

The Merchant of Venice: Act 1 Scene 3

“Should I not say ‘Has a dog money?’”

Bassanio meets with Shylock, a Jewish merchant, to borrow money on Antonio's credit, with the stipulation that he'll pay the loan back in three months. Shylock notes all Antonio's cash is tied up in potential ventures and none of it actually exists yet! Nevertheless, Shylock says he'll lend the money, but would like to speak to Antonio directly first.

When Antonio enters the scene, Shylock talks money with him and Bassanio. Antonio, who until now has avoided borrowing or lending where interest is involved, justifies his change of heart by stating he'll do anything to help Bassanio, even put his principles aside and pay the interest that he's so scorned in the past. Shylock meets him halfway and makes a very unusual offer in lieu of interest... Bassanio smells a rat and insists it's not really necessary for Antonio to risk himself. Nevertheless, Antonio is confident he can repay the loan and he and Shylock leave to find a notary.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. How much money does Bassanio ask from Shylock?

- (a) Three thousand ducats
- (b) Three thousand dollars
- (c) Three thousand dinars
- (d) Three thousand dimes

2. Why does Shylock hesitate over guaranteeing the loan ?

- (a) Antonio has poor credit
- (b) Shylock cannot make a profit
- (c) He worries Antonio will default on the loan
- (d) All Antonio's ships are currently sailing

3. What does 'good' mean when Shylock uses this word to describe Antonio?

- (a) A man of virtuous character
- (b) A man of sufficient credit
- (c) A man who does fine works
- (d) A true and loyal friend

4. Why does Shylock refuse an offer to dine?

- (a) He fears they will try to kidnap him
- (b) Eating is not part of the bargaining process
- (c) Pork will be served at the table
- (d) He believes a handshake is enough to seal the deal

5. What does Shylock call the enmity between Christian and Jews?

- (a) Old hatred
- (b) Ancient grudge
- (c) Past crime
- (d) Historical rivalry

6. What has lowered the interest rates on loans in Venice?

- (a) Generous lending
- (b) Widespread poverty
- (c) War
- (d) Bassanio's lavish spending

7. What has Antonio done to Shylock in the past?

- (a) Spat upon his beard
- (b) Kicked him in the street
- (c) Complained loudly about his moneylending
- (d) All of the above

8. What is the charging of interest otherwise called?

- (a) Usury
- (b) Profiteering
- (c) Speculating
- (d) Coin breeding

9. What condition does Shylock stipulate in case of Antonio forfeiting the repayment?

- (a) Twice the amount of the loan
- (b) Antonio must do the washing up for a year
- (c) He will forfeit his house
- (d) Shylock can cut off a pound of his flesh

10. Why is Bassanio so nervous about this condition?

- (a) He fears for Antonio's reputation
- (b) He cannot trust in Shylock's kindness
- (c) He feels guilty about the loan
- (d) He doesn't really want to marry Portia anyway.

Understanding and Interpretation

1. This scene marks the first appearance of Shylock on stage. What impression is the audience given from his first few lines?
2. What reasons are given for the hatred between Christians and Jews in Venice? Can you categorise these reasons (for example, historical, personal, and the like)?
3. What arguments does Shylock present for the charging of interest on loans? How do Antonio and Bassanio respond to these arguments?
4. What does Shylock reveal about the way he has been treated by Antonio in the past? How might this complicate the audience impression of the characters in the play so far?
5. What impression does the audience have of Shylock by the end of the scene? Is he a wholly sympathetic or villainous character, or somewhere in between? What evidence from the scene can you use to justify your feelings towards Shylock?

Discussion Point: **hate speech**

“What these Christians are, whose own hard dealings teaches them suspect the thoughts of others!”

Language is a tool for communication, sharing information, debating, finding solutions, and building relationships. But it can also be used to wound, hurt, divide, repress, demonise, and dehumanise. This kind of language is nowadays known as ‘hate speech’ and is, sadly, part and parcel of human linguistic cultures. You can [study hate speech in more detail by visiting this blog page](#), reading some of the embedded articles, and trying out the discussion points.

Although the terminology to describe hate speech is relatively modern, this kind of language is not new. What evidence is there in *The Merchant of Venice* of characters using the language of hatred to distance themselves from one another? What are the characteristics of this kind of language? Can you come up with a few different markers of hate speech in the play? Also, discuss how Shylock is a victim of hate speech – and also ask whether he plays a role in perpetrating the cycle of hatred through his own use of language in the play. Share your thoughts with your classmates.

