

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

1. As you know, the action in many of Shakespeare's plays occurs in two different places, each representing a cluster of habits, expectations, behaviors, values, and so on. Venice and Belmont, like Rome and the land of the Goths, Padua and Petruchio's house, and Athens and the forest, represent not just different but opposing worlds. The important parameter in the opposition between *Dream's* Athens and its forest, for example, was "degree of rationality" (lots in Athens, just about none in the forest); what are the important parameters here? What are the main differences? Describe the two worlds, the places they contain (mostly outdoors in Venice, for example, and indoors in Belmont), the kind of activity that takes place in them, and so on; notice who comes from each—and who crosses between them, in which direction, and why.
2. Despite the differences, however, there are some "givens" or start-up conditions which characterize both worlds. For example, notice the opening lines in our first glimpse of each:

ANTONIO: In sooth, I know not why I am so sad (1.1.1).

PORTIA: By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aware of this world (1.2.1)

What is the relation between Venetian sadness and Belmontian world-weariness? Who suffers the most from this? Who escapes, oblivious? What are the causes for sadness? The cures? What do we make of the fact that both the melancholy Antonio and the weary Portia love Bassanio? That both of them oppose Shylock and his "merry" bond?

3. Shakespeare has a gift for making even minor characters vivid and interesting. Consider Gratiano. Note his way of talking, any characteristics an actor might want to emphasize, any changes he might go through in the course of the play. Notice everything he says, everything he does; think about his name; think about the scenes in which he turns up. How does his character relate to the major characters in the play?
4. Who is Portia? The feminine, restrained-by-her-father's-will, obedient young woman who falls helplessly in love with Bassanio? Or is she the tough-minded pragmatist, daughter of Cato, who presides over the trial? The "school-girl" who gives herself and everything she has to Bassanio—or the bitch who makes Bassanio squirm afterwards for giving her ring away? How do the multiple potentials in Portia's role work together or against each other?
5. And what about Bassanio? Is he the "school boy" he compares himself to when sponging on Antonio? The love-sick "Jason" setting out to win Portia? (By the way, would he have fallen in love with Portia if she had been poor? Brunette?) The "Hercules" who rescues Portia? The vocal but useless looker-on at the trial?

The chastened husband at the end? Is this going to be a good marriage?

6. Shylock has been played as a comic butt with a red wig and a fake nose, as a sinister villain, as an innocent scapegoat, and as a tragic hero. Which is truest to the play? In answering, you should decide what exactly are the characteristics which identify him as different from the other Venetians. (Think about his way of talking, his attitude toward music, his idea of fun, and so on, as well as his attitude toward money.) He is in fact the opposite in every way of the central Venetian, Antonio. Why is the play called *The Merchant of Venice* and not *The Jew of Venice*? Do Shylock and Antonio have anything in common?
7. There are other “Others” in this play as well. Portia (of all people!) makes fun of national Others when she mocks her foreign suitors; one of those suitors, the Prince of Morocco, is a racial Other. And Jessica and Portia represent the gendered Other, women subject to patriarchal fathers with strong “wills” who try to arrange their marriages. Consider how Shakespeare represents the various attitudes towards these Others.
8. Portia’s would-be lovers must choose among three caskets, each identified by (1) a type of metal, and (2) a verbal message attached to it. How are the two related? How is each suitor’s choice appropriate to his character? What is it about Bassanio that allows him to choose correctly? (or does Portia give him a hint in the song? Notice what the song says and what its opening rhyming sound is)
9. Act 5 is in some ways rather strange. Look at the lovers cited by the lovers Lorenzo and Jessica: are they appropriate figures to preside over their declarations of love to one another? After their exchange we hear music and a discussion of the powers of music (remember when music was mentioned earlier in the play!): what function does this have? And what about Portia’s little exchange with Nerissa, which follows next, about candles and moons, substitutes and kings, and things that “by season, season’d are” (5.1.107)?
10. What does the final ring scene add? The play could have ended with the trial scene—all the couples have gotten together and Antonio has escaped from Shylock’s knife. This feels like closure already; so why doesn’t Shakespeare close? Why does the play end with a bawdy pun?