



Introduction to Drama



What is drama?

The word drama comes from the Greek word for “action.” **Drama** is a type of literature that is primarily written to be performed for an audience.



History...

- **Greek Drama** 500-400 B.C.
- **Medieval: The Middle Ages** 1200-1500 AD
- **Elizabethan & Jacobean** 1500-1642
- **Restoration & 18th Cent. Drama** 1660-1800
- **Romantic Era** 1800-1880
- **Modern Era** 1850-Present

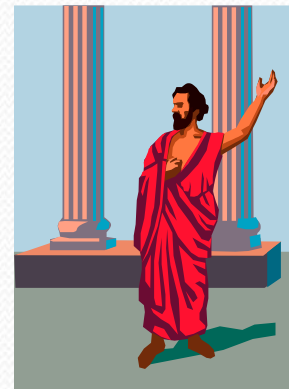
Two Types of Drama

1. Tragedy

- A play in which the main character experiences disaster, but faces this downfall in such a way as to attain heroic stature.*
- shows the downfall or death of a *tragic hero*, or main character.

2. Comedy

- Comedy closes with a peaceful resolution with a main conflict. Typical comedies involve confusion, jokes, and a happy ending.
- stresses human weaknesses.



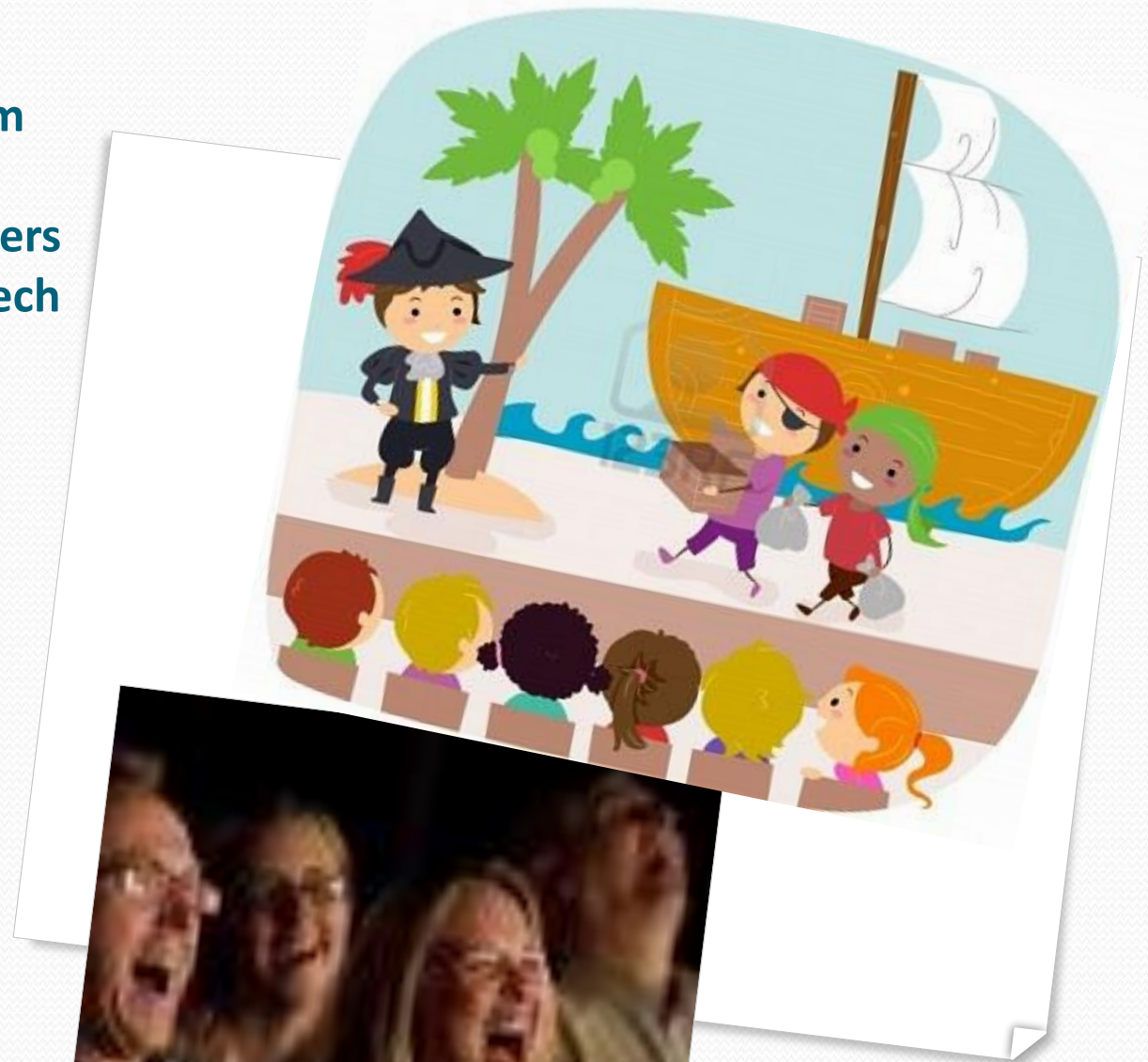
Aristotle's definition of Tragedy:

- Aristotle defines **tragedy** as 'the imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude.'
- Aristotle regarded tragedy as the highest form of poetry. He identified **six** elements of tragedy. They are
- **Plot, character, thought, diction, music and spectacle.** Tragedy is a serious play that deals with the misfortunes and sufferings of man.