Important Character: **Shylock**

“Suffrance is the badge of all our tribe”



The Merchant of Venice is a challenging play to study. In form it is patterned as a romantic comedy: Bassanio is a typical suitor seeking a lady's hand in marriage, tropes such as confusion, mistaken identity, and the uniting of lovers are present and correct. Yet the play is complicated by Shylock, who is framed as a tragic figure. In this scene, Shylock reveals the anti-Semitism he is subjected to. Antonio is a vocal anti-Semite and Shylock feels called to defend his Jewish identity and community: ‘Cursed be my tribe if I forgive him’ he says.

Indeed, Jews in 16th century Venice faced systemic persecution. In 1516 they were forced to live in neighbourhoods separate from

the rest of the city and subject to a curfew. Jews were restricted to only two trades: the selling of clothing and smelting (metal-melting), which translates to *getto* in Italian. Thus ‘ghetto’ was coined as a term for the Jewish quarter of a city and would later refer to the forced isolation of Jews throughout Europe. In fact, in 1930s Germany, *The Merchant of Venice* was frequently broadcast over the radio as a propaganda piece.

The stereotype of Jews engaging in high-interest money-lending is plausible, but not necessarily accurate. In fact, Christians often broke the prohibition on charging interest, and the word ‘interest’ may have derived as a euphemism for ‘usury’ to hide this violation of

Christian custom. However, the tension between merchants who traded tangible goods (like Antonio) and money lenders who built fortunes from intangibles (like Shylock) was a real facet of 16th century European economics. Therefore, Shylock's enmity with Antonio also has a personal dimension: Antonio lends money without interest which drives down the rates Shylock can charge, damaging his own livelihood.

It's hard to say to what extent Shakespeare humanizes Shylock. The character possesses numerous stereotypical qualities that 16th century audiences would have fallen on rabidly. He is cunning, obsessed with his gold and ducats, and cold to his own kindred. Despite modern performances drawing out his sympathetic side, in Shakespeare's time (and for a long time afterwards) Shylock would have been played as a kind of sinister clown or monster of evil. Nowhere is this more apparent than in this scene, where Shylock mentions in an aside how he will '*feed fat the ancient grudge*' between him and Antonio. This casual reference to feeding alludes to one of the ugliest aspects of anti-Semitic propaganda: the blood libel. Began in the 12th century, this refers to the lie that Jews conspire in the secret killing of Christians for the purpose of drinking their blood in cannibalistic rituals.

Over the years then, theater and film productions of the play have portrayed Shylock in various ways. As literary critic Ann Barton points out in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, "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." In the 2004 film adaptation of *Merchant*, Al Pacino's famous portrayal of Shylock is sympathetic and emphasizes his victimization and humanity.

In other productions, Shylock is portrayed as a justifiably angry man: he is hated by the Venetians; despised for his religion, culture, and occupation; betrayed by his daughter; and ultimately undone by the very city in which he lives. You could argue that Shylock's hatred and desire for vengeance is a natural result of his circumstances.

Activity

[Watch actors David Suchet and Patrick Stewart discussing how to play Shylock](#). Then, write a piece in which you suggest how you would like the character of Shylock to be interpreted. You could consider a range of the following ideas from the reading and discussion:

- Sympathetic
- Human
- A victim of religious and ethnic persecution
- A tragic figure
- Defender of his tribe
- A comic villain
- Money-obsessed
- Cold and calculating
- Monstrous

Make sure you embed supporting lines from the play script into your piece. Add your finished work to your Learner Portfolio.

Quotation Bank

If you only remember three lines, remember these...

BASSANIO

In Belmont is a lady richly left,
And she is fair, and, fairer than that word,
Of wondrous virtues [...] (1.1.161-163)

The structure of this quotation is interesting, as it seems to place more importance on Portia's 'richly left' inheritance, then her 'fair' looks and finally her 'virtuous' character. This sequence reveals Bassanio's priorities when wooing Portia and suggests the minds of the characters in this play are dominated by thoughts of wealth and money over love and happiness.

BASSANIO

Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued
To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia.
Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,
(1.1.165-167)

When Bassanio talks about Portia it is clear her "value" derives from how much she is "worth" – in other words her money. When he later compares wooing her to Jason chasing the golden fleece we realise that his quest for Portia is a quest for money, not love.

ANTONIO

You know me well, and herein spend but time
To wind about my love with circumstance
And out of doubt you now do me more
wrong... (1.1.153-155)

This interchange reveals a clue as to Antonio's melancholy. In Elizabethan times, friendship between two men was seen as something spiritual. Now Bassanio has set his sights on marriage, perhaps Antonio foresees the end of their relationship. His tetchiness at the way Bassanio needs to justify asking a favour hints at his unhappiness that their friendship may not continue unaltered in the future.

Based on your own reading of Act 1, Scene 3 and / or your classroom discussion, add another memorable line to this table, and provide an analysis comment: