



DELTA
SPECIALIST ENGLISH TUITION

Sample Resources

**COMMON MODULE: THE
MERCHANT OF VENICE**

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HSC: Common Module (Texts and Human Experiences)

Lesson 3: The Merchant of Venice (I)

Introduction

In this lesson, we will begin with an overview of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, looking at plot and vital contextual information. We will take a closer look at Act I and, using those scenes as a basis, consider the play's treatment of humanity's enduring human experience of prejudice. As a result, the lesson structure is as follows:

- Plot summary to *Merchant*.
- Contextual introduction.
- Close study: Act I.
- Close study: Religious Prejudice in *Merchant*
- Homework

The Merchant of Venice (1596) - Plot Summary

The Merchant of Venice contains two main narratives, one taking place in Venice and the other in nearby Belmont. In Venice, wealthy merchant Antonio enters into a contract with moneylender Shylock to provide funds for his friend Bassanio -- in what is meant as a show of kindness, Shylock lends money for no interest, but, if Antonio fails in repaying a loan, he must give up a pound of his own flesh. In Belmont, Bassanio attempts to win the heart of wealthy debutante Portia via a challenge set by her deceased father.

Like many of Shakespeare's works, fate intervenes in what would be an otherwise straightforward task. Midway through the play, Antonio finds that all of his investments have been lost at sea and subsequently defaults on his loan. Shylock, who has just had his daughter leave him for one of Antonio's friends, pursues revenge to its greatest degree, turning the initially metaphorical pound of Antonio's flesh into a literal demand, one which will kill Antonio in the process.

Meanwhile, in Belmont, Bassanio defeats a range of suitors by correctly interpreting Portia's father's test, winning her hand in marriage. On hearing that Antonio has been imprisoned, awaiting his execution at the hands of Shylock, Bassanio rushes home to be at his friend's side. At the same time, unbeknownst to Bassanio, Portia secretly travels to Venice, disguised as a young male judge so that she may mediate Antonio and Shylock's dispute.

Using Shylock's own literality against him, Portia interprets his contract in a way that cannot be enforceable, punishing him for his attempted murder by taking his worldly possessions and forcing him to convert to Christianity. Back in Belmont, Portia reveals her deception to Bassanio and they celebrate their impending marriage.

Contextual Introduction

The play's status as a comedy and its subsequent reappraisal

Shakespeare's comedies involve absurd and sometimes farcical situations and tend to conclude with many marriages. However, even in our brief summary above, we observe a number of uncomfortable elements within the play: the antisemitism suffered by Shylock culminating in a forced conversion; Portia's lack of agency in choosing a husband. In both cases, we come close to what we would now interpret as **an enduring human portrayal of prejudice, both on the basis of race and religious (against Shylock) and on the basis of gender (against Portia).**

Prior to the 20th century, the play was performed as a straight comedy. Shylock's absolute destruction would have been met by jeering approval by a broadly anti-Semitic European audience, while Portia's disguised representation as a brilliant young lawyer would be read as an ironic subversion of gender roles without ever actually challenging them.

However, inspired by the West's recognition of the horrors of anti-Semitism—embodied most notably in the Holocaust—the play has been reinterpreted to focus instead on Shylock's inherent humanity and the extent to which his villainy is the product of inhuman conditions. **Contemporary productions of the play instead walk a fine line between emphasising the play's effective farcical qualities and ensuring also an appropriate solemnity to Shylock's depiction, resulting in its sometimes-treatment by critics as a 'problem play', or a Shakespearean work that does not fit clearly into comedy or tragedy.**

Marriage as the primary relationship in an individual's life

While contemporary society might recognise marriage as the most significant relationship an individual can undertake, this was a somewhat novel idea around the time of *Merchant's* writing. Instead, the play remarks on the **tension between one's fraternal relationships and their romantic ones**. The friendship between Bassanio and Antonio; between Solanio and Salarino; between Nerissa and Portia; and between Gratiano and Lorenzo **each embody this pre-existing belief that friendship (and not romance) is the most significant relationship in a person's life.**

Meanwhile, the marriages, represented in Bassanio and Portia, Nerissa and Gratiano, and Lorenzo and Jessica, reflect a new conception of marriage as primary, borne of love as opposed to pragmatic financial or status-based concerns. Most notably, at the play's conclusion, Bassanio and Gratiano have to decide between their allegiance to Antonio and their promises to their fiancées, revealing explicitly the struggle to prioritise one relationship over another **a core human experience that maintains relevance today.**

NB: It is also possible to interpret Antonio's relationship with Bassanio as homoerotic in nature, as his initial sadness stems from his impending sense of losing his friend. This will become particularly clear in the Courtroom Scene of Act V.

