

Anti-Semitism and *The Merchant of Venice*

A Discussion Guide for Educators



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*“I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands,
organs, dimension, senses, affections, passions...”*

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

This resource is a tool for teachers presenting *The Merchant of Venice* to their students. This guide is not intended as an exhaustive study of the play. Rather, it is a supplement intended to guide an exploration of the problematic issue of anti-Semitism as part of the broader discussion of the play.

The initial sections of this guide provide important contextual information about the teaching of controversial literature, the impact of anti-Semitism throughout history, and the beliefs and attitudes prevalent in 16th century England that likely influenced Shakespeare’s writing. The core of the guide, however, focuses on Shylock as the central figure of discussion. When the play was first registered for publication, it was described as “a book of the Merchant of Venice or otherwise called The Jew of Venice.” The “Merchant” is Antonio, but Shylock is the most pivotal character.

Over four hundred years after *The Merchant of Venice* was first written, the debate rages on about Shakespeare’s intentions regarding the character of Shylock, whether the play is anti-Semitic or a criticism of the Christian anti-Semitism of Shakespeare’s time, and even whether the play should be taught in schools. The goal of this guide is not to answer these questions, but to help teachers raise these very important issues with their students and to offer discussion questions, related activities and other resources that support an in-depth exploration of the play.

I. TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL TEXTS

Works of literature, written hundreds of years ago, may contain viewpoints that seem stereotypical and that offend modern sensibilities. While it is natural to want to protect students from these harsh sentiments, it may be counterproductive to omit controversial texts from class rather than using them as a vehicle for raising awareness and sensitivity about issues of prejudice. When teaching *The Merchant of Venice*, then, it is important to raise the issue of anti-Semitism as a precursor to examining the text, and to explore this type of prejudice as both a historical and contemporary phenomenon.

Throughout the play, Shylock, and by extension, all Jews, are presented as money-hungry, conniving, and cruel. Shylock—"the Jew," as he is called by everyone in the play—is compared with a dog, a cur, and a demon, and is referred to as "the very devil incarnation." Teachers should be aware of the negative impact these words and ideas could have on students without a thorough examination of the history and the context of this language. It is important to consider how Jewish students in class may feel after reading *The Merchant of Venice*, and equally essential to take into account how the play might reinforce stereotypes of Jews among other students. When negative and stereotypical portrayals of "minorities" are read in class with no examination or critical analysis of these stereotypes, students may assume that these depictions are accurate and true. It is therefore critical to contextualize these stereotypes and offer students an opportunity to examine and deconstruct them.

Related Activities/Discussion Questions

1. ON CENSORSHIP/FREEDOM OF SPEECH

- a. Ask students to define the word "censorship".
- b. Lead a discussion on the history of the free speech movement in the United States. Students can research organizations dedicated to the promise of freedom of speech, such as the ACLU, www.aclu.org or PEN, www.pen.org, an association of writers committed to defending freedom of expression.
- c. Lead a discussion on whether students think that censorship is ever appropriate.
- d. Have students debate whether or not censorship of *The Merchant of Venice* is ever an appropriate response to concerns about the promotion of anti-Semitism or prejudice. Divide the class into two teams; assign one to argue a pro-censorship perspective and the other an anti-censorship perspective. Create small groups of four students—two from each team—and allow them time to debate before debriefing as a whole class.

- e. Have students research works of literature that have been banned in classrooms in the United States in the last fifty years?
 - Do these books have anything in common? If so, what?
 - Research the years that these books were banned and compare the current events and news of the time period with the content of the books. Are there specific issues or trends that explain the controversies surrounding these works?
 - Students can read the American Library Association's information on this topic:
<http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/bookburning/21stcentury/21stcentury.htm>

2. ON LITERATURE AND ART

Lead a discussion on the role of art and literature as vehicles (sometimes controversial) of social commentary and the expression of new ideas. Explore the following:

- a. What is the purpose or function of art?
- b. What makes a piece of writing literature? Might this change over time? Can a book or play that was originally considered "literature" fall out of favor? If so, why?
- c. Who decides what is literature or art?
- d. Have students research recent controversies over art exhibits and the use of public funds to support them. What types of exhibits have been considered "controversial"? Who decides?
- e. Many readers find the character of Shylock to be an offensive caricature of Jews. Do you agree? If so, is it still worth reading or seeing the play? Why does *The Merchant of Venice* continue to be a "classic"?

II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF ANTI-SEMITISM

Anti-Semitism, often called "the longest hatred," is both an age-old problem and a current challenge. For centuries Jews have been accused of treacherous acts, including the murder of Jesus, poisoning wells, the ritual murder of Christian children, the Bubonic plague and controlling the media and the banks. Many of these falsities have roots in historical circumstances, and longstanding fear and misunderstanding. Tragically, these lies continue to be launched against Jews. Recently, Jews have been blamed for everything from the attacks on September 11 and the Iraq War to the tsunami that devastated Southeast Asia. The continual demonizing and scapegoating of the Jew as "other" highlights the need to analyze and discuss the depiction of Jews in literature. Without an examination of both historic and contemporary anti-Semitism, students may be left with stereotypical and negative conceptions of Jews and Judaism.

Certainly one of the most characteristic and troubling aspects of *The Merchant of Venice* is that the depiction of Shylock reinforces the stereotype of Jews as money-hungry and greedy. This stereotype has been around for centuries, and continues to be perpetuated today. Having students learn about some of the historical roots and causes of anti-Semitism, as well as some of the extremely deadly consequences of this hatred, gives them a background for a discussion of the play.

