

SHYLOCK'S REVENGE

A ONE-MAN SHOW

FEATURING MARCUS BALE

RESOURCE HANDOUT

Written by Dr. Peadar Donohoe, edited by Cal Duggan and designed by Marcus Bale

Dear Teachers,

Thank you for supporting Shylock's Revenge. We hope that your students enjoyed the performance and were engaged by it. The aim of the *Shylock's Revenge* Resource Handout is to enhance student knowledge of expand upon topics and themes introduced by Marcus Bale in his performance of the play, along with activities that aim to enhance student appreciation and enjoyment of *The Merchant of Venice*.



Marcus Bale (Actor) and Peadar Donohoe (Director)

We'll begin with Shylock's desire for Revenge as it is the key theme that shaped our adaptation.

SHYLOCK'S REASONS

DID YOU KNOW?

When *The Merchant of Venice* was first registered as a play in 1598, it was listed with both the title we know and its alternative title, *The Jew of Venice*. It seems Shylock was already seen as the main attraction – or at least one who gives Antonio a run for his money.

Shylock's Revenge focuses on Shylock's reasons for revenge against Antonio.

In Venice Christians have power and status whereas Jews are treated like second class citizens or worse. Antonio buys into this social hierarchy and treats Shylock abominably. For example, he spits upon on him and calls him cruel names. Many of these names are quoted in the opening of *Shylock's Revenge*:

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- An evil soul
- A goodly apple rotten at the heart
- Old carrion
- Most impenetrable cur
- Damn' execrable dog
- Inhuman wretch
- The very devil incarnal
- Thy currish spirit wolvis, bloody, starved and ravenous
- The dog Jew

Shylock has been treated like he's less than human by Antonio. Hence, it surprises and galls Shylock that Antonio comes looking to him, of all people, for a loan. Shylock is quick to remind Antonio of his cruel treatment:

*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:
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'?* (Shylock, Act 3, Scene 1)

With a lendeer such as this, it's no wonder Shylock asks Antonio for a pound of flesh as a guarantee of the loan.

The guarantee of a pound of flesh is often interpreted as a joke. However, you could argue that the promise of a pound of flesh is Shylock's subconscious desire for revenge. Then when Antonio defaults on the loan and the opportunity arises to literally take revenge, Shylock's subconscious desire rises to the fore, giving vent to his suppressed rage, turning him into a monster.

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THE MERCHANT OF VENICE A COMEDY OR A REVENGE TRAGEDY?

Now, you might say to yourself: 'Hold on! *The Merchant of Venice* is a comedy, right?' True, it does end happily with the marriage of Portia and Bassanio. However, you could also describe it as a kind of "revenge tragedy".

Revenge tragedies were very popular in Shakespeare's time. A typical revenge tragedy had a lead character avenging a wrong committed against him. The central character's path to revenge would lead to the deaths of many characters, sometimes including the lead character as well. *Hamlet* would be a prime example of this.

Of course, this doesn't happen in *The Merchant of Venice*. The play is more like a revenge tragedy that's just been averted, where the act of retribution is stopped just before revenge is obtained. In Act IV, Portia saves the day just before Shylock, knife in hand, tries to literally cut a pound of flesh from Antonio's body. Then after the Duke strips Shylock of his wealth and humiliates him, he disappears from the action of the play, letting *The Merchant of Venice* come to its happy, comic conclusion.

However, Shylock is unforgettable for audiences as he is arguably the most memorable character from the play. Furthermore, he successfully engages the audience's sympathy. They cannot help but view him as a tortured soul who has been wrongfully victimised. His crusade for bloody justice is extraordinary and, to a point, understandable. He is a tragic figure in a comedy that has no place for a character so complex.

That's why some scholars call *The Merchant of Venice* one of Shakespeare's problem plays. The tone is pretty dark for what is supposed to be comedy. Ultimately, what is Shylock's function in the cast of characters? Is he a hero or villain? If he's the hero, then who's the real villain?

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VILLAIN OR THE HERO: SHYLOCK, ANTONIO OR SHAKESPEARE?

