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This Study Guide was written by Christie Beckham, edited by Linda Ford and Katherine Stinson, with contributions from students in Mr. Flieger’s Shakespeare Class at the International School of the Americas, San Antonio, TX as part of our Shakes Alive! Program, funded by the Texas Commission on the Arts and the Cowden Foundation, and with selected excerpts from the public domain.

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The Classic Theatre’s mission is to build a professional theatre that inspires passionate involvement in a shared theatrical experience and to create a source of pride for our community.

JUST FOR STUDENTS: Join our AIM High Internship Program!

AIM High offers total immersion in design, technical production and acting through hands-on experience working on our productions during the 2014-2015 Season with professional theatre artists and technicians.

Email Director of Education Christie Beckham for more information: Christie@classictheatre.org

AIM High intern Renelle Wilson (far right) onstage with the cast of Classic Theatre of San Antonio’s award-winning production of Scapin by Moliere, 2013.
SYNOPSIS

Antonio, a Venetian merchant, complains to his friends of a melancholy that he cannot explain. His friend Bassanio is desperately in need of money to court Portia, a wealthy heiress who lives in the city of Belmont. Bassanio asks Antonio for a loan in order to travel in style to Portia’s estate. Antonio agrees, but is unable to lend Bassanio the money himself because his own money is invested in a number of trade ships that are still at sea. Antonio suggests that Bassanio secure a loan from one of the city’s moneylenders and name Antonio as the loan’s guarantor. In Belmont, Portia expresses sadness over the terms of her father’s will, which stipulates that she must marry the man who correctly chooses one of three caskets. None of Portia’s current suitors are to her liking, and she and her lady-in-waiting, Nerissa, fondly remember a visit paid some time before by Bassanio.

In Venice, Antonio and Bassanio approach Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, for a loan. Shylock nurses a long-standing grudge against Antonio, who has made a habit of berating Shylock and other Jews for their usury, the practice of loaning money at exorbitant rates of interest, and who undermines their business by offering interest-free loans. Although Antonio refuses to apologize for his behavior, Shylock acts agreeably and offers to lend Bassanio three thousand ducats with no interest. Shylock adds, however, that should the loan go unpaid, Shylock will be entitled to a pound of Antonio’s own flesh. Despite Bassanio’s warnings, Antonio agrees. In Shylock’s own household, his servant Launcelot decides to leave Shylock’s service to work for Bassanio, and Shylock’s daughter Jessica schemes to elope with Antonio’s friend Lorenzo. That night, the streets of Venice fill up with revelers, and Jessica escapes with Lorenzo by dressing as his page. After a night of celebration, Bassanio and his friend Gratiano leave for Belmont, where Bassanio intends to win Portia’s hand.

In Belmont, Portia welcomes the Prince of Morocco, who has come in an attempt to choose the right casket to marry her. The Prince studies the inscriptions on the three caskets and chooses the gold one, which proves to be an incorrect choice. In Venice, Shylock is furious to find that his daughter has run away, but rejoices in the fact that Antonio’s ships are rumored to have been wrecked and that he will soon be able to claim his debt. In Belmont, the prince of Aragon also visits Portia. He, too, studies the caskets carefully, but he picks the silver one, which is also incorrect. Bassanio arrives at Portia’s estate, and they declare their love for one another. Despite Portia’s request that he wait before choosing, Bassanio immediately picks the correct casket, which is made of lead. He and Portia rejoice, and Gratiano confesses that he has fallen in love with Nerissa. The couples decide on a double wedding. Portia gives Bassanio a ring as a token of love, and makes him swear
that under no circumstances will he part with it. They are joined, unexpectedly, by Lorenzo and Jessica. The celebration, is cut short by the news that Antonio has indeed lost his ships, and as a result has forfeited his bond to Shylock. Bassanio and Gratiano immediately travel to Venice to try and save Antonio’s life. After they leave, Portia tells Nerissa that they will go to Venice disguised as men.