The reading, [An Abridged History of Anti-Semitism](#), can be shared with students to help provide this context. The text, which includes a discussion of anti-Semitism from biblical times, is included as an appendix at the end of this guide and can also be found on ADL's website at

http://www.adl.org/education/holocaust/holocaust_history.asp.

Related Activities/Discussion Questions

1. Sadly, anti-Semitism is not a thing of the past. Have students research contemporary instances of anti-Semitism, nationally and internationally. Students can read the ADL's Annual Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents at www.adl.org.
2. Lead a discussion about the word, "ghetto", definition provided:

Etymology: Italian, from Venetian dialect ghèto island where Jews were forced to live, literally, foundry (located on the island), from ghetàr to cast, from Latin jactare to throw --
1 : a quarter of a city in which Jews were formerly required to live
2 : a quarter of a city in which members of a minority group live especially because of social, legal, or economic pressure
3 a : an isolated group <a geriatric ghetto> **b** : a situation that resembles a ghetto especially in conferring inferior status or limiting opportunity <stuck in daytime TV's ghetto>.
(From Merriam Webster Online Dictionary)

- a. Where did the word originate?
 - b. What are some current connotations of the word? How does this relate to the original definition?
 - c. How does the contemporary conception of "ghetto" relate to *The Merchant of Venice*?
3. The expression "Jewed down" refers to the myth that Jews are cheap and good at haggling and bargaining. Ask students if they have heard this expression and if they find it offensive. If so, why? What can students do to respond to instances of anti-Semitic or racist speech?
 4. Anti-Semitism exists in countries with virtually no Jewish population. Why do you think that is? It is probable that Shakespeare had no firsthand experience with Jews, and had never met a Jewish person. Does that impact your understanding of *The Merchant of Venice*? If so, how?

5. Have students read “The Prioress’ Tale ” from Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales. What anti-Semitic myths from the Middle Ages can be found in the story? How are these stereotypes similar to those presented in *The Merchant of Venice*.

III. SHAKESPEARE’S ENGLAND

It is impossible to definitively know what Shakespeare’s intent was in creating the character of Shylock. Was Shakespeare drawing on the anti-Semitism of the time and using Shylock as an archetype to get laughs and evoke revulsion? Or, was Shakespeare turning this stereotype on its head to force his audiences to look at and question their own prejudices and fears? While it is likely that Shakespeare never visited Venice, it is also quite possible that he never met a Jew. Nevertheless fears and myths about Jews were ever-present.

“Even though there were no Jews left in England, the stereotypes and fears remained in Shakespeare’s England. Jews were immensely wealthy—even when they looked like paupers—and covertly pulled strings of an enormous intellectual network of capital and goods. Jews poisoned wells and were responsible for spreading the bubonic plague. Jews secretly plotted an apocalyptic war against the Christians” (Greenblatt, pp. 258-259).

Shakespeare may have also been responding to the current events of his time—the famous trial of a supposed Jewish traitor. In 1594, London was consumed with the high-profile trial of Roderigo Lopez, the queen’s physician. Lopez was accused of trying to poison the queen as a part of a plot hatched by the monarchs of Spain. Lopez, a practicing Protestant, was a converted Jew. The citizens of London feared that he was in fact, still a Jew, capable of the worst cunning and treachery possible. His alleged Jewishness matched his supposed deceitfulness and greed. Lopez was ultimately convicted and hanged in front of a laughing and mocking crowd of Londoners. Many scholars agree that this important trial of a prominent “Jew,” with the accusations of disloyalty, treachery and murder, influenced Shakespeare’s work. Some speculate that Shakespeare himself may have been present at the hanging of Dr. Lopez. (This charge against Jews of a divided loyalty, and of treason, has continually haunted Jews. The Dreyfus Affair in France in 1894 was based on the questioning of a Jew’s loyalty to his government. During the Holocaust, Jews were not seen as full citizens of their homelands. This charge continues today with many believing that American Jews are more loyal to Israel than to the United States).

Another English play from Shakespeare’s England is worth examining. Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* (1592) surely influenced Shakespeare and his creation of Shylock, the Jewish usurer. Marlowe was both a contemporary and a professional rival of Shakespeare. The Jew of the title, Barabas, is the height of anti-Semitic caricature. Among his many deeds are killing the sick, poisoning the wells, and poisoning an entire nunnery. Barabas, while embodying many anti-Jewish stereotypes, is only one of many despicable characters in the play, leading some to believe that Marlowe may have been critiquing the morality of the Christians of his

day as well. Marlowe was an extremely controversial figure and this work examined the social and political issues of his day, including religious diversity, the rise of a commercial economy, and international tensions. *The Jew of Malta* became the biggest theatrical hit of its time, and certainly fed the anti-Jewish hysteria that prompted the mob to laugh so heartily at Roderigo Lopez on the gallows. Shakespeare would have been familiar with the play and Shylock may have been written as a response to Marlowe's infamous creation, Barabas.