How the character of Shylock is portrayed onstage can change depending on the actor's interpretation of the character, directorial choices, the cultural and political context. For example, some believe that *The Merchant of Venice* shows us one of Elizabethan theatre's greatest villains via the monstrous character of Shylock. Others argue that the play is very supportive of Shylock as Shakespeare portrays him in a sympathetic light, showing how hypocritical the Christians are, especially the arrogant Jew-hating Antonio. Others argue that Shakespeare was an antisemite, portraying Shylock as a vampiric caricature of a Jew, whose greatest desire is to carve himself up some fresh Christian flesh and blood. There are supportive arguments for each of these viewpoints.



Marcus Bale as Shylock



Marcus Bale as Antonio

Unsurprising to some audiences, and shocking to others, is the fact that *The Merchant of Venice* was the most popular of Shakespeare's plays during the reign of Nazis (Rosenbaum, 2006). During this dark period in Germany's history, propaganda fuelled productions of *The Merchant of Venice*, commonly portrayed Antonio as a hero who had a justifiable hatred of the villainous Shylock.

DID YOU KNOW?

Many people think that Shylock is the merchant of Venice referred to in Shakespeare's title but the merchant is really Antonio. This common misunderstanding says a great deal about how Shylock dominates the play in which he appears. Arguably, he is the most memorable character.



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Antonio's hatred would have been seen as well-placed as Shylock was portrayed as a greedy, gnome-like figure, hateful and extremely cruel, in fact, demon-like. The actor playing Shylock dressed and acted accordingly:

The pale pink face, surrounded by bright red hair and beard, with its unsteady, cunning little eyes; the greasy caftan with the yellow prayer shawl slung round, the splay-footed, shuffling walk; the foot stamping with rage; the clawlike gestures with the hands; the voice, now bawling, now muttering -- all add up to a pathological image of the East European Jewish type, expressing all its inner and outer uncleanness...(Gross, 1994)



Shylock in Nazi Germany

The desired effect was for the audience to just to look at Shylock and know he was pure evil. This simplistic, panto-like portrayal of the character was chosen so that there would be no sympathy for the Jewish Character. Under the influence of the Nazi propaganda machine, Shylock and his whole race were unquestionably villains.

In Ireland, in past generations, we had our own Catholic heroic version of Antonio take the stage. For example, Antonio was often presented as a very pious man and a follower of what many accepted as the one true religion: Catholicism. This choice was made because the play was performed to mainly Catholic audiences and so their sympathies would often lie with Antonio as he was representative of their faith. True, he may have been a flawed man with his antisemitic views and rhetoric, but at his heart, he was perceived as a Christian hero who would show the villainous Shylock the mercy of Christ.

In contrast, Israeli productions of *The Merchant of Venice* have often portrayed Shylock as a very sympathetic character. For example, the playwright Avraham Oz presented Shylock in his production as:

...someone who is waging war against a terrible, twisted mechanism that existed in Europe for centuries, and accordingly he depicts the battered Jew from all sides, as being out to destroy the fake society into which his sorry fate has delivered him (Bisharat, 2018).

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The prejudiced views of the Christians had a light shone on them to underscore the plight of the much put upon Shylock. The performance demonstrated their hypocrisy towards a man struggling to live in a society that shuns him and hates him but, when it suits their purposes, will happily take his money.

Modern actors also seek to find the human side of Shylock to make him relatable for modern audiences. Jonathan Price said in a 2016 interview that he saw Shylock as:



Jonathan Price as Shylock

...a kind of Everyman figure. He's every immigrant, he's every person who's trying to escape. And it becomes a very universal piece - otherwise, I don't think it's palatable (NPR, 2016).

The question of whether Shakespeare himself was antisemitic or not has been long debated. Was he prejudiced? Or does he try to generate sympathy for Shylock? Have a read of this extract of the most famous monologue from *The Merchant of Venice*:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, 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. (Shylock, Act 3, Scene 1)

Biographers speculate (Tearle, 2016) that Shakespeare wrote this monologue to make a statement that Shylock is just the same as any human. Or could it be that he was trying to give his antagonist fuel for the fire to justifiably pursue his villainous quest for Antonio's flesh? If you argue for this, then why does Shakespeare give us the scene with Tubal where we get to see the human side of Shylock?