Prejudice and Identity

Crucially, Elizabethan society had no conception of 'race', but a strong sense of religious allegiance as a core element to identity. This emphasis on religious identity and the tension between insiders and outsiders **reflects not only the contextual tension on ideological/religious purity** (against a backdrop of Catholic and Protestant tension under Queen Elizabeth), **but also a prevalent European antisemitism that coloured all of society's understanding of Jewish identity.**

Notice how this applies more broadly to Shakespeare's work, not only in *Merchant* but more broadly. In *Othello*, the titular moor is classed as an outsider not on the basis of appearance but on the basis of faith, as his status as a non-believer inspires the "devil" imagery used against him. Same in this play, Shylock's mistreatment stems from the evil associations held by Elizabethans towards his faith, who believed that Jewish people had no souls and were an inherently corrupting influence on an otherwise homogeneous Christian community.

Beyond this, the patriarchal status of Elizabethan society should be evident from previous study of Shakespeare's work. Women were typically considered subordinate to men, where heterosexual marriage constituted a relationship of dominance, prioritising fidelity and obedience. In *Merchant*, Shakespeare playfully undermines these conditions, as Portia challenges Bassanio's masculinity and sense of ownership through a number of insightful attacks on his male ego. Similarly, her representation as a brilliant jurist emphasises her sense of agency.

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However, we can question how resolutely Shakespeare is able to challenge these patriarchal assumptions, based on whether we see Bassanio and Portia's final dynamic as a modern 'marriage of equals' or whether it continues to instantiate the power imbalance that defined Elizabethan gender relations.

The Formation of Identity

Within our discussion of prejudice and its influence on identity, *Merchant* raises similarly pertinent questions about the nature of identity, how it is defined, and how an enduring human process of discerning identity may be complicated by broader social concerns. Essentially, *Merchant* asks whether identity:

- 1) Is something fixed, imposed on the individual by factors beyond their control, and unyielding; or,
- 2) Whether identity is instead something contingent, in a permanent process of re-negotiation depending on the immediate requirements of the individual.

This is further complicated by Shakespeare's portrayal of how certain contexts and social settings are antithetical to the development of identity (through Shylock and Jessica's inability to self-actualise in a homogenous Christian community).

Similarly, in depicting a hyperbolised adolescence in Jessica and Bassanio's process of maturation, it positions them as microcosms for an enduring human process of self-actualisation, where the realisation of identity comes as a product of a sustained period of growth and reflection.

This question of identity is a useful 'general' idea commonly represented across texts and easily applied to the Texts and Human Experiences area of study.

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Competing interpretations of Justice

Throughout the play, there are significant questions raised as to one's obligations within society, how one should behave, and whether the state has a right to force people to act a certain way. There is a question of whether justice should be pursued, even to violent ends, or whether mercy should compel people to forgive even the harshest sins against them. In the pivotal courtroom scene, this question is given central importance.

Essentially, Shakespeare prioritises a 'Christian' sense of mercy as the foremost good, though there is room to question whether he is subverting this ideal or simply manifesting it in line with Elizabethan social beliefs. At the play's conclusion, Shylock is forced to convert to Christianity—is this merciful? Elizabethans thought so, by believing in Christianity as the ultimate truth, conversion was a *necessity* to avoid hell. However, a contemporary performance of the play would instead see a sustained irony in the Christian's demand for mercy before ruthlessly forcing Shylock to sacrifice his faith.

In discussing this issue as an enduring human experience, students would need to affirm the struggle to define justice or morality as a common human experience. Within this, the competing conceptions of justice, as manifested in Antonio, Shylock, and (in some interpretations) Portia, gives sufficient material for a sustained discussion of justice and its repercussions for individual identity.

