cruelty, for example) is undermined by the actions of Bassanio, Portia, and the others.

Other themes, of course, will not necessarily invite that exact approach. However, there is far more to this play than meets the eye. For example, think about the theme of love in The Merchant of Venice. On the surface, this play would appear to celebrate love and make use of it to shape the comic movement. But look closely at each of the couplings in this play, and you may find that the relationships in each case have question marks lingering over them. You might also extend your essay to cover different forms of love, such as the relationship between Shylock and Jessica (a potential source of sympathy for Shylock) or Antonio's love for and devotion to his friend Bassanio. Are any idealized forms of love present in this play? Or, once you have scraped at the surface with a pointed reading of the text, can you see this as a text governed by cynicism and irony rather than romance and love? Indeed, it might even be possible to turn the answer to this question into a thesis statement. An essay assessing the role of irony as a theme might provide you with a focused way of discussing Merchant as a whole while still allowing wide discussion of the play's characters and themes.

**Sample Topics**

1. **Money and wealth:** Does money mean different things to the Venetian Christians than it does to Shylock? How much of the play's action is motivated by money?

   For many critics, money is what makes the world of Shakespeare's Venice go round. It seems to motivate many of the choices made by characters, from Bassanio's quest for Portia to Lancelot Gobo's desire for a better livery. Look for ways in which money and wealth structure other characters and their actions. Assess, too, whether there are differences in how money is valued and treated between Belmont and Venice. What does money mean to Shylock? Look for parts of the text...
that hint at other factors motivating him, even while money continues to play a central role in his character. What does the play seem to say about usury, the act of charging interest on a loan? Compare Shylock's zeal for money to the Christians' financial dealings. Also, you might try to connect the theme of wealth and money to another reoccurring motif, that of "hazarding," or gambling. These two closely related themes overlap in parts of the text, especially the casket scenes in which Portia tests her suitors. Love and business perhaps become connected by the notion of gambling and risking all, just as Antonio does first with his ships and then with his dangerous bond to Shylock on Bassanio's behalf.

2. Fidelity: This is a play that seems obsessed with bonds of different kinds, as well as the consequences of not honoring those bonds. What does the play say about faithfulness? How might this theme influence your evaluations of other thematic areas of the play?

Such an essay might establish a connection between the action surrounding Shylock's bond and the subplot of Portia's ring in act 5. While the final act can seem at first glance unnecessary, a strong case could be made for its integral place in the play. Look for interconnecting issues raised by the two trials, that of Shylock in court and Bassanio in Belmont. In this essay, you might let the unexpected connection between the two plot lines suffice as your thesis, allowing room in your essay to show and explain similarities and meaningful points of difference. For example, the marriage bond represented by Portia's ring is obviously one that should be kept, while Shylock's bond is one that the play wants to see broken. Perhaps you might expand your essay to include other signs and symbols of faithfulness, from Jessica's sale of Shylock's wedding ring to the statements of religious devotion that reappear throughout the text; you might certainly extend the discussion to the infidelity of the Venetian Christians to their much-professed and flaunted moral creed. Finally, try to cement your discussion together by asserting what faithfulness or fidelity finally means in the play. Are there any faithful characters? What are they faithful to? Does the play value fidelity?

Character

All of the main characters in this play deserve and can support their own essays. While not drawn with the psychological complexity of Macbeth or Hamlet, for example, the characters in The Merchant of Venice are nonetheless fascinating, not least because of the gap that exists between so many of their statements and actions. Take Bassanio, for example. An essay on this character might turn on the question of his motives: Why does he pursue Portia? Is he a gold-digging playboy or a romantic hero in the traditional vein? Begin by outlining what you learn of Bassanio's past in the opening acts. Assess his relationship with Antonio and closely examine his reasons for seeking Portia (look, for example, at his ordering of Portia's qualities in 1.2.161–76). Look for irony, too, in Bassanio's victory in the casket scene. What is the relationship between the moral of the lead casket and what is known of Bassanio's history and character?

An equally rich essay could be written about Shylock's daughter, Jessica. Like Bassanio, she is a character we seem asked to admire, but we might not be able to. Such an essay would begin by establishing the relationship between father and daughter, noting Jessica's various complaints but also carefully observing Shylock's treatment of and feeling for his daughter. Then ask yourself what motivates Jessica to elope with Lorenzo, sifting through her escape scene to assess again the role of money and wealth. You might proceed by looking at how Jessica's flight influences your sympathies for Shylock as he discovers her loss (and the loss of his stolen money).

Character study, then, even of the minor characters, seems to be a productive way to approach Merchant. Many students, however, will choose to focus on one of the three main characters.

Sample Topics

1. Shylock: How do you view Shylock's character? What are his redeeming features, and how might you assess his function and meaning in Shakespeare's play?

There is so much to say about Shylock that you could very well write a book about him. Indeed, John Gross has done just that with his very readable and well-researched Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy. The first challenge of dealing with Shylock, then, is to focus your essay on a specific aspect of him. One thesis might concentrate on his redeeming characteristics, showing how a man who is clearly the antagonist of the play is also a victim. Once you have established this sympathetic position, the next move might be to show how Shakespeare slots Shylock into his complex system of meaning. Both of these steps might involve pinpointing Shylock's position within the culture and society of Venice.
First, what picture of Shylock emerges in the opening scenes? Look for any evidence of how he is treated and viewed by Venetians, including Antonio. Equally, assess how Shylock views the citizens of Venice. Try to piece together Shylock's philosophy of money and wealth, looking in particular at any justifications he offers for his usury. Consider, too, his domestic life with Jessica. Look very closely here for details that might endear you to Shylock, especially in his response to Jessica's flight. Why does he pursue his revenge against Antonio? How do you feel about him once he has been defeated in the court, stripped of his money and religion?

This final question urges you to reflect on Shylock's function within the play's production of meaning. Try to think why Shakespeare creates such an ambiguous and rounded figure where other lesser artists might have settled for a stock Jew to vilify. This approach puts Shylock at the heart of the play's moral compass, again encouraging you to question the differences between Jew and Christian in Venice.

2. **Antonio**: Why is Antonio marginalized by the play, left out of the comic resolution? What is the cause of his unexplained melancholy voiced in the play's opening line?

Antonio is a somewhat obscure figure who has received considerable critical attention in recent years. Much of that interest has centered on his relationship with Bassanio, as critics have commented on the homosocial nature of his love for the young man. This affection and the despondency caused by Bassanio's quest for a profitable marriage are suggested as the roots of Antonio's famous sadness. If you wished to pursue this aspect of Antonio's character, you might marshal other works of Shakespeare's canon to your side. Shakespeare treats the importance of male friendship in his early play *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, but this idea is more readily available and interestingly rendered in his sonnets and the (coincidentally named) figure of Antonio in *Twelfth Night*. Critics Bruce R. Smith and Valerie Traub have led the way in considering these issues in Renaissance drama, and their work would be of help if you wish to bolster your writing with reference to outside sources.

More traditional approaches to Antonio focus on his financial dealings and what some critics refer to as his martyrdom. Compare Antonio's handling of money to Shylock's. Equally, however, you might find that Antonio can be contrasted to many of the play's characters in other ways, not least by way of his faithfulness to Bassanio. If you can arrive at a distinction or difference that separates Antonio from the other characters, see if you can use this to explain why Shakespeare leaves Antonio noticeably out in the cold as the comic feast of resolution closes the play.

3. **Portia**: While Portia is an admirably strong and intelligent woman, how does she employ these virtues in controversial ways?

Such an essay should unquestionably consider points already discussed in the "Reading to Write" section of this chapter. More than this, however, you might explore the function of Belmont, Portia's home, to which she is symbolically conjoined. Shakespeare's comedies typically feature a "Green World," a setting in which characters escape the rules and logic of the court in order to find themselves and resolve problems that are rooted back in the real world of the city. While Belmont is the Green World of this play, assess whether it serves the typical function of such a setting. How similar or different is Belmont from Venice? Again, the role of money and wealth may be your starting point here.

Finally, look critically at the ring plot that occupies the fifth act. While Portia's trick with the ring and barely veiled threats of infidelity are bawdily funny, how do they further threaten the already compromised comic ending and connect back to themes of trial and fidelity set out by the play earlier?

**History and Context**

As discussed in the "Character" section, a study of Antonio might take your writing down a distinctly historical route. To understand the implications of a homosocial love between Antonio and Bassanio, you must bring to the table more than our 21st-century notions of sexuality. An essay treating this aspect of Antonio or this theme in Shakespeare generally must attempt to understand the historical context. Although historians disagree on how the Renaissance perceived intimate, even sexual relationships between men, it is certain they did understand them differently than we do today. Many argue that the category "homosexual" did not even exist in the Renaissance, and it appears that it was common for some men to speak of a male friendship as idealized, better than a relationship with a woman precisely because it lacked the complicated and potentially ruinous sexual dimension. This theme was of enormous interest to Shakespeare and appears frequently throughout his work, so it is clear that a reading of Antonio might benefit from historical research.
If a character study of Antonio could be redirected by complementary historical research, the theme of money and wealth is unquestionably another essay topic that could likewise benefit. Historians talk of the early modern period as witnessing the birth of what we call capitalism. The way wealth and status were generated changed during Shakespeare's lifetime. Medieval economic practices such as the feudal system receded and were gradually replaced by early free markets. New attitudes to private property and consumerism radically changed the meaning of wealth, and some critics have suggested that in *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare breathes a sigh of disappointment and disapproval with the emerging ethos of capitalism. Find ways in which Shakespeare's play seems to speak out against a culture preoccupied with mercantilism and profit, forging from these a reading of Shakespeare's play as satire or social commentary. Lisa Jardine's excellent book on consumption and business in Renaissance Europe, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance,* is an excellent place to begin research in this area.