Aristotle – Tragic Hero

- **Tragic hero:** A character , who was a good person brought down by a *tragic flaw*– an error in judgment that leads this character's downfall. is neither too virtuous nor too vicious but his misfortune or fall is brought about by some error or frailty. Aristotle called it 'hamartia' which means tragic flaw.

A drama or play is a form of storytelling in which actors make the characters come alive through speech (dialogue) and action (stage directions).



How is a play written?

- The author of a play is called a *playwright*. Everything a playwright writes must appear onstage.
- A play in written form is called a *script*.
- The playwright must write the *dialogue*, or what the characters say to each other in conversation, as well as the *stage directions*, which tells how the play is to be performed.

Elements of Drama

- **External Conflict:** Pits a character against nature or fate, society, or another character
- **Internal conflict:** Between opposing forces within a character.
- **Protagonist:** The central character of the play and often undergoes radical changes as the action progresses.*
- **Antagonist:** The character who opposes the main character*

- **Foil:** A minor character whose traits contrast sharply with those of the protagonist
- **Dialogue:** Conversations between characters
- **Monologue:** A long speech spoken by a single character to himself or herself, or to the audience
- **Soliloquy:** A monologue in which a character speaks his or her private thoughts aloud and appears to be unaware of the audience.
- **Aside:** a short speech or comment delivered by a character to the audience, but unheard by the other characters who are present.

Conventions of Drama

- **Cast of Characters:** listed in the beginning of the play, before the action starts.
- **Act:** a major division of a play
- **Scenes:** Major division of an act
- **Stage Directions:** a dramatist's instructions for performing a play.

Dialogue

- Dialogue is what the characters say, and it is used to reveal their personalities = Character Traits.
- The name of the character who is to speak is listed usually in bold at the start of a line, followed by a colon.
- Every time the speaker changes, a new line is started.
Dialogue is necessary in order to develop conflict and advance the plot.



Staging a play

- Drama is more than just the words on a page. The production of a play involves directing the way the characters move, what they wear, the lighting, and the scenery.
- *Staging* is the practice of putting on the play.

Sets

- Sets are the scenery, backdrops, and furniture that create the setting.
- A production may have different sets for different scenes. For example, some scenes may take place outside in the street, while others may take place in a character's living room. Some scenes may take place during the day, while others may take place at night.



Props

- Props are things like books, telephones, dishes, and other items that actors use onstage during the performance to support the action.



Remember-People Produce Plays

- The actors and actresses who perform the play are known as the cast.
- The people who build sets, manage lighting, or work backstage are called the crew.

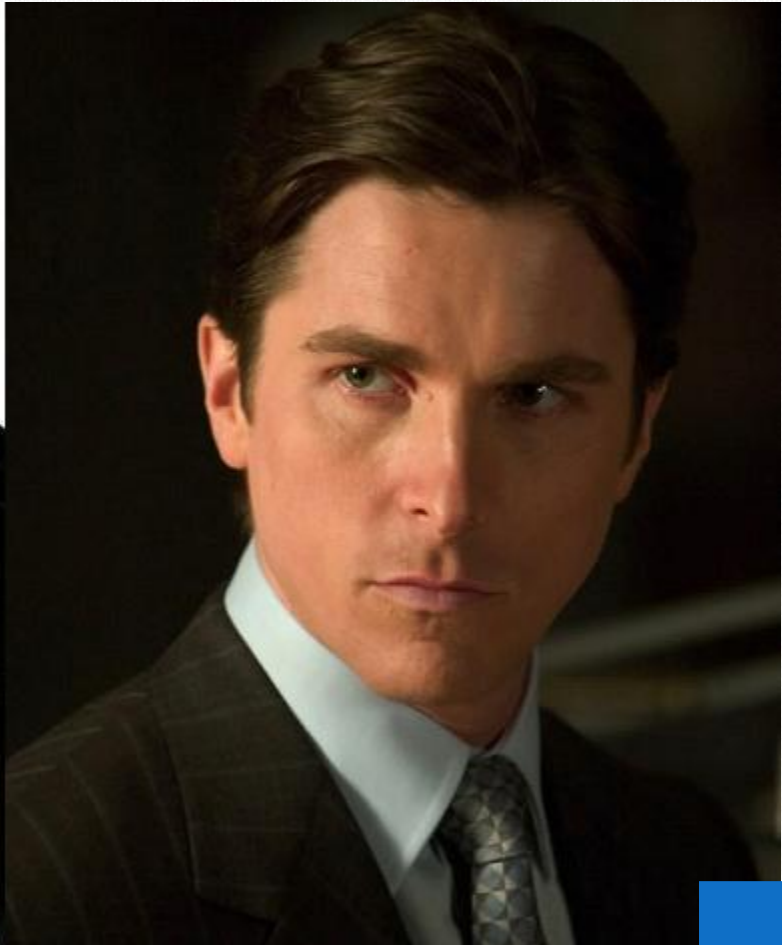


Dramatization

- A *dramatization* is a play that was once a novel, short story, folk tale, biography, or other type of writing. Some plays are completely new works. Other plays are *adapted* from novels, short stories, or even from nonfiction. A playwright takes scenes, characters, and action from an existing work and turns them into a play, or dramatizes them.