Over the next five weeks, we will deal with each of these issues individually, examining how they appear in the play and creating scaffolds that can be used for essay paragraphs. NB: Each of these preoccupations has clear links to the enduring human experiences of individuals and collectives, so would be strong bases for building your thesis.

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Exercise:

What is a problem play? Is *Merchant of Venice* one?

Summary: Act One

Scene	Summary
I.i	<i>Antonio announces his melancholic feelings, which his friends interpret as fear about the status of his investments which are presently all at sea. Bassanio reveals that he needs money to pursue his love Portia, Antonio has no cash but promises to see what he can get on credit to support his friend.</i>
I.ii	<i>Portia and Nerissa bond over the poor quality of Portia’s suitors. The audience learns that Portia’s father, before he died, created a riddle designed to select Portia’s husband, whoever succeeds in correctly passing the test will gain Portia’s hand and inherit her father’s wealth.</i>
I.iii	<i>Bassanio approaches wealthy moneylender Shylock, who is revealed to have</i>

	<p><i>an extensive public rivalry with Antonio. They agree to a contract with an initially metaphorical clause: if Antonio can't pay back the trivial sum, he will give up a pound of flesh nearest his heart. He accepts the deal but already Bassanio is uncomfortable.</i></p>
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Textual Analysis I.i

Summary: Antonio announces his melancholic feelings, which his friends interpret as fear about the status of his investments which are presently all at sea. Bassanio reveals that he needs money to pursue his love Portia, Antonio has no cash but promises to see what he can get on credit to support his friend.

- Notice from the very first line “In sooth, I know not why I am so sad” how simple Antonio’s diction is. Replacing ‘sooth’ with the modern ‘truth’ makes this sentence almost identical to contemporary English. *Merchant of Venice* is unique in its treatment of **working class characters**, their language lacks the richness of metaphor and abstraction used by royalty in other plays. As a result, the text is far more easily interpreted by a contemporary audience.
- **Alliteration:** “want wit sadness”, to ‘want wit’ is to want reason, as Antonio characterises his melancholy condition as ‘idiopathic’, or without clear justification or cause. The ambiguity of Antonio’s sadness is provocative: we gain the sense that his affection for Bassanio is stronger than mere friendship; where this potentially unrequited love, combined by the knowledge of Bassanio’s intention to pursue Portia, motivate his sadness. This **homoerotic interpretation** of *Merchant* is among the most popular readings of the play, and enables students to examine the enduring human experience of **unrequited love** and the way this impedes one’s sense of self.
- “Your mind is tossing on the ocean”, Salarino uses a metaphor to suggest Antonio’s worries stem from the status of his investments. A wealthy

- What follows is a length series of jests performed by Antonio’s friends, including the newly arrived Gratiano and Lorenzo. Crucially, Antonio denies the accusation that he is “in love” and does so quite aggressively with the exclamatory “Fie, Fie”. **A suggestion that love is perhaps more closely on his mind that he is admitting.**
- Subsequently, Bassanio and Antonio are left alone, and Bassanio describes the “Lady... to whom [he] swore a secret pilgrimage”.
- Bassanio responds in **aphorism**, offering a “**childhood proof**”. The naivety connoted in “innocence”, his **simile** “wilful youth” and the **temporal reference** to “school days” **characterises Antonio and Bassanio’s relationship as that of a mentor and his mentee.** Here, Bassanio’s development across the entirety of the text connotes a **hyperbolised adolescence**, where we see his initially naivety give way to an adult maturity -- note especially the way he adapts Antonio’s idioms and aphorisms as his own wisdom, and how central it is to his capacity to win Portia.
- In the metaphor “disabled mine estate,/By something showing a **more swelling port**/Than my faint means would grant continuance”, he reveals that he has been overspending to portray himself as a wealthy suitor so that he may have the chance to ask Portia’s hand in marriage. *Context: marriage was, mostly, a matter of class--the idea of a romantic marriage was novel. In this case, Bassanio must falsely present himself as wealthier than he is to have a chance.*
- Antonio promises to help him, saying “You know me well, and herein spend but time/To wind about my love with circumstance”, **again affirming the strength of their fraternal bond.** This tension between friendship and romance will recur in Lesson 3.