Elizabethan theatergoers would have recognized Shylock as a Jew immediately. His red wig, bulbous nose and huge cape immediately label him as "the other" and as an outsider. Even though Jews were not living in England (at least not openly), they represented a stereotype—evil, cunning, greed and at the very core, heartlessness. Throughout the play, Shylock is despised and insulted by the other characters. Shylock is spat upon by Antonio, reviled even by his servants, abandoned by his daughter, Jessica, and ultimately undone by Portia. The characters continually mock him and it is hard to imagine that the theatergoers in Shakespeare's time would not have shared the feelings of disdain conveyed by the players in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Since much of the tension in the play comes from the issue of usury, it may be helpful to explore the topic with your students. Money lending was a key political issue in Shakespeare's time, as the economy shifted from an agricultural to a market economy. A troubled relationship was forged between money-lenders and borrowers. Stephen Greenblatt writes,

"...though officially the English declared by statute that usury was illegal under the law of God and had driven out only the people who were exempt, by reason of being Jews, from this prohibition, the realm's mercantile economy could not function without the possibility of money lending... Christian usurers, even though they were not directly called that by name, occupied a position roughly comparable to the one held by the Jews: officially, they were despised, harassed, condemned from the pulpit and the stage, but they also played a key role. A role that could not be conveniently eliminated..." (Greenblatt, pp. 271-272).

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare exposes the increasing reliance on credit and money-lending in European society. Shylock, the money-lender, while reviled by the Venetians in the play, is a necessary evil as he makes it possible for his Christian customers to conduct both their business and "romantic" pursuits. The play explores the relationship and tension between love and commerce. Without Shylock's services, Bassanio could not win the "lady richly left," Portia, and the Venetian businessmen could not finance their ventures. The conceit of usury as money "breeding" is a critical one for the play, and is based on Aristotelian teachings. Throughout the play there are puns confusing sexual and romantic references to money as Shakespeare asks his audience to consider both Shylock's and the Christian's passion and lust for money. While Shakespeare may be highlighting Christian hypocrisy about greed and money lending, it is also important to remember

that money-lenders were despised in Shakespeare's time and that his audiences would have surely laughed at Shylock's ultimate ruin at the end of the play.

Related Activities/Discussion Questions

1. Jews have been historically scapegoated during difficult economic times. Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* not long after the Bubonic plague had ravaged England. Have students research the history of Jews in England during Shakespeare's time. How did the "Black Death" impact the plight of Jews living in England?
2. If it is true that Shakespeare never met a practicing Jew, why make Shylock Jewish? What purpose does Shylock serve in the play?
3. Have students read authors from Shakespeare's time with particular attention to their attitudes toward Jews and Christians. Have students visit the Folger Shakespeare Library website and review the following primary source material:
 - a. Read the excerpt from "*Jewish Hypocrisy, A Caveat To The Present Generation*" to explore anti-Semitism in Shakespearean England:
<http://www.folger.edu/eduPrimSrcDtl.cfm?psid=109>.
 - b. Have students look at the "Death of Usury" pamphlet written in England about the same time as *The Merchant of Venice*.
<http://www.folger.edu/eduPrimSrcDtl.cfm?psid=120>.
 - c. How are the views and opinions represented in these two texts similar to *The Merchant of Venice*? In what ways do they differ?
4. Since Christians were forbidden to lend money for profit, Jews assumed the role and forged uneasy associations with Christians, who were dependent on them for capital. How is this tension reflected in the relationship between Antonio and Shylock? Where specifically in *The Merchant of Venice* is this mentioned?
 - a. Many readers have argued that Shylock and Antonio represent each other's opposites: Christian/Jew, money-borrower/money-lender, generosity/greed, etc. What other ways do the characters oppose each other? What might have been Shakespeare's purpose in having these characters counter-balance each other? In what ways do these dichotomies represent the disparate political views of Shakespeare's day in terms of usury and money-lending? In what ways might Antonio represent Christian hypocrisy?
 - b. Shakespeare may have used *The Merchant of Venice*, and Shylock, as a platform to examine the shift in England from an agricultural economy to a commercial one. What is Shakespeare saying about the nature of his countrymen?

- c. Shakespeare may have been commenting on the rise of commercialism and globalization in his time. Have students research these issues in Elizabethan England.
 - In what ways does *The Merchant of Venice* reflect, and possibly critique, the increasing reliance on capital and global commerce?
 - How do these same tensions and problems play out today? Have students look for contemporary examples of art and literature that critique contemporary society's increased greed acquisitive nature.
- d. Have students examine Shylock's retelling of the story of Jacob and Laban in Act I, Scene III. What is Shylock's goal in the retelling of this story? What is the significance of the reference?
- e. Portia has been read as a stand-in for Queen Elizabeth, searching for an international mate and business partner for England. In what ways does this inform our understanding of Shakespeare's world-view? What does this say about views on love in *The Merchant of Venice*? On commerce?
- f. Shakespeare himself may have had personal experience with money-lending. His father, John Shakespeare, was accused at least twice of lending money at exorbitant rates. William Shakespeare himself very likely was involved with borrowing money. Does this information change your reading of the play? How?

IV. SHYLOCK: A CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Art and theatre are dynamic, and subject to interpretation from actors, directors, audiences and readers. Many critics have argued that *The Merchant of Venice* is a lesson about reading and interpretation. Throughout the play, characters interpret (and misinterpret) things: Shylock's interpretation of the "pound of flesh" is literal whereas Antonio initially reads Shylock's behavior as benign; Portia (disguised as the doctor) interprets the law and the quality of mercy; Gratiano and Bassanio misinterpret the doctor and his clerk, and are tricked into believing that their betrothed are men; and Portia's suitors are cast aside because they misread the caskets. In many ways our reading of Shylock is influenced through our contemporary lenses. Similarly, we can see how the portrayal of Shylock and the problem of anti-Semitism have also changed over the years.