Shylock ignores the many pleas to spare Antonio’s life, and a trial is called to decide the matter. The Duke of Venice, who presides over the trial, announces that he has sent for a legal expert, who turns out to be Portia disguised as a young Doctor of Law. Portia asks Shylock to show mercy, but he remains inflexible and insists the pound of flesh is rightfully his. Bassanio offers Shylock twice the money due him, but Shylock insists on collecting the bond as it is written. Portia examines the contract and, finding it legally binding, declares that Shylock is entitled to the merchant’s flesh. Shylock ecstatically praises her wisdom, but as he is on the verge of collecting his due, Portia reminds him that he must do so without causing Antonio to bleed, as the contract does not allow him to draw a drop of blood. Trapped by this loophole, Shylock hastily agrees to take Bassanio’s money instead, but Portia insists that Shylock take his bond as written, or nothing at all. Portia informs Shylock that he is guilty of conspiring against the life of a Venetian citizen, which means he must turn over half of his property to the state and the other half to Antonio. The duke spares Shylock’s life and takes a fine instead of Shylock’s property. Antonio also forgoes his half of Shylock’s wealth on two conditions: first, Shylock must convert to Christianity, and second, he must will the entirety of his estate to Lorenzo and Jessica upon his death. Thorougly beaten and shamed, Shylock agrees and takes his leave.

Bassanio, who does not see through Portia’s disguise, showers the young Doctor of Law with thanks, and is eventually pressured into giving Portia the ring with which he promised never to part. Gratiano gives Nerissa, who is disguised as Portia’s clerk, his ring. The two women return to Belmont, where they find Lorenzo and Jessica declaring their love to each other under the moonlight. When Bassanio and Gratiano arrive the next day, their wives accuse them of faithlessly giving their rings to other women. Before the deception goes too far however, Portia reveals that she was, in fact, the law clerk, and both she and Nerissa reconcile with their husbands. Lorenzo and Jessica are pleased to learn of their inheritance from Shylock, and the joyful news arrives that Antonio’s ships have in fact made it back safely. The group celebrates its good fortune.
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564-1616)

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, England, and was baptised a few days later on April 26, 1564. His father, John Shakespeare, was a glove maker and wool merchant and his mother, Mary Arden, was the daughter of a well-to-do landowner. It is likely Shakespeare received a very basic public education.

The next documented event in Shakespeare’s life is his marriage at the age of 18 to Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a local farmer. She was eight years older than him and their first child, Susanna, was born six months after their wedding. Two years later, the couple had twins, Hamnet and Judith, but their son died when he was 11 years old.

Again, a gap in the records leads some scholars to refer to Shakespeare’s life between 1585 and 1592 as ‘the lost years’. By the time he reappears again, mentioned in a London pamphlet, Shakespeare has made his way to London, roughly 100 miles southeast of his hometown, without his family and was already working in the theatre.

As well as belonging to its pool of actors and playwrights, Shakespeare was one of the managing partners of the Lord Chamberlain’s Company (renamed the King’s Company when King James succeeded to the throne), whose actors included the famous Richard Burbage. The company performed at two theatres in the Southwark area of London near the banks of the Thames River - the Globe and the Blackfriars.

Records of Shakespeare’s first plays appear in 1594. His hard work quickly paid off and he began to accumulate some wealth. By 1596 Shakespeare’s father, John, had been granted a coat of arms and it’s probable that Shakespeare had commissioned them, paying the fees himself. A year later he bought New Place, a large house in Stratford.

His earlier plays were mainly histories and comedies such as Henry VI, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Romeo and Juliet and Richard II. By the last years of Queen Elizabeth I’s reign, Shakespeare was well established as a famous poet and playwright and was called upon to perform several of his plays before
the Queen at court. In 1598, the year that *The Merchant of Venice* first premiered on the stage, the author Francis Meres described Shakespeare as England’s greatest writer in comedy and tragedy.

In 1602 Shakespeare’s continuing success enabled him to move to upmarket Silver Street, near where the Barbican is now situated, and he was living here when he wrote some of his greatest tragedies such as ‘Hamlet’, ‘Othello’, ‘King Lear’ and ‘Macbeth’.

Shakespeare spent the last five years of his life in New Place in Stratford. He died on April 23, 1616 at the age of 52 and was buried in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford. He left his property to the male heirs of his eldest daughter, Susanna. He also bequeathed his ‘second-best bed’ to his wife.

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**FACTS ABOUT THE MERCHANT OF VENICE**

- There is no evidence that Shakespeare ever traveled to Venice.
- Although many people feel that Shylock is the central character, ANTONIO is actually “the Merchant of Venice”.
- Shakespeare’s play was influenced by an earlier play by Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*.
- The first law school for women in the United States, founded in 1908, was named Portia Law School after Shakespeare's heroine in *The Merchant of Venice*. In 1969, the school was renamed New England School of Law.
- In Nazi Germany productions of *The Merchant of Venice*, the intermarriage of Jessica and Lorenzo was often omitted.
- During his early years in London, Shakespeare was sued several times for being unable to pay back small loans.

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Portia disguises herself as Balthazar, a young Doctor of Law, in order to help Antonio win his case. Nerissa also disguises herself as a messenger, Stephano. (From the 2005 film version).
THE JEW and ANTI-SEMITISM

1. Antisemitism

prejudice against, hatred of, or discrimination against Jews as a national, ethnic, religious or racial group. A person who holds such positions is called an "antisemite". As Jews are an ethnoreligious group, antisemitism is generally considered a form of racism.

Although Shakespeare created possibly the most famous Jew in English literature, there were virtually no Jews in England during his lifetime. It isn't known whether Shakespeare would have come into contact with anyone who was Jewish. It would also be impossible to surmise how detailed his knowledge of the historical facts about Jews in England was, but fact and myth were certainly handed down through the ages, and it is safe to assume that he would have been aware of his country's historical folklore.

One of the first documented groups of Jews residing in England comes from Oxford in 1075. Eyewitness accounts report that Jews and non-Jews visited each other's houses, indicating that they lived side by side in relative harmony. Jews, however, were not citizens. They were viewed as outsiders, and were often barred from many professions because of their religion. Christians, however, could not lend money with interest, and many Jews earned a lucrative living as usurers (moneylenders). This profession was not a sure path to riches, as debts often had a way of going unpaid. The Jewish lender often had to become his own debt collector, and in trying to regain the debt owed to him, he frequently became the target of resentment. As usury was a profession comprised exclusively of Jews, religion eventually became the focus of much of this bad feeling.

Repressive measures against Jews continued to grow as the century wore on until finally, in 1275, they were forbidden to be money-lenders. With the loss of their primary source of income, and thus their value to the King's coffers, Jews became expendable to the Crown and were expelled from England in 1290, not to be readmitted until 1655.

After the Expulsion, the English view of Jews began to be formed by several myths that grew in popularity through the centuries. The strongest of these myths was undoubtedly that of ritual
murder (or "blood libel"), the most prevalent one being that of Jews kidnapping children at Easter and using them in ritual practices. None of these myths had any basis in fact; instead they stemmed from fear of an unknown culture and, yet, they were regarded as truth by many.

But there was one notorious event which could hardly have escaped Shakespeare's notice. In 1593, a few years before The Merchant of Venice was written, Queen Elizabeth I's physician Roderigo Lopez was accused of trying to poison her. Dr. Lopez was one of a small group of Jews seeking refuge in England during the Spanish Inquisition. Lopez, allegedly in league with King Phillip II of Spain, was convicted of treason. His was a very public execution, and the fact that he was a Jew led to an outbreak of anti-Jewish sentiment in the country. He was taunted by slurs on the scaffold as he died, still proclaiming his innocence.

William Shakespeare, being a man of the theatre, would have been heavily influenced by history and was an exceptionally good businessman with a keen sense of what characters and plots his audiences craved. Negative portrayals of Jews in drama were a long-standing tradition by the time Shakespeare wrote The Merchant of Venice. The Jew seems to have been the guy audiences loved to hate in medieval and Renaissance drama -- the equivalent to Americans' glee at watching the television exploits of the fictional and despicable King Joffrey in the HBO hit series Game of Thrones.