Textual Analysis I.ii

Summary: *Portia and Nerissa bond over the poor quality of Portia's suitors. The audience learns that Portia's father, before he died, created a riddle designed to select Portia's husband, whoever succeeds in correctly passing the test will gain Portia's hand and inherit her father's wealth.*

- Note Nerissa's **didacticism**, saying that Portia would be weary "if [her] miseries were in the same abundance as [her] good fortunes are". Much of her conversation turns on moral teachings, characterising her as an older educational figure in Portia's life. Though she may have experience, we will subsequently see that Portia's intellectual brilliance allows her to subvert and challenge these teachers.
- Portia's **aphorism**, "if to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches and poor men's cottages princes' palaces" foregrounds the play's later consideration of justice and morality by foreshadowing Portia as someone knowledgeable about the disjunct between what is right and what is desired.
- Her outburst "O me, the word 'choose'" reveals her lack of agency, as she is described metonymically as a juxtaposition between "the will of a **living** daughter curbed by the will of a **dead** father". Here our first sense of the patriarchal gender relations of Shakespeare's context are revealed: despite her monetary wealth and status, she's incapable of acting upon it -- instead made to await the day when her obedience to her father may be transferred to another male through marriage. The **irony** of this state of affairs is only heightened as we gain a clearer sense of intelligence and independence, in the pivotal courtroom scene she disguises herself as a young male jurist and eventually frees Antonio. That even Bassanio does not recognise her in this moment reinforces the gendered assumptions that would prevent him from recognising such intelligence.

- The following **dialogue** functions as a **call-and-response** where Nerissa names each suitor to Portia and she responds with a witty takedown. Notice the emphasis on birthplace in each suitor's identity, there is a "Neapolitan prince", a "French lord" and a "Baron of England". In each case, Shakespeare interweaves Elizabethan racial stereotypes as a means of engaging his audience.
- The **bawdy language** is unbecoming of a woman of Portia's status, while their use of **prose** in the sequence reveals the intimacy of their conversation. This is taking place in a private chamber and is a moment of sincerity between the pair, a game they clearly play often. In referring to the Neapolitan prince as a "colt", she implies he is the product of bestiality; whereas the French Lord is described as lacking any discernible character.
- The allusion to the English baron is itself a moment of **self-deprecation**, though it is significantly more restrained than his treatment of the other men. In describing the Englishman as buying "his doublet in Italy, his round hose in France, his bonnet in Germany and his behavior every where" he suggests, on one level, that the English identity is a **pastiche** of other European cultures; yet, in the same breath, it recognises also England's history (and success) in amalgamating other cultures under a single British ideal.
- The issue of race and identity is introduced at the conclusion of the scene, where Portia uses juxtaposition in saying "if he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me". Here she is referring to the "Prince of Morocco", a character who, from his name alone, an Elizabethan audience already recognises as an outsider. Notice this distinction between 'condition' and 'complexion', the superficiality of such description reflects the Elizabethan tendency to embrace racial stereotype.

Textual Analysis I.iii

Summary: *Bassanio approaches wealthy moneylender Shylock, who is revealed to have an extensive public rivalry with Antonio. They agree to a contract with an initially metaphorical clause: if Antonio can't pay back the trivial sum, he will give up a pound of flesh nearest his heart. He accepts the deal but already Bassanio is uncomfortable.*

- “Three thousand ducats; well” Shylock’s first line immediately alludes to Elizabethan anti-semitism, through its connotations of him as obsessed with money. In this case, the repetition of “well” reveal the literal nature of his thought process, the audience literally observes the gears in his brain through these *wells* acting to show each step of his consideration of the debt.
- This **excessive literality** can be interpreted as a defence mechanism: remember, wordplay is a weapon within Shakespeare’s plays, as Shylock is the constant victim of the Christian community, he is careful to ensure there are no barbs or tricks being played. The idea of his enemy borrowing such a sum of money would, on face value, seem suspicious.
- This **literality** continues in the subsequent speech, where he explains his **metaphor**: “land-rats and water rats, *water-thieves and land-thieves, I mean pirates.*” Where each clause clarifies the figurative language further, characterising him as an individual uncomfortable with the linguistic culture of the Rialto and conscious of his status as an outsider.
- Consider the following **aside**, remembering that these asides are, like soliloquies, heard only by the audience and in this case give some understanding of Shylock’s interior beliefs:

Shylock. *[Aside]* How like a fawning publican he looks!