Even before the play begins, the *dramatis personae* presents Shylock as an archetype, "Shylock, *the Jew*." Throughout the play, the other characters consistently refer to him as simply, "the Jew." This characterization dehumanizes and de-personalizes Shylock and reduces him from a person to a category. During Shakespeare's time, Shylock, and Jews in general, were portrayed on the stage as comical, yet villainous figures. The costume included an orange wig, a bulbous nose, and a large and sinister cape. Jews were types, not people.

Shylock is an outsider, both literally (living apart from Christian society in the Jewish ghetto) and figuratively (being forced into the margins). He is continually insulted,

degraded by the other characters and described in bestial terms as a dog and a wolf. At other points in the play, Shylock (and by extension all Jews) is equated with the devil and with evil. He is spat upon by Antonio and reviled even by his servants. Shylock's daughter, Jessica, abandons him by running away and marrying, and by symbolically leaving the Jewish faith and converting to Christianity. In the end, Shylock's greed leads to his ruin. He is left without a livelihood, and in many ways, without a life. Shakespeare's creation of Shylock mirrored the sentiments, fears and myths about Jews that were commonly held in his day.

Yet the most famous lines from the play seem to infuse the character of Shylock with some sympathy and humanity, though contradictions abound.

“Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimension, senses, affection, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.”

3:1.49-59

With these lines Shylock defends his humanity. This speech about human dignity stands in contrast, however, to the last few lines, a cry for vengeance. While Shylock claims that he is flesh and blood, he demands just this from Antonio—a pound of flesh. These lines continue to be interpreted in a range of ways. Some have argued that these lines prove that Shakespeare somehow transcended the anti-Semitism of his time and argues that a Jewish person's humanity must be recognized and respected. Others read the speech as a cynical and sarcastic one, showing once again that Shylock will use trickery to outwit and cheat his Christian customers.

The “pound of flesh” that Shylock seeks from Antonio is another extremely troubling aspect of the play. His inhumane (and unmerciful) cry for murderous vengeance adds to the despicable nature of his character, particularly in light of Portia's words about the quality of mercy. Shylock's greed and lust for money are paralleled by his cruelty. One can read this scene as a contrast between the vengeful Jew and the merciful Christian, and by extension a clash between Old Testament and New Testament readings and values. Strikingly, though, the mercy that Portia so eloquently describes is not ever extended to the Jews of the play.

The mystery of Shakespeare's intentions and the meanings of the play, in particular the intent behind Shylock, have allowed for numerous interpretations over the years. Since Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock has been played and seen as a comic buffoon, a cruel villain, and as a tragic and sympathetic outsider. In

Shakespeare's time Shylock was played as a comic figure. In the mid-1700s an English actor, Charles Macklin, created a monstrous and despicable villain. Later, in the early 19th century, the actor, Edmund Kean, challenged the conventional thinking and created a wholly sympathetic character. Starting in the Victorian period, and continuing through our contemporary times, most actors play Shylock as a tragic and human figure.

While one can debate the nature of Shylock's character, there is no doubt that Shylock has been used to fossilize and perpetuate the stereotypes of the evil Jew as powerful, cunning, money-hungry, and inhuman. As with the Passion Plays, stereotypical depictions of Jews may have had dangerous repercussions and fanned the fires of anti-Semitism. Some historians have argued that Nazi Germany's affection for Shakespeare as a purveyor of "Aryan values" was bolstered by the many, many performances of *The Merchant of Venice* that were launched during that time period. Students should be aware of the many ways that *The Merchant of Venice*, and other works of fiction, have been historically used as vehicles of anti-Semitism.

Related Activities/Discussion Questions:

LOOKING AT THE TEXT

1. "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" 4.I.169
Portia's question asks the audience to consider the many similarities between Antonio and Shylock, both merchants and money-lenders. Lead a discussion comparing these two characters.
2. Have students discuss the following lines from Act Three, Scene Three, spoken by Shylock.
*"Thou call'dst me dog before thou hadst a cause;
But, since I am a dog, beware my fangs."*
 - a. What warning is conveyed through this metaphor?
 - b. Why did Shakespeare choose to use the image of a dog? What does this say about Shakespeare's conception of Jewish people? How does it shape the audience's attitudes?
 - c. Do you think Shylock's attitude is offensive or justifiable?
3. Shylock is frequently compared to a dog and to a wolf. Why?
 - The Nazis frequently compared Jews to vermin and used animalistic language to demean and dehumanize Jews. Compare the Nazis use of language with that of the Venetians in the play.

4. In other historical instances, words have been used to demonize the “other” by comparing them to animals and beasts. Have students research the government-sponsored radio broadcasts and newspaper articles from the Rwandan genocide to look at how language shaped the conflict (see, for example, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/rwanda/Geno1-3-10.htm>).

- How does this mirror what the Nazis did? What the characters in *The Merchant of Venice* do? Are there current examples of groups of people being ostracized through dehumanizing language?