**Sample Topic**

1. **Judaism in Renaissance Europe:** Does Shakespeare use *The Merchant of Venice* to condemn anti-Semitism, or at least to challenge some of its harsher commonplaces?

Such an essay would attempt to see Shakespeare's text as social commentary, a document in which the dramatist contemplates the figure of the Jew in his time. Obviously, the important thing here is to recognize that you are no longer treating Shylock as a self-contained character in a self-contained play but as a creation pieced together out of cultural tradition and historic moment. Asking what Shakespeare does with that mix, how he processes the ideas, beliefs, and images of his age, is the key to this essay. James Shapiro's *Shakespeare and the Jews,* a seminal work in this particular field of Shakespeare studies, would make an excellent point of departure for such research.

It will be helpful if you are aware of the literary tradition forming the backdrop to Shakespeare's play. In early modern Europe and earlier, anti-Semitism was rooted in biblical accounts of the death of Christ. It was this perceived blame for Christ's death that spawned popular resentment of Jews and a virile tradition of folk belief and literature peopled by countless variations of the murderous Jew. This culture of hatred can be found even in the works of Chaucer, whose "Prioress' Tale" tells the story of a young Christian boy killed by envious Jews. As is discussed in the "Compare and Contrast" section below, this tradition was alive and well in Shakespeare's day, most visibly in Christopher Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta* (a work certainly at the front of Shakespeare's mind as he wrote *Merchant*).

Though Shakespeare was surrounded by stock representations of Jews, he probably never encountered an actual flesh-and-blood Jewish person. The number of Jews in Shakespeare's England is difficult to estimate but probably numbered only in the low hundreds. Jews had been expelled from English soil in 1290, and the remaining small number was made up mostly of immigrants from southern Europe who did not openly practice their faith. It might seem, then, as though Judaism was hardly a topical matter for Shakespeare to pick up, but Marlowe's play and the arrest and execution of Roderigo Lopez gave the subject contemporary resonance. Lopez was a Jewish doctor accused of plotting to kill Queen Elizabeth, and his traitor's death—hung, drawn, and quartered—in 1594 would have stoked anti-Jewish sentiment enough to make Shakespeare's play very much of the moment.

You might wish to investigate this cultural and historic context further, assessing Shakespeare's response to it. An essay could usefully be structured by a provocatively simple question: Is this an anti-Semitic play? You should answer this as you wish, but a safe path to steer might be the predictably qualified answer "yes and no." As many commentators have noted, it would have been impossible for Shakespeare to discard the intellectual baggage of his time entirely; look for ways in which Shylock retains some of the elements of the stock Jew, and examine how Shakespeare's play employs them to bring paying customers into his theater. But equally seek ways in which Shakespeare, even if he does not reject the anti-Semitic tradition of his culture, at least reconsiders and revises it. Your task as writer here is to catalog your evidence on either side but then assess the balance that Shakespeare strikes.

**Form and Structure**

*The Merchant of Venice* is a comedy, but an essay exploring the problems of this definition might be extremely rewarding. Most critics do not label *Merchant* as one of the "problem comedies," a small group of later comedies that explicitly and innovatively challenge the meaning of comic drama. In many ways, however, *The Merchant of Venice* anticipates the challenges to comic
form offered by later plays such as *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*. When Shakespeare challenges comedy, the approach he seems to favor most is to have all the required sweet ingredients of comedy present yet still produce a bitter flavor. One of Shakespeare's problem comedies may well end in marriage, as a comedy should, and avoid death as it must, yet its resolutions appear intentionally incomplete, its air tainted by the breath of tragedy.

**Sample Topic**

**1. The Limits of comedy in *The Merchant of Venice*:** Despite the comic closure of the play, does *Merchant* function successfully as a comedy? What elements of the play question or hinder its comic movement, even after the union of lovers in marriage?