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THE FUNCTION OF TUBAL

In Act 3, Scene 1 we meet Tubal, Shylock's friend. Tubal has traced Jessica to Genoa, where he has heard news of her but could not find her. However, he has heard that she has sold Shylock's wedding ring for a monkey. This hurts Shylock to the core, and upon learning of Jessica's disrespect for her mother's memory, he remonstrates to Tubal:

Out upon her, Tubal! It was my turquoise. I got it from Leah, her mother when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it away for a wilderness of monkeys. Why loss upon loss, the thief gone with so much and so much to find the thief, and no satisfaction, no revenge, nor no ill luck stirring but what lights o'er my shoulders, no sighs but o' my breathing, no tear but o' my shedding! (Shylock, Act 3, Scene 1)

Tubal is a Jew like Shylock, someone he can trust and open up to. Through Tubal, the audience can see the human side of Shylock and experience his grief. He shares with us his grief over the loss of his daughter, his money, and the ring which symbolises the love he still has for his dead wife Leah. Everyone and everything he cared for is now gone. He feels completely alone. Could it be that Shakespeare wants to get the audience on Shylock's side? To root for him, at least a little bit?

Then Tubal tells Shylock that he has picked up more news while he in Genoa. He heard that another of Antonio's ships was '...cast away, coming from Tripoli...' (Tubal, Act 3, Scene 1). Tubal consoles Shylock that '...Antonio is certainly undone...' (ibid).

Shylock is elated. This news pulls him up from the mire of despair, transforming his grief into a crusade for vengeance against the hypocritical Antonio. Now he hopes to get justice in the Venetian court. But instead, he will receive a harsh lesson in mercy.



Al Pacino as Shylock and Allan Corduner as Tubal

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JUSTICE AND MERCY

In Act 4, Scene 1 (the courtroom scene) Antonio, Portia, Bassanio and the Duke all preach the importance of mercy. However, when you have read the final passages of the scene, it may leave you questioning whether or not mercy is granted as freely as it is spoken about.

Shylock is seeking justice. He isn't asking for special treatment of the court, only that the Duke, who presides as the judge, follows the letter of the law as he would for any other Venetian. But time and time again, Shylock is asked to drop his demand for a pound of flesh and show mercy.

The idea of Christian mercy is foreign to Shylock. He is a follower of the Old Testament. Orthodox Jews (as is the character of Shylock) are very strict with their rules. They follow the path of retribution, what was known as *Lex Talionis*, the principle exemplified by the expression: "an eye for an eye" (Deuteronomy 19:21).

Whereas the Christian characters, follow the teachings of the New Testament. This second half of the Bible emphasizes the spirit of the law rather than the exact letter of the law. In other words, law is mitigated with mercy. Christians are asked to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:38-39) rather than demand "an eye for an eye".

In theory, turning the other cheek, being merciful, is important in a Christian court of law. However, by the end of Act 4, Scene 1, when mercy is administered by the Christians, one has to question the fairness of it:

*That thou shall see the difference
in our spirit, I pardon thee thy life
before thou ask it.
For half thy wealth, it is Antonio's, the
other half shall come to the general state.*

(The Duke, Act 4, Scene 1)

DID YOU KNOW?

The 1914 silent movie *The Merchant of Venice* was co-directed by Lois Weber & Phillips Smalley. This makes Weber, who has been called one of the first genuine auteurs in American cinema, the first woman to direct a full-length feature film in America.



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It could be argued that when Shylock didn't show any mercy to Antonio, he lost any chance of mercy for himself. Furthermore, Jews weren't allowed the same rights as Venetian Christians. As Portia points out:

*It is enacted in the laws of Venice,
if it be proved against an alien
that by direct or indirect attempts
he seek the life of any citizen,
the party 'gainst which he does contrive
shall seize one half of his goods.
The other half comes
to the privy coffer of the state
and the offender's life
lies in the mercy of the Duke only against all other voice.
Down therefore Jew, and beg mercy of the Duke. (Portia, Act 4, Scene 1)*

Given these laws, Shylock is lucky to walk away from the trial alive. He could have been put to death for plotting to take the life of a Venetian citizen.

Therefore, shouldn't Shylock be grateful that, despite the Duke's pronouncement, Antonio asks the court to let Shylock keep half his wealth? However, Antonio's mercy has a sting in its tail. In order to keep half his wealth, Shylock must convert to Christianity. From Antonio's perspective, he must have thought he was doing Shylock a great favour by having him convert to 'the one true religion' because, according to his Catholicism, he'd be saving his soul.

Hence, Shylock leaves the court losing half his wealth and will be forced to change his religion, a key part of his identity. Given how badly things turn out for him, one must question if *The Merchant of Venice* is an anti-Jewish play or not.