Protagonist



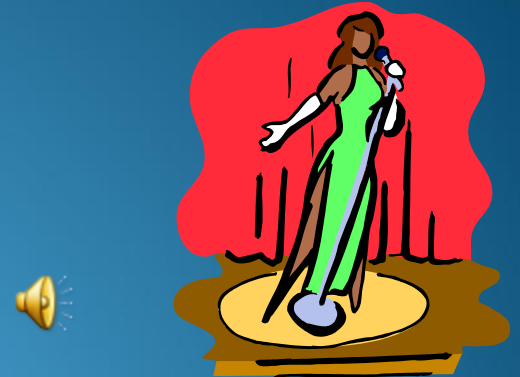
Antagonist





Enjoy the Show!

(Whether you are reading drama or watching a performance)



The Elizabethan Age

The Elizabethan Age is remembered as the time of a great wave of English nationalism, as well as a period in which the arts flourished. The time of Shakespeare was also the time of Elizabeth I, who is one of the most memorable monarchs.



The word 'renaissance' literally means 'rebirth' and it began in Italy in the 14th century and subsequently spread throughout Europe during 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries.

The Renaissance in England coincided with the reign of Elizabeth I who was Queen of England and Ireland from 1558 until 1603, so it is often referred to as the Elizabethan period, which saw a significant growth in cultural developments.

A number of important historical events contributed to making England a powerful nation during this period. England made significant advances in the realm of navigation and exploration. England's reputation as a strong naval power was enshrined in history by its defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and by the turn of the century England was at the forefront of international trade and the race for colonisation.

England's renaissance in the realm of thought and art is epitomised by the official recognition that Elizabeth I gave to Oxford and Cambridge. These universities were acknowledged as the focal point for the nation's learning and scholarly activities. Other historical developments which shaped the direction of Elizabeth Literature include the invention of the printing press to England in 1476 which helped to make literature more widely available, the growth of a wealthy middle class of people who had the time to write and read.

The arts flourished under Elizabeth I. Her personal love of poetry, music, and drama helped to establish a climate in which it was fashionable for the wealthy members of the court to support the arts. Theatres such as the Globe (1599) and the Rose (1587) were built and writers such as Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, and William Shakespeare wrote comic and tragic plays.

Elizabethan Poetry

Latin was still used for much of the literature early in the period. However, as the new nationalism began to influence literary production, works began to appear in English. The new literary style borrowed heavily from classical Greek writing. A form of sonnet called either the Shakespearean Sonnet or the Elizabethan Sonnet became fashionable.

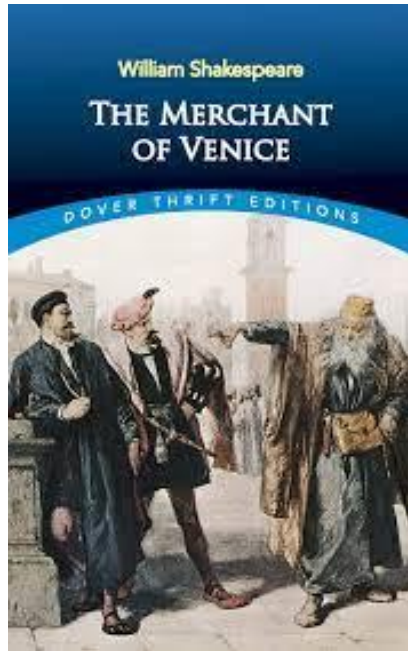
Theatrical Conditions in Elizabethan England

Shakespeare is the best known of all of the Elizabethan Playwrights. Other writers of the period include [Christopher Marlowe](#), Ben Jonson, John Fletcher, and John Webster. Plays were usually performed in outdoor theatres in the afternoon. Poorer audience members were required to stand for the duration of the performance while wealthier people could sit in elevated seats. Experimentation with the English language led to the rise in favour of Blank verse (which is unrhymed iambic pentameter).

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

TRAGI-COMEDY

Tragicomedy is a type of drama which inter-mingles the characters, subject matter and plot forms of tragedy and comedy. Thus, the important agents in tragicomedy included both people of high degree and people of low degree. Tragicomedy represents a serious action which threatens a tragic disaster to the protagonist, yet, by sudden reversal of circumstance, turns out happily. Shakespeare's "*The Merchant of Venice*" is the best example.



William Shakespeare

The most influential writer in all of English literature, William Shakespeare was born in 1564 to a successful middle-class man in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Shakespeare attended grammar school, but his formal education proceeded no further. Shakespeare eventually became the most popular playwright in England. His career bridged the reigns of Elizabeth I (ruled 1558–1603) and James I (ruled 1603–1625), and he was a favorite of both monarchs. Wealthy and renowned, Shakespeare retired to Stratford and died in 1616 at the age of fifty-two.

