

◆◆◆ **MERCHANT OF VENICE** ◆◆◆

COURSE PLAN METHODOLOGY: *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare is represented by the abbreviation **MV**. The student should become familiar with the course plan, determining, with the help of parents, whether to read each synopsis beforehand, afterward, or as a study aid. The final week will offer students the opportunity to read and respond to one of the critical essays that follow the novel--**doing so is optional**.

COURSE TEXTS:

- MV** ❖ Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. Ed. Joseph Pearce. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009. (T3959)
- MVSG** ❖ *Kolbe Academy Study Guide to The Merchant of Venice*. Kolbe Academy Press: Napa, 2014. (*The two-book set includes a student book with questions and a teacher book with questions and answers.*) (T3959A), Optional

A NOTE ON IGNATIUS CRITICAL EDITIONS: Kolbe Academy is fortunate in having *Ignatius Critical Editions* to offer for many titles in its British Literature Course, including for *The Merchant of Venice*. The *Critical Editions* series “represents a tradition-oriented approach to reading the Classics of world literature.” It “concentrates on critical examinations informed by our Judeo-Christian heritage.”¹ We at Kolbe could not hope for a better tool to help students of all ability levels learn to appreciate the beauty, artistry, and wisdom to be found within the pages of a great book. Those students who are inclined to a deeper study of literature will thrive on learning how to examine a work to gain insights like those contained in the critical essays; those not so inclined will discover how to examine a text to learn what it truly has to say.

**CHARACTERS:**

Shylock: The Jewish moneylender who stands for justice untempered by mercy.

Antonio: The merchant of the title. He is the guarantor of a loan for Bassanio from Shylock

Bassanio: One of Portia’s suitors. He accepts a loan from Shylock (for which Antonio is guarantor) in order to pay suit to the fair Portia, but must pass a test of his worthiness in order to win her.

Gratiano: Bassanio’s reasonable friend (or *raisonneur*). He is in love with Nerissa.

Lorenzo: A friend of Bassanio and Antonio’s. He falls in love with Jessica.

Launcelot Gobbo: Shylock’s servant who later serves Bassanio. He is a comic character.

Portia: A wealthy heiress of marriageable age. Both beautiful and intelligent, she can only be won by a man who discovers her true worth. It is her wisdom, mercy and daring that save Antonio.

Nerissa: Portia’s lady-in-waiting. She is a *raisonneur*. She is in love with Gratiano.

Jessica: Shylock’s daughter who falls in love with Lorenzo.

The Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Aragon: Two of Portia’s suitors

¹ *The Merchant of Venice*. Ignatius Press (San Francisco) 2009. Back Cover. Print.

The Duke of Venice: The character in the play that stands for law and justice.

Salerio and Solanio: Good friends of Antonio's.

BEFORE YOU READ

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE AS LITERATURE AND AS THEATRE

In reading the *Merchant of Venice* students are entering not only a literary world, but a theatrical world. They must see the characters, sets, lighting, and costumes in their imaginations to make the experience worthwhile. Of course, the best way to study the play is to see it acted. In the Ignatius Press version of *The Merchant of Venice*, James Bemis recommends watching the 1972 version directed by Cedric Messina and starring Charles Gray as Antonio, Maggie Smith as Portia, and Frank Finlay as Shylock. Students would have to do their own research to find the film's availability. If students live near one of the many regional theaters across the country that regularly produces Shakespeare plays, they are encouraged to take advantage of a live performance. Barring that, however, the student should read scenes out loud, most fruitfully with the help of family members taking various roles. If the reading cast members study the scene a bit before starting, they can interpret the lines well and make them come to life. Of course, the student can benefit greatly by reading the introduction and one or two of the critical essays before reading the play. The introduction and critical essays (We recommend reading *Text as Test: Reading the Merchant of Venice* by Crystal Downing) will help students find and use the interpretive keys that unlock the play's meanings.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE AND THE CHARGE OF ANTI-SEMITISM

Discussion of *The Merchant of Venice* will probably always center on the issue of anti-Semitism. It is an important issue for Catholic readers (see below). The *Merchant of Venice* that we carry is part of the Ignatius Critical Editions series; it addresses this question, tying Shakespeare's pandering to anti-Semitic sentiment to the Perez matter of his time. Read more about it in the introduction to the book. Further, the essay titled "*Text as Test: Reading The Merchant of Venice*" by Crystal Downing gives the reader the interpretive key to understand the play as centered, as the title suggests, on the merchant in *The Merchant of Venice* and not on the money lender in *The Merchant of Venice*.