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IS THE MERCHANT OF VENICE ANTISEMITIC?

Over the course of the play, Shylock has lost his daughter, most of his fortune, and a treasured ring given to him by his dead wife. Added to this he has been mocked and bullied by Antonio and loses his servant to Bassanio. No wonder he wants his revenge and hopes to get it through the courts. But what happens at the end of the courtroom scene? He must make Lorenzo inheritor of his estate, the same man who eloped with his daughter and helped her steal from him. And he is forced to abandon his religion for a Christian one - a religion that forbids him from practicing the trade of money-lending. The only trade he knows in which to make a livelihood.

It is arguable that when Shylock didn't show any mercy to Antonio, he lost any chance of mercy for himself. According to Venetian law, Shylock is lucky enough to be alive. He could have been put to death for plotting to take the life of a Venetian citizen. But was the Venetian court really a fair place for Shylock's grievance to be heard or was it always going to be biased against him?

Shylock was not in a room of his peers but amongst a group of people who looked down on and despised him. The Christians present were all too ready to use the word 'Jew' as a kind of epitaph rather than call Shylock by his proper name.

In fact, over the course of the play, religion is not used as a tool for spiritual enlightenment, but as a weapon to exclude, persecute and discriminate. Furthermore, bigotry is not only reserved for Shylock. Remember Portia's reaction when Morocco lost the casket test?

A gentle riddance.— Draw the curtains, go.—

Let all of his complexion choose me so.

(Portia, Act 2, Scene 1)

DID YOU KNOW?

Christopher Marlowe, a contemporary of Shakespeare, wrote *The Jew of Malta*. The play showed a Jewish character, Barabbas, in a most unsympathetic light and as a very greedy villain. Shylock is more nuanced.

Biographers speculate *The Merchant of Venice* was Shakespeare's attempt to create a more sympathetic Jewish character.



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His complexion – the colour of his skin. She was relieved when he lost as she did not want to be married to an African.

So, was Shakespeare a product of his time, embracing the bigotry around him? Or was he doing something different in *The Merchant of Venice*? In fairness, Shakespeare does show how hypocritical the Christians are. They are so smug in their self-righteousness that they can't see how ignorant, prejudiced and ugly they really are as they abuse Shylock and other outsiders. Hence, it could be argued Shakespeare was doing what all good playwrights do: he holds a mirror up to society and allows audiences to draw their own conclusions.

Whatever conclusion you come to, you need to be able to discuss your argument for the exam. And hopefully, having seen *Shylock's Revenge* and read the discussions in this handout, it has helped you in your understanding and appreciation of *The Merchant of Venice*, while also aiding your preparation for the English exam.

Best of Luck!



Dr. Peadar Donohoe

ADDENDUM

A THEORY FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

It might be confusing to the reader when this author uses the term Christianity and Catholicism interchangeably. Why not just stick to one term as most everyone in Venice is Catholic? Furthermore, why doesn't Shakespeare use the word Catholic? Surely, he would have known that Italy is a Catholic country. I theorise, that due to the Reformation Shakespeare intentionally refrained from using the 'Catholic' word.

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The Reformation occurred when England broke away from the authority of the Pope and the Catholic Church. This came to pass because Henry VIII wanted to divorce his first wife and remarry. The Pope would not allow it and so Henry VIII made the Protestant Church of England the church of the state. Thereafter, Catholics were often fined and persecuted if they did not convert.

Shakespeare's father probably converted to Protestantism for business purposes but his mother most likely remained a Catholic (Herbert, 1912). Such religious divisions in families were common in England at the time. However, if one remained a Catholic, one could be name-called, spat upon and treated poorly in the courts. Sound familiar?

So, I wonder, is *The Merchant of Venice* a disguised allegory/commentary on the religious troubles of Shakespeare's time?

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ACTIVITIES

STRONGLY
AGREE

FOUR CORNERS EXERCISE

AGREE

The purpose of this activity is to foster student discussion of characters and events in the play. Students should be encouraged to use evidence from the text to defend their opinions. In doing so, students will have to debate with their peers and think critically about the character's choices.

First, on four different pieces of paper, write the following in large letters: **Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree**. Hang each piece of paper in a different corner of the room.

Second, read out the statements below to your class. After each statement is read, ask the students to move to the corner of the room with the sign that is in agreement with their opinion (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree). Students must chose one corner of the room, they cannot stand in the middle.