Shakespeare is the author of the thirty-seven plays and 154 sonnets that bear his name. A number of Shakespeare's plays have become so influential as to affect profoundly the course of Western literature and culture ever after.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

The Merchant of Venice was probably written in either 1596 or 1597. Its basic plot outline, with the characters of the merchant, the poor suitor, the fair lady, and the villainous Jew, is found in a number of contemporary Italian story collections, from which Shakespeare borrowed several details.

Plot (To be carefully read at home.)

Antonio, a Venetian merchant, complains to his friends of a melancholy that he cannot explain. His friend Bassanio is desperately in need of money to court Portia, a wealthy heiress who lives in the city of Belmont. Bassanio asks Antonio for a loan in order to travel in style to Portia's estate. Antonio agrees, but is unable to make the loan himself because his own money is all invested in a number of trade ships that are still at sea. Antonio suggests that Bassanio secure the loan from one of the city's moneylenders and name Antonio as the loan's guarantor. In Belmont, Portia expresses sadness over the terms of her father's will, which stipulates that she must marry the man who correctly chooses one of three caskets. None of Portia's current suitors are to her liking, and she and her lady-in-waiting, Nerissa, fondly remember a visit paid some time before by Bassanio.

In Venice, Antonio and Bassanio approach Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, for a loan. Shylock nurses a long-standing grudge against Antonio, who has made a habit of berating Shylock and other Jews for their usury, the practice of loaning money at exorbitant rates of interest, and who undermines their business by offering interest-free loans. Although Antonio refuses to apologize for his behavior, Shylock acts agreeably and offers to lend Bassanio three thousand ducats with no interest. Shylock adds, however, that should the loan go unpaid, Shylock will be entitled to a pound of Antonio's own flesh. Despite Bassanio's warnings, Antonio agrees. In Shylock's own household, his servant Launcelot decides to leave Shylock's service to work for Bassanio, and Shylock's daughter Jessica schemes to elope with Antonio's friend Lorenzo. That night, the streets of Venice fill up with revelers, and Jessica escapes with Lorenzo by dressing as his page. After a night of celebration, Bassanio and his friend Gratiano leave for Belmont, where Bassanio intends to win Portia's hand.

In Belmont, Portia welcomes the prince of Morocco, who has come in an attempt to choose the right casket to marry her. The prince studies the inscriptions on the three caskets and chooses the gold one, which proves to be an incorrect choice. In Venice, Shylock is furious to find that his daughter has run away, but rejoices in the fact that Antonio's ships are rumored to have been wrecked and that he will soon be able to claim his debt. In Belmont, the prince of Arragon also visits Portia. He, too, studies the caskets carefully, but he picks the silver one, which is also incorrect. Bassanio arrives at Portia's

estate, and they declare their love for one another. Despite Portia's request that he wait before choosing, Bassanio immediately picks the correct casket, which is made of lead. He and Portia rejoice, and Gratiano confesses that he has fallen in love with Nerissa. The couples decide on a double wedding. Portia gives Bassanio a ring as a token of love, and makes him swear that under no circumstances will he part with it. They are joined, unexpectedly, by Lorenzo and Jessica. The celebration, however, is cut short by the news that Antonio has indeed lost his ships, and that he has forfeited his bond to Shylock. Bassanio and Gratiano immediately travel to Venice to try and save Antonio's life. After they leave, Portia tells Nerissa that they will go to Venice disguised as men.

Shylock ignores the many pleas to spare Antonio's life, and a trial is called to decide the matter. The duke of Venice, who presides over the trial, announces that he has sent for a legal expert, who turns out to be Portia disguised as a young man of law. Portia asks Shylock to show mercy, but he remains inflexible and insists the pound of flesh is rightfully his. Bassanio offers Shylock twice the money due him, but Shylock insists on collecting the bond as it is written. Portia examines the contract and, finding it legally binding, declares that Shylock is entitled to the merchant's flesh. Shylock ecstatically praises her wisdom, but as he is on the verge of collecting his due, Portia reminds him that he must do so without causing Antonio to bleed, as the contract does not entitle him to any blood. Trapped by this logic, Shylock hastily agrees to take Bassanio's money instead, but Portia insists that Shylock take his bond as written or nothing at all. Portia informs Shylock that he is guilty of conspiring against the life of a Venetian citizen, which means he must turn over half of his property to the state and the other half to Antonio. The duke spares Shylock's life and takes a fine instead of Shylock's property. Antonio also forgoes his half of Shylock's wealth on two conditions: first, Shylock must convert to Christianity, and second, he must will the entirety of his estate to Lorenzo and Jessica upon his death. Shylock agrees and takes his leave.

Bassanio, who does not see through Portia's disguise, showers the young law clerk with thanks, and is eventually pressured into giving Portia the ring with which he promised never to part. Gratiano gives Nerissa, who is disguised as Portia's clerk, his ring. The two women return to Belmont, where they find Lorenzo and Jessica declaring their love to each other under the moonlight.