Jews aren't the only minorities in the play. How do the Venetian characters discriminate against the Prince of Morocco?
# CAST OF CHARACTERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Actor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANTONIO, a merchant of Venice</td>
<td>Mark Stringham*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BASSANIO, his friend, suitor to Portia</td>
<td>Nick Lawson*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PORTIA, an heiress</td>
<td>Christie Beckham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHYLOCK, a moneylender of Venice</td>
<td>Allan S. Ross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NERISSA, Portia’s gentlewoman-in-waiting</td>
<td>Allie Perez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRATIANO, friend of Antonio and Bassanio</td>
<td>John Stillwaggon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LORENZO, friend of Antonio and Bassanio, in love with Jessica</td>
<td>Torence B. White</td>
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<tr>
<td>JESSICA, Shylock’s daughter</td>
<td>Susi Lopez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAUNCELOT GOBBO, servant to Shylock and later Bassanio</td>
<td>Dru Barcus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OLD GOBBO, Lancelet’s father</td>
<td>Robert Moritz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SALERIO, friend of Antonio and Bassanio</td>
<td>Dru Barcus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOLANIO, friend of Antonio and Bassanio</td>
<td>John Boyd</td>
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<tr>
<td>HANDMAIDEN, CLERK</td>
<td>Mary Griffith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BALTHASAR, servant to Portia, JAILER, CLERK</td>
<td>Hunter Wulff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>servant to Portia, others</td>
<td>Sidney Murray**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRINCE OF ARAGON, suitor to Portia</td>
<td>John Stillwaggon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRINCE OF MOROCCO, suitor to Portia</td>
<td>Torence B. White</td>
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<tr>
<td>TUBAL, Shylock’s friend</td>
<td>Robert Moritz</td>
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<tr>
<td>The DUKE of Venice</td>
<td>John Boyd</td>
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*Member, Actor’s Equity Association  
**AIM High Intern
## PRODUCTION TEAM,
Classic Theatre of San Antonio

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Matthew Byron Cassi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>Mark McCarver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramaturg</td>
<td>Katherine Stinson**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage Manager</td>
<td>Kaitlyn Muse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tech Director</td>
<td>Rick Clyde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set Design</td>
<td>Allan Ross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costume Design</td>
<td>Diane Malone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lighting Designer</td>
<td>Rick Malone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sound Designer</td>
<td>Rick Malone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prop Master</td>
<td>Diane Malone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composer</td>
<td>Darrin Newhardt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Photographer</td>
<td>sRagnaR fotografi</td>
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</tbody>
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**AIM High Intern**

### STAFF- The Classic Theatre of San Antonio

- Rick Malone, Executive Director, Founding Member
- Diane Malone, Co-Artistic Director, Founding Member
- Allan Ross, Co-Artistic Director, Founding Member
- Christie Beckham, Director of Education
- Joseph Urick, Graphics and Public Relations
- Linda Ford, House Manager/Bookkeeper
- Florence Bunten, Box Office Manager
THEMES of *The Merchant of Venice*

**CHOICE**

In *The Merchant of Venice* characters must choose between lovers, friends, and family, personal comfort and societal norms. The explicit choices, like Portia's casket lottery, provide a frame for the entire play. The game to win Portia's hand is explicitly built on chance and the choice of her suitors. Bassanio is faced with choosing correctly or foregoing his chance to ever have a wife again.

**RACE/INTOLERANCE**

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Judaism and Christianity aren't just religions – they're constructed as racial (and even national) identities as well. In its portrayal of a bloodthirsty Jewish moneylender, the play famously dramatizes 16th century racial stereotypes that are deeply unsettling, especially for modern audiences. While there's no doubt the play depicts anti-Semitism, literary critics are divided over the question of whether or not the play itself endorses racism or is criticizing society for it.

**JUSTICE**

Because Venice's economic stability depends on foreign businessmen like Shylock, the city has laws in place to protect their legal rights. Although the law is on his side when the Jewish moneylender goes to court and demands his "pound of flesh," Shylock is expected to show mercy. Instead, he insists on getting his pound of flesh. Throughout the play, Judaism is associated with the Mosaic code (from Leviticus and Deuteronomy in the Old Testament), with its strict emphasis on justice and following the letter of the law. Christianity, on the other hand, is associated with the New Testament's emphasis on God's mercy and offer of salvation.