5. One of the major dichotomies in *The Merchant of Venice* is between love and money. Throughout the play, Shylock confuses the two. His conception that love equals money is a troubling stereotype in the play. Have students examine the following lines from Act 2, Scene 8:

*I never heard a passion so confused,
So strange, outrageous, and so variable,
As the dog Jew did utter in the streets:
'My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!*

- a. What do these words mean?
 - b. Is this troubling? How does this influence the audience’s understanding of Shylock? Of Jewish people?
 - c. Have students find other examples in the play of Shylock’s equating of love and money.
 - d. Why does Shakespeare have Solanio retell these lines from Shylock rather than have Shylock say them himself? What is the effect of this?
6. Have students discuss the scene where Portia’s suitors must select a casket to win her hand in marriage. Much is made of appearances, both of the caskets and of the suitors. What is the intent? How does this relate to Shylock and how he is viewed by the Christians in the play?
7. Most critics who claim that Shakespeare transcends the anti-Semitism of his day find evidence in Shylock’s “Hath a Jew Eyes” speech. Have students read the speech closely and consider whether Shakespeare intended to convey sympathy for the Jews.
- a. Who is Shylock speaking to in this speech? Who responds? Do you think that this important?
 - b. What is Shylock’s intent in giving this speech?
 - c. Does Shylock’s speech impact any of the characters in the play? To what extent does this inform our understanding of Shakespeare’s intent?
 - d. Compare this speech to some of Shylock’s other speeches. Is Shylock’s message consistent? How does this speech differ from many of his other comments?
 - e. Do you think that Shylock is defending his humanity? Or is Shylock tricking the Christians into showing him mercy? Why?

8. How does the historically anti-Semitic myth of the “blood libel” (explained in *A Brief History of Anti-Semitism*) relate to the “pound of flesh” that Shylock wants to extract from Antonio? Do you think that this is significant?
9. Critics have also read the “pound of flesh” as a reference and misinterpretation of the Jewish rite of circumcision. Have students interpret that reading.
10. Do you think that Shylock is a sympathetic character or a cruel and inhuman stereotype?
 - a. In what ways does Shylock defy stereotypes cast upon him throughout the play?
 - b. In what ways does Shylock beg for our sympathies?
 - c. What do the other characters make of Shylock?
 - d. What about Jessica, Shylock’s daughter? How does her rejection of her father and conversion affect our impressions of Shylock?
 - e. How do you interpret Shylock’s conversion to Christianity? What does this mean for him?
 - f. In the end, Shylock is defeated. What do you make of this? Does his undoing impact our understanding of his character?
 - g. Can you think of other examples of characters in literature, film, or television that seem stereotypical?
 - h. Are these depictions ever appropriate? Justified?

SHYLOCK INTERPRETATIONS

1. Many critics read *The Merchant of Venice* as a story of interpretation (e.g., the law is variably interpreted as is the concept of mercy; Portia’s suitors’ draw different conclusions about the meaning of the caskets; etc.) In what ways is our reading of Shylock influenced by our contemporary interpretation of the play?
2. Different actors and directors have interpreted Shylock as a buffoonish comic figure, a nightmarish villain, and as a sympathetic character, pleading for his human rights. Why do you think that is? What factors may have influenced these very specific interpretations in different times and places?
3. Show students video, film clips or still photographs from different productions of *The Merchant of Venice*. For photos, see [Stage Depictions of Shylock](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/7221/stagehistory.htm) at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/7221/stagehistory.htm>.
 - a. How do the portrayals of Shylock vary?
 - b. In what ways are the depictions consistent?
 - c. How do some of the actors make Shylock a sympathetic character?
 - d. How do some of the actors make Shylock a despicable villain?

- e. Until the 1800's, Shylock had been portrayed as a comic figure, and played for laughs. Why do you think this changed with Edmund Keane's performance in the early 19th century?
4. At the end of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is virtually dead. He is disgraced and ruined at the trial, his daughter has abandoned both him and their faith, and he is destitute and forced to convert to Christianity. Literally, the Jew is dead. Shakespeare pushes Shylock even farther to the margins of Venetian society than we find him at the beginning of the play. His loneliness and isolation stand in sharp contrast to the union of the young lovers on the idyllic island of Belmont that marks the "happy" ending of the play.
 - a. Why does Shakespeare provide these contrasts? What is the final feeling that the audience is left with?
 - b. Many modern productions of the play have added an additional "dumb-show" (pantomime) scene in which Jessica reacts to her losses. What might the purpose of this addition be?
 - c. Why do directors take such liberty with this "classic"?
 - d. Can we read Shylock as an empathetic character if we see this play as a "comedy"?
5. *The Merchant of Venice* was staged frequently during the 1930s in Austria and Germany. What were some of the reasons? Can you think of other examples of art being used as propaganda either historically or contemporarily?
6. Taken in its entirety, do you think *The Merchant of Venice* endorses anti-Semitism? In what ways? If not, does the play actually critique the anti-Semitism of the time and ask us to reflect on our own prejudices and biases? Can the play do both simultaneously?
 - a. Lead a debate with students about the merits and limitations of the play.
 - b. Do you think that this play should be studied in school?
 - c. Does the literary value and artistic merit rise above the more troubling and stereotypical aspects of the play?
 - d. How can study of the play be framed to raise awareness of the dangers of prejudice and prevent the perpetuation of anti-Semitism?

For additional lesson plans and other teaching materials on The Merchant of Venice and other Shakespeare plays, visit the Folger Shakespeare Library Lesson Plans Archive at <http://www.folger.edu/lessonplans>. The Folger Shakespeare Library is a world-class research center on Shakespeare and on the early modern age in the West.

V. GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Anti-Semitism: Anti-Semitism is prejudice and/or discrimination against Jews. Anti-Semitism can be based on hatred against Jews because of their religious beliefs, their group membership (ethnicity) and sometimes the erroneous belief that Jews are a race.

Caricature: a gross and exaggerated depiction or portrait.

Discrimination: (an action) Discrimination is the denial of justice and fair treatment by both individuals and institutions in many arenas, including employment, education, housing, banking and political rights. Discrimination is an action that can follow prejudicial thinking.

Prejudice (a feeling): Prejudice is prejudging or making a decision about a group of people without sufficient knowledge. Prejudicial thinking is frequently based on stereotypes.

Scapegoating: Scapegoating is blaming an individual or group for something based on that person's or group's identity when, in reality, the person or group is not responsible. Prejudicial thinking and discriminatory acts can lead to scapegoating.

Shoah: Hebrew for "catastrophe"; used as a synonym for the Holocaust.

Stereotype (an idea): A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization about a person or a group of people without regard for individual differences. Even seemingly positive stereotypes that link a person or group to a specific positive trait can have negative consequences.

Usury: The lending of money with an interest charge for its use; *especially* : the lending of money at exorbitant interest rates.

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VII. Appendix: An Abridged History of Anti-Semitism

Definition

Anti-Semitism is the hatred of the Jewish people and/or Judaism, the Jewish religion. It has been called anti-Judaism when it targets Jewish beliefs and practices, and anti-Semitism when it targets the Jewish people as a perceived race. Sometimes referred to as "the oldest hatred," it began as a conflict over religious beliefs, but in certain places and times, it evolved into a governmental policy of political, economic and social isolation, exclusion, degradation, and attempted annihilation. It did not begin in the Nazi era, nor did it end with the close of World War II. Its continuance over the millennia speaks to the power of scapegoating a group that is defined as "the other."

Biblical Times

Abraham who is believed to be the father of the three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) led his family to Canaan almost 2,000 years before the Common Era (B.C.E.). It was there that a new nation--the people of Israel--came into being. During those centuries before Christ, the Hebrews (the early Jewish people) experienced occasional persecution because they refused to worship the idols of the kingdoms in the Middle East. This was seen as stubborn and was resented by surrounding nations since the usual custom of the times was to adopt the religion of the locale or ruler.

Anti-Judaism

After the beginning of Christianity, a new anti-Judaism evolved. Initially, Christianity was seen as simply another Jewish sect since Jesus and his Disciples were Jewish and were preaching a form of Judaism. In the year 70 C.E. (Common Era), the Romans destroyed the Jewish State and most Jews were scattered throughout the ancient world.

During the first few hundred years after the crucifixion of Jesus, by the Romans, followers of both Judaism and Christianity, lived together throughout the Mediterranean sometimes peacefully, sometimes with hostility, as both groups tried to spread their religious beliefs in the same lands.

When the Roman Emperors converted to Christianity, it became the sole established religion of the Roman Empire. Since both religions followed the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), early Christian church leaders sought to establish their religion as a successor to Judaism by asserting that Jesus was the Messiah to those who refused to become Christians.

The unwillingness to accept Jesus as the Messiah was viewed as a threat to the Roman rulers and the Christian faith. By not recognizing Jesus, Jews were seen as abandoning their role in the divine plan and were thus seen as unnecessary. A destructive charge was now imposed upon the Jews; they were portrayed as "Christ Killers."

The Middle Ages: The Early Modern Period

During the next three centuries (300-600 C.E.) new patterns of institutionalized discrimination against Jews occurred: Jews were forbidden to intermarry with Christians (399 C.E.), prohibited from holding high positions in government (439 C.E.), and prevented from appearing as witnesses against Christians in court (531 C.E.). As Jews were officially being excluded, certain bizarre fantasies about Jews arose in Northern Europe that foreshadowed the anti-Semitism of the 20th Century. Some people came to believe that Jews had horns and tails or engaged in ritual murder of Christians. The latter allegation, referred to as "blood libel," was created by Thomas of Monmouth, an Englishman, in 1150 to explain the mysterious death of a Christian boy. The belief appears again in English and German myths. In addition, Jews were accused of poisoning wells in various communities.

In 1095, Pope Urban II made a general appeal to the Christians of Europe to take up the cross and sword and liberate the Holy Land from the Muslims, beginning what was to be known as the Crusades. The religious fervor that drove men, and later even children, on the Crusades was to have direct consequences for Jews. The Crusader army on the way to attacking Muslims in the Holy Land swept through Jewish communities looting, raping and massacring Jews. This was the beginning of the pogrom, or the organized massacre of helpless people, who held unpopular religious beliefs.

During the middle of the 14th century the Bubonic Plague spread throughout Europe, killing an estimated one-third of the population. Fear, superstition and ignorance prompted the need to find someone to blame and the Jews were a convenient scapegoat because of the myths and stereotypes that already existed about them. Though Jews were also dying from the plague, they were accused of poisoning wells and spreading the disease.

Martin Luther, the founder of the 16th Century Reformation and Protestantism, wrote a pamphlet in 1545 entitled *The Jews and Their Lies*. Luther claimed that Jews thirsted for Christian blood and urged that the Jews be killed. The Nazis reprinted this pamphlet in 1935. Some scholars feel that these outrageous attacks mark the transition from anti-Judaism (attacks motivated because of the Jews' refusal to accept Christianity) to anti-Semitism (hatred of Jews as a so-called "race" who would contaminate the purity of another race.)