CATHOLICISM AND THE JEWISH RELIGION

It is important to note that the Catholic Church does not condone anti-Semitism or the blaming of all Jews for the death of Christ on the Cross, a death he chose freely to bring about salvation. Parents may wish to review the following from *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions) with the student before reading this play:

"Thus the Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God's saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. She professes that all who believe in Christ—Abraham's sons according to faith—are included in the same Patriarch's call, and likewise that the salvation of the Church is mysteriously foreshadowed by the chosen people's exodus from the land of bondage. The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have

been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles. Indeed, the Church believes that by His cross Christ, Our Peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles, making both one in Himself.

The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsmen: "theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:4-5), the Son of the Virgin Mary. She also recalls that the Apostles, the Church's main-stay and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ's Gospel to the world, sprang from the Jewish people.

As Holy Scripture testifies, Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation, nor did the Jews in large number, accept the Gospel; indeed not a few opposed its spreading. Nevertheless, God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues—such is the witness of the Apostle. In company with the Prophets and the same Apostle, the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and "serve him shoulder to shoulder" (Soph. 3:9)...

...True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ.

Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.

Besides, as the Church has always held and holds now, Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation. It is, therefore, the burden of the Church's preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's all-embracing love and as the fountain from which every grace flows."

SHAKESPEARE'S PLACE IN THEATRE HISTORY

At the time of Shakespeare's prolific career, the theater was undergoing quite a change. Before the Reformation, theater was rooted in religion. And before that, historians believe, theater was born through Greek religious practices. Something in our very makeup seeks to enact and present the spiritual and moral dilemmas we face in dramatic form so that we can see them and understand them better. After the loss of ancient theater, the Catholic Church saved the performing arts during the medieval period. Catholic rituals such as Stations of the Cross laid the foundation for theater inspired by the Catholic Faith. Feast days such as Corpus Christi and the Feast of Fools prepared the way for the popular mystery plays and miracle plays based on the Holy Scripture and the lives of the saints. Sponsored by the local craft guilds, these plays presented the history of God's intervention in our world from Creation to final judgment and included Adam and Eve's expulsion, Isaac's Sacrifice, and the Trial and Passion of Jesus. The mystery plays served to educate townsfolk and villagers about the Faith. It is very likely that Shakespeare saw the best of these plays, the Coventry Corpus Christi Pageants, when he was a child. His home town of Stratford-upon-Avon was some twenty miles from Coventry. From these plays, the morality plays such as *Everyman* arose. By Shakespeare's time, drama was flourishing in the English-speaking world. Unfortunately, there was a shift in the content of plays with the onslaught of the

Black Death. The Protestant Revolution that followed believed theater to be sinful because it was based on falsehood. Within the atmosphere of this suffocating new society, Shakespeare created some of the most famous plays in theater history. Shakespeare took the morality plays which he had seen as a boy and buried them in the context of his work. In addition, he gave his work a depth and breadth that reward multiple close readings and attentive viewings—many of his plays require interpretation on several levels. However, with a firm foundation in theology, a Catholic student can uncover the Faith-honoring messages in Shakespeare’s plays.

WEEK 1		
READING	MV	<p>Read the Introduction by Joseph Pearce: Note the discussion of sources based on pre-existing plots: the story of the suitor and the usurer, the story of the caskets, and the story of the pound of flesh which give the play its structure.</p> <p>Read: Act I, Scenes I-III through Act II, Scenes I-IV</p>
Study Guide	MVSG	Answer the questions for the above.
Synopsis		<p>Act I, Scene I: Venice, on the street: When we meet Antonio, the merchant of the title, he is feeling melancholy and cannot say why. Though he is a trader with much of his fortune tied up in goods still at sea, he does not consider that to be the cause of his melancholy. Gratiano, his friend, points out that it is wrong for Antonio to mope about (I.I. 83-87). In this he plays the <i>raisonneur</i> or one who argues using reason. Bassanio, who is visiting, needs a great sum of money to play the suitor to Portia. Antonio says that he will help him find the money in any way he can.</p> <p>Act I, Scene II: Belmont, Portia’s house. This scene in which Portia and Nerissa are talking mimics the first scene when Portia complains of melancholy. This time, instead of Gratiano being the voice of reason (or the <i>raisonneur</i>), Nerissa counsels her to be contented and live within the golden mean, or between extremes. Portia explains that her sadness comes from the fact that she cannot choose her own suitor. She has plenty of them, however, and she and Nerissa make sport of the latest applicants for her hand. Nerissa reminds her of Bassanio, “A Venetian, a scholar and a soldier” who was known to her father. She remembers him well.</p> <p>Act I, Scene III: Venice, a public place. Antonio, on Bassanio’s behalf, enters into a loan with Shylock, the terms of which might cost Antonio a pound of his flesh. Note: Antonio and Shylock have bad blood between them. Shylock, a Jew, feels slighted by Antonio, a Christian; further, Shylock disapproves of Antonio’s lending money without interest. It is the latter that forms the chief conflict of the play, not religious differences. Look for the following speech from Shylock: “I hate him for he is a Christian;/But more, for that in low simplicity/He lends out money gratis, and brings down/The rate of usance here with us in Venice.” (II. 42-45) The Church taught that usury was wrong when income was received by the lender (interest) on an unproductive loan for the borrower, that is, that the borrower himself made no profit or excess from which to repay the loan. Think about someone borrowing money to pay for a family member’s medicine. All the money would be gone, and the borrower left in a worse monetary position. Of course, he could designate monies meant for other purposes to the loan, but the church did not approve of such</p>