When Bassanio and Gratiano arrive the next day, their wives accuse them of faithlessly giving their rings to other women. Before the deception goes too far, however, Portia reveals that she was, in fact, the law clerk, and both she and Nerissa reconcile with their husbands. Lorenzo and Jessica are pleased to learn of their inheritance from Shylock, and the joyful news arrives that Antonio's ships have in fact made it back safely. The group celebrates its good fortune.

Portia enters, disguised as Balthasar. The duke greets her and asks whether she is familiar with the circumstances of the case. Portia answers that she knows the case well, and the duke calls Shylock and Antonio before her. Portia asks Antonio if he admits to owing Shylock money. When Antonio answers yes, Portia concludes that the Jew must be merciful. Shylock asks why he must show mercy, and, in one of the play's most famous speeches, Portia responds that "[t]he quality of mercy is not strained," but is a blessing to both those who provide and those who receive it (IV.i.179). Because mercy is an attribute of God, Portia reasons, humans approach the divine when they exercise it. Shylock brushes aside her pretty speech, however, by reiterating his demands for justice and revenge.

Portia asks whether Antonio is able to pay the money, and Bassanio offers Shylock twice the sum owed. If need be, Bassanio says, he is willing to pay the bond ten times over, or with his own life. Bassanio begs the court to bend the law slightly in order to exonerate Antonio, reasoning that such a small infraction is a little wrong for a great right. Portia replies, however, that the law shall not be broken—the decrees of Venice must stand. Shylock joyfully extols Portia's wisdom, and gives her the bond for inspection. She looks it over, declares it legal and binding, and bids Shylock to be merciful. Shylock remains deaf to reason, however, and Portia tells Antonio to prepare himself for the knife. She orders Shylock to have a surgeon on hand to prevent the merchant from bleeding to death, but Shylock refuses because the bond stipulates no such safeguard.

Antonio bids Bassanio farewell. He asks his friend not to grieve for him and tells Bassanio that he is happy to sacrifice his life, if only to prove his love. Both Bassanio and Gratiano say that, though they love their wives, they would give them up in order to save Antonio. In a pair of sarcastic asides, Portia and

Nerissa mutter that Bassanio's and Gratiano's wives are unlikely to appreciate such sentiments. Shylock is on the verge of cutting into Antonio when Portia suddenly reminds him that the bond stipulates a pound of flesh only, and makes no allowances for blood. She urges Shylock to continue collecting his pound of flesh, but reminds him that if a drop of blood is spilled, then he will be guilty of conspiring against the life of a Venetian citizen and all his lands and goods will be confiscated by the state. Stunned, Shylock hastily backpedals, agreeing to accept three times the sum, but Portia is insistent, saying that Shylock must have the pound of flesh or nothing. When Shylock finds out that he cannot even take the original three thousand ducats in place of the pound of flesh, he drops the case, but Portia stops him, reminding him of the penalty that noncitizens face when they threaten the life of a Venetian. In such a case, Portia states, half of Shylock's property would go to the state, while the other half would go to the offended party—namely, Antonio. Portia orders Shylock to beg for the duke's mercy.

The duke declares that he will show mercy: he spares Shylock's life and demands only a fine, rather than half of the Jew's estate. Shylock claims that they may as well take his life, as it is worthless without his estate. Antonio offers to return his share of Shylock's estate, on the condition that Shylock convert to Christianity and bequeath all his goods to Jessica and Lorenzo upon his death. Shylock consents and departs, saying simply, "I am not well" (IV.i.392).

- The character of Shylock is open to a wide range of different interpretations by audiences.

- As a character, Shylock first appears with Bassanio in Act I, scene iii and departs alone in Act IV, scene i. Whilst Shakespeare does not give him a significant physical presence on stage, he is a key figure in the play. Shylock only appears in five scenes out of twenty, yet his character dominates much of the play's plot.

- Although he is only encountered in Venice, he impacts all the characters in both Venice and Belmont and motivates most of their actions.
- As a character, Shylock is already depicted as **detested** by Venetian society before the play commences.
- Shylock is not portrayed as a cruel master or father. His strictness towards his daughter, Jessica, is due to his **deviation** of the behaviors of Venetian society, which he believes is wholly inappropriate for his daughter.
- Many of Shylock's actions could be seen to be largely motivated by his miserliness and greed and his language primarily revolves around money
- Shylock is sharply contrasted with the play's other characters and his **malice** is partly driven by their cruelty towards him:
 - As a character he is continually subjected to humiliation which evades some sympathy from the audience
- His frequent mentions of past mistreatment at the hands of Christians make him a more complex and sympathetic character
- After Act III, scene iii of the play, it becomes clear that Shylock is devoid of both compassion and balance:
- His insistence on exacting a pound of flesh from Antonio can be viewed as an act of cruel vengeance. He insists on getting what he believes is rightfully his, without entertaining any form of opposition or reason. As a result, he could be perceived as having lost touch with his own humanity which he outwardly professes to have.
- Despite being spared from death, Shylock faces severe consequences, including losing his possessions, his daughter, profession and religion:
 - After losing his assets and being forced to convert to Christianity, Shylock declares himself as if dead:
 - Whilst Shylock is a complex character, he does not undergo any significant changes throughout the play. His inflexibility and rigidity are some of his most notable traits and they persist until the end of the play

We can find clues to Shylock's tragic character through his monologues, which reveal his innermost thoughts. For example, Shylock shows his true colors in this monologue in Act I of *The Merchant of Venice*, as he describes his enemy **Antonio**, a rival merchant:

'How like a fawning publican he looks!
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.