I hate him for he is a Christian,

But more for that in low simplicity

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He lends out money gratis and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.
If I can catch him once upon the hip,
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.
He hates our sacred nation, and he rails,
Even there where merchants most do congregate,
On me, my bargains and my well-won thrift,
Which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe,
If I forgive him!

- **Simile:** “fawning publican”, a publican is a proprietor of a pub, while the verb ‘fawning’ connotes an affectation of exaggerated (and thus insincere) flattery. Shylock recognises two things then: 1) Antonio’s insincerity, through the contradiction between his public ‘face’ and his pre-existing mistreatment of Shylock; but also 2) The extent to which Antonio’s sense of dominance extends even to realms beyond his control. Remember, Antonio and Bassanio are visiting Shylock *on his turf*, so for Antonio to operate with the same confidence and affectation as he would at home reinforces the sense of Christian superiority that suppresses outsiders in Venetian society.
- Key terminology: lending ‘money gratis’ means to lend money without interest. As a result, Antonio drives down the rate of interest in the Rialto more generally, harming moneylenders like Shylock who rely on the interest as the basis of their business. **Crucially, this is not merely an act of goodwill by Antonio: recognising that usury was outlawed by Christianity at the time and so exclusively practised by Jewish moneylenders, lending money without interest was a direct act designed to harm the Jewish community.**
- **Furthermore,** Shylock juxtaposes the “low simplicity” of his immediate grudge (based on Antonio’s lending practice) against the “ancient grudge”,

- Note the contrast between the **tone** of Shylock’s aside and the subsequent remark to Antonio: “Rest you fair, good signior;/Your worship was the last man in our mouths”. The **connotations** on *rest, fair, good, worship* imply a conviviality that does not exist. There is **irony** too in recognising he was the “last man” in their mouths, as Shylock has already railed against Antonio.
- **Important point: While Bassanio and Shylock initially negotiate in prose, there is a sudden shift to verse on Antonio’s arrival.** Remember, that language choice and style of speech betrays not only class, but interclass relationships. In this case, Shylock’s adoption of the verse form acknowledges Antonio’s superiority within the rialto’s power structure, and also his attempt to elevate himself to that same level through the use of the same linguistic form.
- Subsequently, Shylock and Antonio enter into a lengthy biblical discussion, as **allusions** to the story of Jacob and Laban reflect a **religious justification for charging interest**. Remember, Christianity’s old testament draws its origin from the Tanakh, or Hebrew Bible, so both figures would be familiar with the story, but in Antonio’s case, would instead prioritise the invocation against interest drawn from the Christian **New Testament**.

Antonio. Mark you this, Bassanio,
The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.

An evil soul producing holy witness
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,
A goodly apple rotten at the heart:
O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!

- The above line is interpreted in divergent ways depending on the production. Some performances will play this as an **aside**, in which case Shylock is *not* aware of the insult being performed right in front of him, reinforcing the disconnect between Antonio’s public face as a righteous merchant and the vile acts of anti-semitism he portrays. *Alternatively*, other productions would perform this as a line spoken like any other, **reinforcing the power imbalance that exists where, even while asking for Shylock’s money, Antonio feels comfortable assaulting him.**
- In a series of metaphors, Antonio remarks on an enduring human struggle to discern **appearance from reality**. There is an irony implicit too in this discussion, as he lectures on morality without interrogating his own prejudicial assumptions.
- What follows is our first proper confrontation between Shylock and Antonio. Notice the disjunct between the use of respectful salutation (“Signior”) and the harsh action implied (“spit”, “rated”, “call me misbeliever”). Shylock’s wealth allows him to stand face to face with Antonio, but he is aware still of his presence in a hostile territory.
- The antisemitic connotations on “misbeliever”, as well as the imagery of “Jewish gaberdine”, recognise an Elizabethan caricature of Jewish identity. Antonio’s response echos Shylock’s accusation with **repetition**, saying he is likely to “call thee so again,/To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too”.
 - As above, the manner of this performance would vary dramatically depending on when it was performed. An Elizabethan audience would interpret this speech as farcical, seeing Antonio rebuke Shylock’s

attempts so openly. **Alternatively, contemporary productions see an opportunity here to introduce another side of Antonio, the formerly friendly, melancholy man is shown now to have a hostile side, reinforcing our sense of pathos for Shylock.**

Read the following sequence and answer the questions that follow, quoting from the exchange.