	<p>arrangements—neither did Antonio.</p> <p>Act II, Scene I: Belmont, Portia’s house. The Prince of Morocco has the test for Portia’s hand explained to him. A strict rule of the process is revealed to him: If a man chooses the wrong casket, he forfeits his right to marry another (line 39- 43). Therefore, paying suit to Portia is a dangerous venture for a prince, whose duty it is to carry on his royal bloodline by marrying and producing an heir.</p> <p>Act II, Scene II: Venice, a street. A side plot is established in this scene. Launcelot Gobbo, Shylock’s servant, must decide whether to be faithful to him or to leave him and serve Bassanio. Though the episode is introduced for comic relief, it reflects the larger theme of the play. Launcelot is choosing between Old Testament law and New Testament grace. When Old Gobbo enters and does not recognize his son, he is looking with the eyes of one who sees the law of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob without seeing the Son or the new Covenant to which they point.</p> <p>Act II, Scene III: Venice, Shylock’s house. Jessica, Shylock’s daughter, sets a plot to elope with Lorenzo in motion.</p> <p>Act II, Scene IV: Venice, a street. Scene IV serves as an exposition to the audience of Jessica’s and Lorenzo’s flight from her father. Jessica’s fortune, which she is to bring, is a foreshadowing of the future storyline.</p>
<p><i>Paper Topic</i></p>	<p><i>Was Portia’s father acting with love when he instituted the three-casket test for her suitors? What did he want for her as her father? Weigh the question as you read by paying attention to what Shakespeare is saying about freedom and law. Remember individual characters will embody specific attitudes toward freedom and law. (Hint: The only true freedom is the freedom to do good; hence preparing oneself for an ordered freedom is the best way to go.)</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;">◆◆◆</p> <p>↔ Key Points:</p> <p>Introduction: At the start of the play, Shakespeare is concentrating on developing the characters and the bonds of friendship and camaraderie between them. Shakespeare utilizes the character of Antonio as a Christ figure, an image that is used throughout the play.</p> <p>Genre: Comedy. Comedies end in marriage; they affirm the value of life. Dealing as they do with human foibles, they, nevertheless, include suffering—although the suffering does not lead to death, instead it leads to the establishment of a new harmony. Typically, comedies include a journey to the green wood where the characters have an adventure, suffer, change, and come back having been refreshed (hence the green, the color of life). Shakespeare employs this structure in <i>As You Like It</i> and <i>A Midsummer Night’s Dream</i>. In <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>, Belmont, or the beautiful mountain, functions as the green wood. Shylock is a comic character. If he were not, Portia would not be an admirable heroine.</p> <p>Mood: Individual and alternating scenes may be melancholy, joyful, suspenseful, comic, and serious.</p> <p>Plot: The three main plots are the suitor and the usurer, the three caskets, and the pound of flesh.</p> <p>Sub Plots: Shakespeare’s side plots comment on the main plot. Launcelot Gobbo and Jessica, Gratiano and Nerissa provide romantic sub plots, as you would expect in a comedy.</p> <p>Conflict: Man vs. Society</p>	

Setting: Venice: The commercial center that rewards risk, relies on laws, and serves as a type of the modern city; Belmont: the place of beauty and repose, refreshment and renewal.

Themes: Necessary pairings: Justice and Mercy; Law and Freedom; **Opposing Elements:** Charity vs. Greed; Forgiveness vs. Revenge.

Symbols: Shakespeare uses the characters of Antonio and Bassanio to represent the roles of Christ and a sinner. Her father has posthumously set up a system of choosing her future husband using three coffers or boxes.

Discuss: ◆ How is Antonio acting in pure freedom by binding himself to aid his friend? ◆ How is Belmont magical because it is devoted to the Cardinal Virtues? ◆ How does law support commerce and the activities necessary to build a community? ◆ How is risk at the heart of Venice? Of Belmont?

Notes