.....
Cursed be my tribe,
If I forgive him!'

In this monologue, Shylock reveals his resentment toward Antonio. First, he states that he hates Antonio for his religious beliefs, or simply because he is not Jewish. Shylock also hates Antonio because he is honest: Antonio doesn't lend money at interest. As a result, fewer people borrow from Shylock, who does charge interest. Shylock hopes to entrap Antonio when **Bassanio**, Antonio's best friend, asks Shylock for a loan that Antonio guarantees.

Shylock accuses Antonio of hating Jews. Antonio has made it clear that he dislikes the way Shylock does business. Shylock swears he will not forgive Antonio for his actions.

Portia - Portia is the romantic heroine of *The Merchant of Venice*. As play opens, Portia's father has passed away, leaving her with a stunning inheritance. This beautiful, wealthy woman is now the sought-after prize for many young suitors, including princes and wealthy gentlemen who travel from other countries to win her hand in marriage.

Portia, a wealthy heiress from Belmont loves a young Venetian gentleman named **Bassanio**. Portia's beauty is matched only by her intelligence. Bound by a clause in her father's will that forces her to marry whichever suitor chooses correctly among three caskets, Portia is nonetheless able to marry her true love, Bassanio. Far and away the clever of the play's characters, it is Portia, in the disguise of a young law clerk, who saves Antonio from Shylock's knife.

- Portia is first introduced in Act I Scene ii. Shakespeare initially depicts her as a beautiful and dutiful daughter:
 - Her strict adherence to her father's will is significant as Shakespeare uses it to underscore her rule-abiding nature
 - This aspect of her character is significant and is further evidenced during the court scenes with Shylock
- Due to Portia's immense wealth, only suitors from the highest **stratums** of society are eligible to court her. The casket test appears to be an impartial method of selecting among all of her international suitors:
- While Portia desires Bassanio as a husband, she does not appear to have a romantic disposition and approaches her marriage from a practical standpoint:
 - She confesses to him that though she is not in love with him, she is prepared to accept him as her husband
 - She is aware that Bassanio seeks her fortune as well as her beauty, though she is accepting of his superficial traits
 - Despite her obedience to her father, Portia is also presented as independent and determined. As soon as she discovers Antonio's predicament, she instinctively acts in a generous and decisive manner
 - Portia resides in the luxury of Belmont as a wealthy heiress, but effortlessly shifts to her disguise as a man in the much harsher reality of the Venetian legal system
 - Portia succeeds in defeating Shylock by imposing a stricter interpretation of the bond than Shylock originally intended.

Antonio - The merchant whose love for his friend Bassanio prompts him to sign Shylock's contract and almost lose his life. Antonio is often inexplicably melancholy and, as Shylock points out, possessed of an incorrigible dislike of Jews. Nonetheless, Antonio is beloved of his friends and proves merciful to Shylock, though with conditions.

- Antonio is the character after whom the title of the play is named and he is the main driving force behind the key events. Despite this, he is presented as quite a muted a character.
- When Antonio is first introduced to the audience, he is in a **melancholic** state of which he cannot rid himself: "In sooth I know not why I am so sad"

- A defining characteristic of Antonio is his faithful loyalty towards his companion Bassanio and he expresses his love for his friend with great **exuberance**
- Antonio exhibits traits of kindness, patience and selflessness and he displays a tolerant attitude towards Bassanio's indulgence:
 - Antonio's reaction to Bassanio's plea for financial help is immediate, generous and unrestrained. He faces the trial with an attitude of acceptance and resignation
- However, by the end of the play, Antonio does eventually show mercy to Shylock:
 - He sticks resolutely to his inner moral code of not gaining from the hardships of others and refuses to claim his share of Shylock's property

Bassanio - A gentleman of Venice, and a kinsman and dear friend to Antonio. Bassanio's love for the wealthy Portia leads him to borrow money from Shylock with Antonio as his guarantor. An ineffectual businessman, Bassanio proves himself a worthy suitor, correctly identifying the casket that contains Portia's portrait.