Increasingly Jews were subjected to political, economic and social discrimination, resulting in the loss of their legal and civil rights. In some European countries, they were segregated by laws which forced them to live in certain sections of the towns called ghettos. Beginning in the 13th Century, in many parts of Europe, Jews were required to wear a distinctive emblem (a badge and/or a pointed hat) so that they could be immediately recognized. (Shylock lives in the Jewish ghetto of Venice and is recognizable by his "Jewish gabardine," a cloak worn by Jews of the period.)

Jews were forbidden to own land, and in agricultural societies there were few other means of supporting their families. Since the Church did not allow Christians to loan money for profit, money lending became one of the few ways in which Jews could earn money legally. Once they became associated with the forbidden trade of usury

(loaning money for interest) a new set of stereotypes evolved in which Jews were accused of being money hungry.

As moneylenders, Jews were frequently useful to rulers who used their capital to build cathedrals and outfit armies. As long as Jews benefited the ruler, either through finance or by serving as a convenient scapegoat, they were tolerated. When they were no longer of use to the ruler, Jews were expelled--from England in 1290, France in 1394, and Spain in 1492. Thus, during Shakespeare's lifetime (1564-1616), Jews had been cast out of England for almost 300 years and it is likely that he never had any direct experience with Jewish people when he wrote *Merchant of Venice*.

The Rise of the Jewish Ghetto¹

Because of their central role in economic exchange—in foreign trade, loans to the state, and small-scale money-lending—Jews were seen in late medieval and early modern Europe as a necessary evil; they could neither be tolerated nor expelled. Jews had been lending money to Venice to fight its wars since the late fourteenth century. Venetian authorities, like others in Europe, felt uneasy about the close cohabitation of Christians and Jews, so they passed laws forbidding sexual relations between them.

The origins of the Venetian Ghetto can be traced back to the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, when Pope Innocent III decreed that Jews should be forbidden from holding public office, should have clothing that distinguished them from Christians, and should not appear in public during Easter week. It was the responsibility of Christian magistrates to restrict Jewish economic activity. Segregation was seen as a simple way of enforcing these laws in Venice and elsewhere (Jews had been living in restricted quarters in cities like Prague since the late thirteenth century). Jews had been permitted to live in Venice in 1509, and soon secured the right to practice money-lending in return for financial payments to the state. They were tolerated as a source of revenue for the government and as providers of cheap credit for poor Christians. Unlike what we find in Shakespeare's play, Venetian Jews were forbidden to make largescale commercial loans.

In 1516, after rejecting the idea of relegating the Jews to a small island called Giudecca, the Venetian authorities designated an area called the ghetto nuovo, or "new foundry," named after the copper and bronze foundry there, as the locale where all Jews were required to relocate and to live in rented quarters. This is the origin of the now widespread use of the term "ghetto." High walls sealed off access and heavy wooden gates, guarded by Christians, were opened at sunrise and locked at sunset. At its peak, several thousand Jews lived in the Ghetto and a thriving community flourished.

Anti-Jewish actions intensified in the sixteenth-century Catholic Europe, part of a larger Counter-Reformation reaction by the Church. Copies of the Talmud were burned in 1553 and Jews who had converted to Christianity, and whose conversion was suspect, were persecuted. In 1555 Pope Paul IV declared, "Jews were condemned to live in a quarter set apart from the Christians." They also had to wear distinctive

¹ *The Rise of the Jewish Ghetto* section is from *The Merchant of Venice Official Teacher's Guide* by Mary E. Cregan, Ph.D., Department of English, Barnard College. Available at <http://www.sonypictures.com>, courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics Inc.

garb and were no longer allowed to own real estate. The Venetian Ghetto served as a model for other Italian cities. In the wake of Pope Paul IV's decree, similar restrictions were imposed on Jewish communities in Rome, Siena, Florence, Verona, Padua, and elsewhere in Italy.

Not until 1797, two hundred and eighty years after they had first swung shut on the Jews within, would the wooden gates of the Venetian ghetto be torn down and burned.

The Enlightenment

During the 18th Century, Europe was influenced by the increase in knowledge of the scientific world and a new perception of the human condition. The idea of universal human progress led to a belief in the basic equality of all individuals. Following the spread of Enlightenment ideas throughout Europe during Napoleon's conquests, many countries in Europe granted Jews citizenship rights.

In Germany, Jews were granted full civil rights in 1871 after the German states unified into a single nation called the Second Reich. With their new status as full citizens, Jews were able to take up many occupations previously denied to them. Many Jews improved their social and economic positions by becoming storekeepers, lawyers, doctors, and teachers. However, full professorships in the universities and high military ranks were rarely available to them. Many left the ghettos and became part of German's growing middle class. With citizenship, many Jews came to believe that their first loyalty was to their nation. They fought as German soldiers in the Franco-Prussian War and in World War I.

Jews made important contributions in many aspects of German culture. They participated actively in the visual arts, theater, film, the scientific community, literature, philosophy, medicine, law, etc. German Jews such as Albert Einstein, Martin Buber, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Kurt Weill, Walter Rathenau, Heinrich Heine, Hannah Arendt and Ernest Lubitsch and many others made significant contributions in their respective fields.