Such an essay might start by looking at the end of the play, the moment in which a comedy should offer resolution and hope. Regardless of the appearance of unity, look for sources of discord and dissent in the final acts. The most obvious character to start with might be Shylock, but note also how Antonio, despite the return of his ships, seems excluded from the festivities at the close of the play. How are these two figures marginalized? Consider the impact of the ring plot on the comic movement as well. While it is funny, its consequences are far from comic in the formal sense of that word. Think about how Portia's threats of infidelity undercut the reconciling comic power of marriage. The thing to consider as you write this essay is effect. How does this play, regardless of its comic promise, finally manage to spread a little of Antonio's enigmatic sadness to its audience?

**Compare and Contrast Essays**

As discussed above, one of the most prominent approaches to this play, the weighing of Shylock against the Venetian Christians, inherently takes the form of compare and contrast. Be alert to the way Shakespeare draws parallels where audiences would have only expected distinctions. An essay comparing Belmont to Venice might also encourage you to find unexpected similarities. Look for ways in which the magical, carefree Belmont is as focused on money and superficiality as Venice, the city that embodied luxurious excess and wealth for the early moderns. Approaching comparison and contrast from a character perspective, you might look for yet more unanticipated common ground between Shylock and Antonio. While the play hinges on Shylock's antipathy for Antonio, what do they have in common? Look for ways in which they are both cogs in the wheel of Venetian capitalism, and perhaps explain how both characters seem to lead marginal lives despite their wealth. Yet another approach might be to look elsewhere in Shakespeare's canon for related works. *The Tempest* and *Othello* are major plays that also treat "otherness," exploring the confrontation between white Europeans and people of different religions or races. Such an essay might turn on a comparison of Shylock with Othello or Caliban, arguing as you see fit for similarities or differences in Shakespeare's level of sympathy for these characters. However, perhaps the most attractive compare and contrast opportunity would be to link *The Merchant of Venice* to a text by another great playwright of the English Renaissance.

**Sample Topics**

**1. Comparing Shylock to Christopher Marlowe's Barabas (*The Jew of Malta)*:** While both Shakespeare and Marlowe base plays on a Jewish antagonist, how much do Shylock and Barabas have in common? Despite their differences, how might Shakespeare and Marlowe finally use these central characters from *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Jew of Malta* to create related effects and social commentary?

Marlowe's play came first, so a good approach might be to assess how Shakespeare builds on *The Jew of Malta* to create his play and his representation of Shylock. You might first consider the differences between Barabas and Shylock, some of which should be quite clear. Marlowe seems to rely far more on the stereotypical figure of the villainous Jew, much like the one found in Chaucer's "Prioress' Tale" and countless vulgar ballads and stories (but perhaps he is doing so ironically). Find examples of this tradition in Marlowe's portrait, looking at moments like the slave market scene, in which Barabas boasts of his astonishingly prolific evil. Contrast this to Shylock's altogether subtler villainy. However, you may find a few ways in which Barabas is less stereotypical. For example, critics have observed that while Shylock earns his money through usury, Barabas has earned his great wealth primarily through long-distance business ventures like Antonio's. Other distinctions can be found, for example, in the relationships Barabas and Shylock have with their daughters, Abigail and Jessica.

Having found similarities or differences, you might turn to a consideration of what effect each dramatist seeks through his
central Jewish figure. Look especially at how both Marlowe and Shakespeare set up divisions between Jewish and Christian communities that essentially become engines for satire and comparison. Although vastly different, what might connect, say, Ferneze in Marlowe's play with Bassanio in Shakespeare's?

2. **Contrasting Shakespeare's play to Michael Radford's film adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* (2004):** What strategies does Radford use in adapting Shakespeare's play? What are the most significant interpretive moves made by the film, and what are the effects of these choices?

With its star cast and lavish production, Radford's film adaptation of the play will surely feature regularly in classroom discussions of *Merchant* for a good many years to come. While it is faithful to the play to a great extent, it does offer some interpretations beyond the text, primarily through visual additions to the original text. One of the great opportunities of cinematic adaptations are the shots that, without adding a word to the dialogue in Shakespeare's play, can radically alter the play. Pay close attention to such moves made by Radford. For a start, what is the effect of staging Antonio's spitting on Shylock, only mentioned in the play? Why does Radford show a number of early scenes, entirely absent from Shakespeare's play, of Christian victimization of Jews in Venice? Such an essay might reflect, too, on the visibly eroticized relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. Most important, however, think about the effect and meaning of the final montage. Consider the effect of shots showing Shylock and Antonio alone as the play closes, but especially think about what might be Radford's most daring visual invention: a closing shot of Jessica and the ring she was rumored to have sold for a monkey. What implications does this proof she did not sell the ring have for Jessica's character? Try to characterize early in your essay, as your thesis, the governing logic or pattern of Radford's interpretive choices in *The Merchant of Venice.*

**Further Information**


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