- Shakespeare uses the opening scene of the play to introduce the character of Bassanio and his pursuit of Portia:
 - It sets up the chief romantic storyline and also sets in motion the bond plot point
- Bassanio is a young "noble kinsman" of Antonio's and serves as a kind of catalyst, provoking much of the play's action
- He is first depicted as a good-natured, but irresponsible, young man who has incurred heavy debts by living beyond his financial means:
- Antonio and Bassanio have a strong bond and Antonio acts as a generous benefactor, advisor and confidante to his friend:
- Antonio displays a tolerant attitude towards Bassanio's indulgence and willingly consents to lending him more money. However, it becomes evident that he harbours genuine love and care for his friend when Antonio's misfortunes unfold:
 - Bassanio quickly returns to Venice to assist Antonio, highlighting his loyalty and devotion
- He is characterised as a gentle soul and his response to Antonio's letter and his subsequent trial are genuine and deeply felt:
 - Bassanio's faithfulness towards Antonio remains steadfast and he proposes to take care of Antonio's debt

- At times, Shakespeare portrays Bassanio's character as rather shallow and superficial. However, he demonstrates his astuteness when choosing the correct casket in order to marry Portia:
 - He also possesses a keen intuition to mistrust Shylock due to his cautious remark: "I like not fair terms and a villain's mind"

Jessica: Although she is Shylock's daughter, Jessica hates life in her father's house, and elopes with the young Christian gentleman, Lorenzo, with a part of her father's jewelry. Then she marries him. In the end of the play, she gets half the money of her father.

The Three Caskets (Portia's Suitors)

Portia is the romantic heroine of *The Merchant of Venice*, William Shakespeare's tragicomedy. As *The Merchant of Venice* opens, Portia's father has passed away, leaving her with a stunning inheritance. This beautiful, wealthy woman is now the sought-after prize for many young suitors, including those who travel from other countries to win her hand in marriage.

Portia loves a young Venetian gentleman named **Bassanio** and hopes he will pursue her; however, her interest comes with a hitch. As dictated by her father, the suitor who wins her hand must pass a test and choose from among three chests filled with gold, silver or lead.

Each chest has an inscription:

- The gold box says, 'Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.'
- The silver box says, 'Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.'
- The lead box says, 'Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.'

Only one of the chests contains a picture of Portia, and if the suitor chooses wisely, he will win her hand in marriage. **Portia explains her dilemma to Nerissa in one of her monologues.** She makes clear that she understands the difference between knowing and doing what's right. Her deepest frustration lies in her inability to choose her own suitor due to her loyalty to her father. Portia's dilemma is one that is a symbol of the Venetian law's one when is encountered with Shylocks merciless attitude.

(Main) Sub plot

There are two main plot strands to *The Merchant of Venice*, both closely intertwined. The first involves Portia, the wealthy heiress of Belmont, who decides that she will marry whichever suitor picks the right casket when faced with a choice of three (made of gold, silver, and lead).

The second involves a loan the Jewish moneylender, Shylock, makes to Antonio, the merchant of the play's title. These two plot lines are connected because Antonio borrows money from Shylock in order to help out his friend, Bassanio, who wishes to finance a trip to Belmont to try his hand at Portia's 'three caskets' trial.

The terms of the loan are as follows: Antonio will repay the money to Shylock when his ships return from their voyage; if he fails to pay up then, Shylock will be entitled to a pound of Antonio's flesh, from the nearest part to his heart.

When Antonio's ships are declared lost at sea, he cannot repay the debt to Shylock, who promptly demands his pound of flesh. The phrase 'pound of flesh' has, of course, become proverbial and entered common use, used to refer to an unreasonably high demand made of someone.

These two threads run through the play, becoming united towards the end of the play, when Portia disguises herself as a male lawyer, Balthazar, in order to defend Antonio against Shylock's knife. In Act 4 Scene 1, during the courtroom scene, Portia delivers the speech which has become one of the most famous in all of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Themes

The Divine Quality of Mercy

The conflict between Shylock and the Christian characters comes to a head over the issue of mercy. The other characters acknowledge that the law is on Shylock's side, but they all expect him to show mercy, which he refuses to do. When, during the trial, Shylock asks Portia what could possibly compel him to be merciful, Portia's long reply, beginning with the words, "The quality of mercy is not strained," clarifies what is at stake in the argument (IV.i.179). Human beings should be merciful because God is merciful: mercy is an attribute of God Himself and therefore greater than power, majesty, or law.

In this speech, Portia begs Shylock for showing mercy on Antonio by understanding his situation. Being a guarantor of the loan, he is liable to return the loan amount but due to unforeseen events, he can't pay it off. She doesn't want to change the law but she seeks to change Shylock's mind. So, pleading for mercy, she describes the power of mercy that is above the power of might.

However, Portia does manage to bring about some mercy in Venice. When Shylock faces execution for his crimes, Portia persuades the Duke to pardon him. She then persuades Antonio to exercise mercy by not taking all of Shylock's money from him. Here, Portia's presence turns the proceedings away from violence and toward forgiveness.

Friendship

The theme of friendship drives most of the action in *The Merchant of Venice*. Bassanio needs money and turns to Antonio, who has already offered him substantial financial support in the past. Antonio immediately and unquestioningly agrees to do whatever he can to help his friend, including offering a pound of his own flesh to Shylock if he defaults on the loan. Antonio never blames Bassanio for leading him into the situation that later threatens his life. Instead, Antonio repeatedly says that he is happy to die for the sake of his friend. In return, Bassanio tells him that "life itself, my wife and all the world / Are not with me esteemed above thy life" (IV.i.275-276). Thus, the play depicts friendship as one of the most intense and important emotional bonds humans can experience and suggests that the bond of friendship between Antonio and Bassanio may even run deeper than romantic love. The importance of friendship is also displayed between Bassanio and Gratiano and between Portia and Nerissa. Gratiano and Nerissa show great loyalty to and trust in their friends, and they even fall in love with each other after being brought together by their friends. The final double marriage means that the four friends will never have to be separated from one another, which further supports the importance placed on friendship.