Shylock. Signior Antonio, many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances:
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.
Well then, it now appears you need my help:
Go to, then; you come to me, and you say
'Shylock, we would have moneys:' you say so;
You, that did void your rheum upon my beard
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold: moneys is your suit
What should I say to you? Should I not say
'Hath a dog money? is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats?' Or
Shall I bend low and in a bondman's key,
With bated breath and whispering humbleness, Say this;
'Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last;
You spurn'd me such a day; another time
You call'd me dog; and for these courtesies

I'll lend you thus much moneys'?

Antonio. I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.
If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends; for when did friendship take
A breed for barren metal of his friend?
But lend it rather to thine enemy,
Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face
Exact the penalty.

Shylock. Why, look you, how you storm!
I would be friends with you and have your love,
Forget the shames that you have stain'd me with,
Supply your present wants and take no doit
Of usance for my moneys, and you'll not hear me:
This is kind I offer.

What does Shylock suggest about his treatment at the hands of the Christians in Venice?

- Subsequently, Shylock attempts to demonstrate his “kindness” by offering a contract that invokes no interest. Instead, he offers a novelty bet: if Antonio cannot repay, he gives Shylock an “equal pound/Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken/In what part of your body pleaseth me.”
- **NB: Despite the hostility in this scene, Shylock seems sincere in his willingness to show “kindness”.** He has already established his intimate knowledge of Antonio’s financial affairs (“His means are in supposition: he hath an argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies...”). He is aware that, even though Antonio is cash poor, he has so many investments that it is almost impossible for him to fail to pay. **As a result, it would be wrong to conclude that Shylock’s villainy is apparent from the play’s beginning; he is *made* a villain by the climate of prejudice he is forced to exist in, reflecting the corruptive nature of this enduring human experience and, in turn, compelling the audience to develop their sense of empathy beyond their own identity groups.**
- Shylock’s religious allusion to “father Abram” invites our first sense of his appraisal of the Christians. Their “hard dealings teaches them suspect/The

thoughts of others!” The impossibility of interfaith dialogue is directly introduced here, where both Shylock and Antonio rely on a corrupt interpretation of the other group, preventing any genuine connection from taking place.

- What we will see as the play develops is that Shylock’s view of Christian “hard dealings” aligns with reality -- that the Christians in Venice are defined by the cruelty with which they exclude religious outsiders from true engagement as citizens within the community. Antonio’s failure to recognise this is an example of **moral blindness**, or the failure of the individual to realise their own wrongs due to a **social climate that grants individuals license to exploit and exclude oppressed groups**.
- A significant element of the play’s contemporary reappraisal is the way it exists **post-Holocaust, whereby the treatment of Jews -- and the West’s failure to interrogate its own antisemitism -- during the period leading up to and during WW2 has led to *The Merchant of Venice* gaining a new subtext**. As a result, we see the unquestioning way in which Venetians condemn Shylock as microcosm for a broader mistreatment experienced by the Jewish community in the 20th century.
- The rhyming couplet that follows this exchange is divided between Antonio and Bassanio:
 - **Antonio:** The Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind.
 - **Bassanio:** I like not fair terms and a villain’s mind.
- That they share this feature indicates both the intimacy of their bond (for a contemporary example: it’s as if they finish each other’s sentences).
- However, note also the **connotations**: the association of “Christian” with “kind” (and by negation, the association of “Hebrew” with “villain”).

