

Merchant of Venice: Venice, in the Renaissance, was known as a crossroads of commerce and culture. Venice and Belmont, in the play, represent two worlds: one a world of money, commerce, and “law” (the “public” world?), and the other a world of beauty, gracious living and love (the “personal” world?). Different lifestyles, concerns, topics of talk, and kinds of actions characterize each. The main plot deals with questions concerning distinctions brought to our attention by the intersection of these worlds, so read to note evidence that will bear on each of the underlined differences

By contrasting and then relating these two world, the play explores the following four questions: **1)** In what sense are human relationships “contractual”? **2)** What are the implications of living to protect what one has vs. taking wild risks? **3)** How compatible are the values of the contractual world with the values of Christianity? **4)** What is a “bond” and what is it to be “good” fiscally vs. morally? The subplot (involving the servant Lancelot and his father Gobbo) functions as a foil to explore these same questions. Shakespeare exploits the double meanings of the following words: *kind, gentle, good, prodigal, bond*.

Journal Questions: Write on any question below, drawing at least some of your evidence from an act assigned for that day’s reading and explaining how your findings relate to one of the questions above.

1. Find several quotes that illustrate how/why Shylock alienates an audience and at least one illustrating why he might win sympathy. Cite key phrases and explain, trying to get at what Shakespeare might want us to notice or understand relating to one of the four questions at the top.
2. Who is “prodigal” in this play? (“Prodigal” can mean wasteful or it can mean generous, in the sense of giving without hope of self-gain. Remember the parable about the prodigal son.) Who is usurious (look up this word)? Consider quotes or actions that demonstrate prodigality give it a positive or negative “spin,” explaining and again relating what you see one or more of the four questions above.
3. Find examples of mercantile language used with regard to personal relationships. What do you make of it relating it to one of the four questions above?
4. Find lines that make an audience consider the tenets of Christianity in unusual contexts (where we’re not used to considering them). Explore implications with respect to the questions above.
5. The casket mottoes and contents symbolically represents the attitudes and choices of important Venice characters– and the consequences to them. Hypothesize connections, trying to find textual support.
6. Instead of showing Shylock discovering Jessica’s elopement, Shakespeare has it reported. What is the difference in effect on an audience, and how does that provide insights related the one of the questions above? OR consider how the sequencing of some of the scenes affects us (what is contrasted with what and the effect with regard to some question explored in the play).
7. This play seems to question the nature of contracts of all kinds. The words “bond” and “kind” come up frequently. Find quotes where the word “bond” appears. What similarities and differences does the play suggest between Shylock’s bond and the rings? What complexities about the nature of a “bond” does this comparison encourage us to consider?
8. Do the Christians in the trial scene demonstrate Christian values like generosity and mercy? (Refer to

particular actions and particular lines.) How does our reaction to their actions bear on one of the above questions? Over

9. What is the effect of placing the last act in Belmont and having it concern the rings? (Relate what you say to one or more of the four questions explored in the play– questions like the meaning of “bond” and “kind” or the relationship of mercy and justice.) Write as many thematic connections as you can linking this scene to what goes on in Venice; then explore one in more depth.