**LOVE**

Love in *The Merchant of Venice* comes in a variety of forms. There's love between family members, between friends, and of course, between lovers. Still, love is more notable for its absence than its presence in the play. Love often goes hand in hand with betrayal. Bassanio says he "loves" Portia, but he courts her for her money. At times, the same seems true of Lorenzo's interest in Jessica. Even though he is too gruff to express it, Shylock truly loves his daughter Jessica. When she deserts him, leaving him entirely alone in the world, he is transformed from a mildly grumpy man into an actively malicious one. Women seem happy to give love, but they do so with a shred of cynicism. Antonio clearly loves Bassanio (whether romantically or not), but he ultimately must subordinate this love to Portia's more formal marriage with him. Love is regulated, sacrificed, betrayed, and generally built on rocky foundations in the play.
VOCABULARY

1. **Usurer** - moneylender

2. **Forfeit** - to lose or surrender something, usually with a penalty

3. **Mitigate** - to make less harmful or unpleasant

4. **Render** - to give or supply something

5. **Entreat** - to attempt to persuade

6. **Prodigal** - recklessly wasteful or long absent

7. **Beseech** - to beg for something

8. **Commend** - to praise

9. **Repentance** - a feeling of regret for having done something wrong, with a resolve to do something better in the future.

*From a 1931 American production of The Merchant of Venice that toured the U.S. and Canada.*

*Portia (Christie Beckham) in Classic Theatre’s production.*
LESSON IDEAS/ACTIVITIES

BEFORE THE SHOW:

- *The Merchant of Venice* addresses themes that students will find familiar, despite the troubling aspects of the plot; both the anti-Semitism directed at Shylock and Portia's marriage predicament (she is forced to submit to the lottery set up by her father) deserve careful discussion. As a pre-viewing activity, list the play's themes on the board, including: CHOICE, RACE/INTOLERANCE, JUSTICE and LOVE.

- Brainstorm with students: how and where do these themes present themselves in our lives? Have students read or seen other works (literature, films, television) that touch on any of the themes of *The Merchant of Venice*? Assign students to select one theme and track its development as they watch the play, taking note of particular scenes that present the theme and characters who wrestle with that issue.

DELVING DEEPER

What is a stereotype? How do stereotypes originate? In Shakespeare’s world, the stereotype of Jews was viciously negative; similarly, does Shakespeare's play encourage or challenge the widespread anti-Semitism and racism of the time?

Before answering, consider other examples. Identify characters in television, film, and literature that are built on a stereotype (of age, class, region, ethnicity, race, etc.). List them on the board.

- Which characters are stereotypes that reinforce negative images? Label them.
- Which characters stretch or break out of their stereotypes? How do they do it? What message or lesson about stereotypes do the characters deliver?
- What role do stereotypes play in art? Should they remain or be a part of newly-created art?

DEBATE TOPIC:

Marriage is not a romantic affair in the play, and neither men nor women are under the impression that it is. All of the marriages in the play exist for convenience or necessity. Romance can follow, but it isn't a requirement, which may be why partners seem willing to forgive each other and compromise.

*Dru Barcus (Launcelot) and Robert Moritz (Old Gobbo) rehearse a scene from Classic Theatre’s production.*
PERFORMANCE:

When Shylock loses everything and is forced into becoming a Christian by his hated enemy Antonio. Shylock's last lines in the play are, "I pray you give me leave to go from hence. / I am not well. Send the deed after me. / And I will sign it." (4.1.412-414)

Write and perform a scene that reveals what happens to Shylock after the trial.
At the end of the play, we are left guessing, as Portia says that she will “answer all things faithfully” at another time. It makes you wonder….

- How and when did Portia find out about Antonio's ships?
- How likely is it that Jessica and Lorenzo will be happy together?

Write and perform one of these “deleted scenes” from Shakespeare’s play.

Come be part of the magic! Join our AIM HIGH internship program and work on a production at Classic Theatre as a performer or technician. No experience necessary! Email Christie@classictheatre.org for more information.