- Again, we notice a disjunct between the *text* of Act One and the behaviour of the Venetians. There is **limited textual evidence in Act I** to suggest Shylock’s villainy (and, where his villainy is suggested, it seems to be justified by Antonio’s treatment towards him). Yet, the Venetians are *convinced* of his villainy, reinforcing the extent to which an Elizabethan audience would have seen him as inherently, irreconcilably evil. Hence, in **contrast** to villains like Iago in *Othello* or Claudius in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare sees no need to justify his characterisation, knowing the audience will do that work for him.

Core Human Experience: Prejudice (Religion)

To this point, we have examined the text of Act I closely, prioritising analysis that demonstrates the religious context of the Elizabethan era and how that manifests in the anti-semitic portrayal of Shylock. What we will do now is examine that idea *critically*, through a consideration of a brief essay on the text, which will then lead us into constructing some general ideas about the **core human experience of prejudice as represented in the text**.

By the end of this portion, students should have sufficient material to write a paragraph outlining the treatment of prejudice in Act I.

Revision: Texts and Human Experiences

In writing about texts and human experiences, we need to identify a few things, in sequence:

What is the enduring human experience represented in the text?	<i>How is that human experience mediated by the text’s context and form?</i>	<u>What are the implications of that representation for a responder studying it?</u>
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As a result, (1) we begin by defining what this core human experience is, (2) we then look deeply in the text, showing how that human experience is mediated by the formal decisions (and contextual background) of the composer, and then-- importantly--(3) we tie it back to us as readers, defining how our understanding of core human experiences are developed by studying this representation.

But what are those implications? What does the text say about Prejudice as a core human experience?

Identity as a social entity and based off one's identification of a group: One key element of the play's treatment of enduring human experience is its belief that identity is not some private, individual thing, but rather a sense of self that emerges from one's socialising with the broader world. Here, one's identity comes from their ability to identify with a larger group. **However, a tension arises when one's identification with a group requires them to negate another group. This enduring human experience of prejudice stems from humanity's tendency to treat outsiders with mistrust.**

Consider how this manifests in the play: there is a clear sense of kinship between the Venetian merchants. They speak in a similar diction, they expressly state their affection for one another, and the scenes they share are marked by tones of warmth and humour. *This disappears immediately when engaging with members of the 'out-group', in this case, Shylock.* Hence, we see what can be a positive, soul-affirming notion (one's capacity to identify with society) subverted and warped into something corruptive (the human tendency to exclude). ***Implication for responder: by observing Shylock's treatment, they reflect on the nature of their own social identity, as expanded empathy allows them to in turn expand the definition of***

those connections. In this sense, a core human experience is transformed from a limited, individualist idea to one that is collective.

Prejudice as corruptive to one’s sense of self-worth. We now consider the inverse idea, that of the individual’s core experience of prejudice and how that affects them. For Shylock, he is portrayed in Act I as the victim of an immutable identity complex, by virtue of his Jewish identity, he is interpreted as a “villain” in spite of any behaviour to the contrary. Even in the play’s early scenes we see the extent to which his capacity to connect with others has been corrupted by this tendency. His excess literality reflects his attempts to pre-emptively recognise attacks on his honour. Similarly, while Antonio has a range of friends to rely upon, Shylock only has “Tubal, a wealthy Hebrew of my tribe”, revealing the extent to which religious lines segment their society.

In this case, the implications for the responder are the affirmation of their own experience of prejudice. Individuals who have suffered in this way can view a representation in text and develop a sense of solidarity, they recognise both the prevalence of this issue throughout human history, but also the potential to challenge it. Crucially, it is meant to make an individual feel ‘less alone’ in their human experience, granting the potential for self-affirmation. In discussing the treatment of religious prejudice in *The Merchant of Venice*, our paragraph might look like:

<p>Through interpreting <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>, audiences gain a greater understanding of the enduring nature of prejudice as a distinct</p>	<p><i>The depiction of prejudice in <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> alludes directly to the antisemitism of Elizabethan society, showing the corruptive</i></p>	<p><u>Hence, contemporary reimaginings of the play emphasise the injustice of such prejudice, as the representation expands the responder’s capacity</u></p>
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HSC Common Module: **The Merchant of Venice**

issue within human experience.	<i>nature of prejudice upon identity.</i>	<u>for empathy, a tool to critically reflect on one's exclusionary values.</u>
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