Lastly, when students arrive at the corner, give each group about a minute to discuss why they made that choice and to pick one person to share the group's thoughts with the class. Afterwards, give students the opportunity to debate their positions, encouraging them to use evidence from the play. When the discussion begins to dwindle, read out the next statement and have the students repeat the process. Also feel free to create any play relevant statements.

Four Corners Statements:

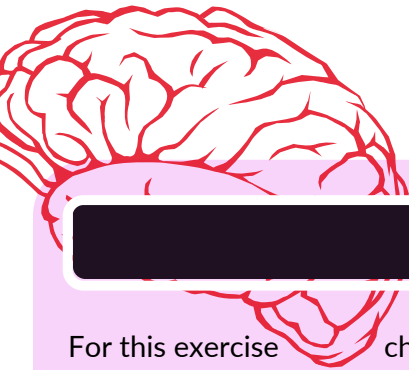
- You should marry someone the same religion as yourself.
- It's acceptable to borrow money from your friends or to have them borrow from you.
- We should follow our parents' wishes when choosing a spouse, even if it makes us unhappy.
- If you cannot agree with your parents wishes, you should consider running away.
- If there is no alternative, a person's health or life should be considered collateral for a loan that cannot be repaid.

DISAGREE

STRONGLY
DISAGREE

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ACTIVITIES



MIND MAP

For this exercise choose Shylock, Antonio, Portia or Bassanio to explore.

Mind Map Poster Instructions: Make a list of everything you think is important for a particular character. This could be: people they talk about, things they do, words they use or how others describe them. The listing can be done individually or in groups.

Take a fresh piece of paper and write your character's name in the middle. Imagining this paper is your character's mind, start to fill the page with words or drawings from your list. If you think something or someone is important to your character, place it nearer their name. You can make this map as full and colourful as you like.

Once the mind map is finished you will probably be more familiar with your character and can empathise more easily with their plight.

HOT-SEATING - SCRIPTING AND PLAYING

Hot-seating is an activity where a student actor/volunteer is questioned by the rest of the class about a chosen character.

Hot-seating can deepen student knowledge of a character, their circumstances, how they contribute to the play as a whole and...it's a whole lot of fun for the class! I've been using it with my students for years.

- Peadar Donohoe, Cyclone Rep Artistic Director.

Any character from The Merchant of Venice can be Hot-seated. Here are some sample questions:

- For Jessica: Why did you run away from home and elope with Lorenzo?
- For Bassanio: How long have you been borrowing money from Antonio and for what reasons?
- For Antonio: Why have you spat at Shylock and called him names?
- For Shylock: Why did you agree to the loan with Antonio if you hate him so much?

The rest of the class questions them from a prepared list. Student actors respond to questions drawing from the plot of the play as much as possible. However, some responses might have to be made up. This is fine as long as it is within the realm of possibility. Also, not all questions have to be scripted. During Hot-seating, character responses might inspire the class to ask new questions.



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ACTIVITIES

THE MERCHANT IN A MINUTE!

In groups of four to six students perform the play in one minute. Challenge them to try and include as much plot detail and characters as possible. The most detailed performance wins!

SIX O'CLOCK NEWS SPECIAL REPORT

Scenario A: Partner up with a co-anchor and choose a scene of the play to make a one-minute news report. Tell the audience the story as if you were actual newsreaders.

Scenario B: Partner up with a classmate who will play one of the characters from the play. You are a reporter outside the Venetian court. Interview characters before they go into court, asking what they are hoping for and why. Alternatively, you can interview characters after the Duke passes his verdict. Ask them about proceedings, the verdict and if they feel it was fair or not.

SHORT FILM PROJECT

This combines **The Merchant in a Minute** with the **Six O'clock News Special Report**. This is an extra fun version as it combines the two Drama scenarios. Start with news reporters to give some background and then cut to a scene from the play. Cut back and forth as much as you like. The reporters can also present scenes from different groups so that everyone in the class can be included. Assign the students scenes in a linear fashion to mirror the plot and to aid the reporting. You can do this very quickly as an improvisation or rehearse and polish the scenes to make a short film or performed presentation.

If you would like to share any of the content produced through these activities with us please email the file to: admin@cyclonerep.com (with your parent's/teacher's permission). We will chose some of them and post them on our website or on our Social Media channels!