Anti-Semitism

The term anti-Semitism was first used in 1873 by Wilhelm Marr, a German politician. It coincided with the development across Northern Europe and the United States of a new so-called pseudo-science based on theories of racial superiority and inferiority. These ideas were also used to justify European colonialism during the 19th century.

It has sometimes been stated that the term "anti-Semitism" should or does include all Semitic people and not just Jews. As the term was created specifically to refer to hatred of Jews, this is historically and linguistically false and in some cases, it is an attempt to co-opt the terminology to use against Jews today.

Many have asked why anti-Semitism turned to genocide in Germany, rather than in France or England, which had the same medieval heritage. Following World War I, Germany was a deeply troubled country. Having lost the war, its citizens felt humiliated by the defeat. The victorious countries, including the United States, France and England authored the Treaty of Versailles, a peace treaty which compelled

Germany to give up territory, and to pay large sums of money to the countries whose territories it had damaged during the war. Germany also suffered severe economic problems of inflation and unemployment during the 1920's and 1930's. The government of the Weimer Republic which was established after World War I was unable to solve these problems. Increasingly, there were strikes and riots that the government could not control.

In 1933 when the Nazi Party, under the leadership of Adolph Hitler seized control over Germany, Hitler could call upon remembered myths of the "blood libel" to evoke fear that the Jews would contaminate what he referred to as the superior "Aryan race." A significant number of the German people had "bought into" the extremely effective use of Nazi propoganda and were willing to place blame for Germany's problems on the Jews. Therefore, according to Hitler's doctrine, all Jews, and their genetic pool had to be eliminated.

The Holocaust

There may be no more succinct description of the Holocaust than the statement issued by the Vatican on March 12, 1998:

This century has witnessed an unspeakable tragedy, which can never be forgotten: the attempt by the Nazi regime to exterminate the Jewish people, with the consequent killing of millions of Jews. Women and men, old and young, children and infants, for the sole reason of their Jewish origin, were persecuted and deported. Some were killed immediately, while others were degraded, ill-treated, tortured and utterly robbed of their human dignity, and then murdered. Very few of those who entered the [Concentration] Camps survived, and those who did remained scarred for life. This was the Shoah.

As Pope John Paul II recognized, "erroneous (mistaken) and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability (guilt) have circulated for too long...." and may have created anti-Jewish sentiment in some Christian minds and hearts. The progressive dehumanization that Jews endured-the image of the Jews' demonic "otherness"-made the Holocaust possible.

Contemporary Anti-Semitism

Contemporary anti-Semitism draws upon all the old forms and images. In various part of the world, there exists a disturbing coexistence of anti-Judaism (the theological hatred of Jews and Judaism), anti-Semitism (hatred of Jews as a race or group), state sponsored anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism (opposition to the establishment or development of the State of Israel) and various forms of these strains.

While anti-Zionism is not always anti-Semitic, often it is. When one country is singled out for criticism and reproach when other countries are engaged in similar or more problematic acts and are not criticized, it is reflective of a double standard and prejudicial attitudes. The line is crossed when it passes from criticism of the actions or policies of the government (which is legitimate) to questioning the very existence of the Jewish state (which is a form of bigotry and anti-Semitism.)

A defining characteristic of anti-Semitism today is the concept of "Jewish power." This is unique as most groups who are the subject of such intense hatred are hated for their perceived inferiority while hatred for Jews seems to target their perceived power and the control (often invisible) that such power gives Jews over others.

The stereotype of Jewish power is derived from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This document, supposedly the writings of a secret group of rabbis plotting to take over the world, was later found to be forged by the secret police of Czar Nicholas II in an attempt to blame the Jews for problems Russia was experiencing. The "Protocols" were to serve as one of the bulwarks of Nazi propaganda and were introduced into the curriculum of many of Germany's schools.

While the "Protocols" have been delegitimized throughout most of the West, they have recently taken on a new currency in the Middle East. In Fall 2002, the Egyptian state-owned media released a 41-part television series, "Horseman Without a Horse," based on the "Protocols." Indeed, there appears to be a recent and widespread adoption of medieval European libels of Jews throughout parts of the Islamic world. Most chilling has been the credence in many parts of Europe to the attempt by many in the Muslim world to blame Jews or Israel for responsibility for the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center.

A recent ADL survey of five European countries finds that one in five people hold strong anti-Semitic sentiments (September 2002). In Germany today, governmental safeguards against fascist anti-Semitism have been instituted and yet young neo-Nazi Skinheads, frustrated at rising unemployment, look for scapegoats. When they cannot find living Jews, they desecrate Jewish cemeteries and look for other vulnerable targets such as immigrant workers. In Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Soviet Union has brought with it a rise in nationalist groups that use anti-Semitism to meet their political ends. There is even anti-Semitism in countries where there are virtually no Jews, like Japan.

The United States has been unique in its constitutional separation of church and state, full provision for citizenship for Jews and its institutional support of Jewish life from President Washington to the present. Despite these institutional protections, Jews still experience enjoying the full benefits of citizenship, according to the 2001 FBI Hate Crimes Statistics Act Report, 75 percent of hate crime incidents motivated by religious bias targeted Jews. In addition, extremist groups and Skinhead youth promote racist and anti-Semitic worldviews and are actively recruiting young people through various means including on the Internet. Anti-Semitism has a history and, like all forms of hate, it has a legacy as well.