Important Quotations Explained

1.

I am a Jew. 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. 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.

(III.i.49–61)

Shylock begins by eloquently reminding the Venetians that all people, even those who are not part of the majority culture, are human. A Jew, he reasons, is equipped with the same faculties as a Christian, and is therefore subject to feeling the same pains and comforts and emotions. Instead of using reason to elevate himself above his Venetian tormenters, Shylock delivers a monologue that allows him to sink to their level: he will, he vows, behave as villainously as they have. The speech is remarkable in that it summons a range of emotional responses to Shylock. At first, we doubtlessly sympathize with the Jew, whose right to fair and decent treatment has been so neglected by the Venetians that he must remind them that he has “hands, organs, dimensions, senses” similar to theirs (III.i.50). But Shylock’s pledge to behave as badly as they, and, moreover, to “better the instruction,” casts him in a less sympathetic light (III.i.61). While we understand his motivation, we cannot excuse the endless perpetuation of such villainy.

2.

*What if my house be troubled with a rat,
And I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats
To have it baned? What, are you answered yet?
Some men there are love not a gaping pig,
Some that are mad if they behold a cat,
And others when the bagpipe sings i'th' nose
Cannot contain their urine; for affection,
Mistress of passion, sways it to the mood
Of what it likes or loathes. . . .
So can I give no reason, nor I will not,*

*More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
A losing suit against him. Are you answered?
(IV.i.43–61)*

When, in Act IV, scene i, Antonio and Shylock are summoned before the court, the duke asks the Jew to show his adversary some mercy. Shylock responds by reasoning that he has no reason. He blames his hatred of Antonio on “affection, / [that] Mistress of passion,” who is known to affect men’s moods in ways they cannot explain (IV.i.49–50). Just as certain people do not know why they have an aversion to cats or certain strains of music or eating meat, Shylock cannot logically explain his dislike for Antonio. The whole of his response to the court boils down to the terribly eloquent equivalent of the simple answer: just because. Shylock also bookends his speech with the simple question, “Are you answered?” (IV.i.61). Here, Shylock’s tightly controlled speech reflects the narrow and determined focus of his quest to satisfy his hatred.

3. (To be read at home)

*You have among you many a purchased slave
Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,
You use in abject and in slavish parts
Because you bought them. Shall I say to you
'Let them be free, marry them to your heirs.
Why sweat they under burdens? . . .*

...

*You will answer
'The slaves are ours.' So do I answer you.
The pound of flesh which I demand of him
Is dearly bought. 'Tis mine, and I will have it.
(IV.i.89–99)*

Again, in this passage, we find Shylock cleverly using Venice’s own laws to support his vengeful quest and enlisting society’s cruelties in defense of his own. Shylock begins his speech on a humane note, yet this opening serves merely to justify his indulgence in the same injustices he references. Shylock has no interest in exposing the wrongfulness of owning or mistreating slaves. Such

property rights simply happen to be established by Venetian laws, so Shylock uses them to appeal for equal protection. If Antonio and company can purchase human flesh to “use in abject and in slavish parts,” Shylock reasons, then he can purchase part of the flesh of a Venetian citizen (IV.i.91). In his mind, he has merely extended the law to its most literal interpretation. Unlike the Venetians, who are willing to bend or break the law to satisfy their wants, Shylock never strays from its letter in his pursuit of his bond. His brand of abiding by the law, however, is made unsavory by the gruesome nature of his interpretation.

4. *The quality of mercy is not strained.*

*It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
Upon the place beneath. . . .
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.*

(IV.i.179–197)

In this speech, Portia begs Shylock for showing mercy on Antonio by understanding his situation. Being a guarantor of the loan, he is liable to return the loan amount but due to unforeseen events, he can't pay it off. She doesn't want to change the law but she seeks to change Shylock's mind. So, pleading for mercy, she describes the power of mercy that is above the power of might.

Asking Shylock for mercy, Portia tells Shylock, and the court, that mercy is an essential human quality. Being kind and forgiving towards those over whom we have some power is a noble pursuit. She adds that there is something noble about being merciful, because you treat those over whom you have power – kindly when

you could easily harm them. Mercy is ‘twice blessed’ because the person you are merciful towards is thankful for your mercy. Moreover, the one bestowing the mercy is ‘blessed’ too – by God, because we often feel better about ourselves if we are kind towards others and show them mercy.

Therefore, Portia states, the gift of forgiving the bond would raise Shylock to an elevated status. It’s enthroned in the hearts of kings. It is an attribute of God himself. And earthly power most closely resembles God’s power when justice is guided by mercy. Therefore Jew, although justice is your aim, think about this: none of us would be saved if we depended on justice alone. We pray for mercy and, in seeking it ourselves, we learn to be merciful. Lastly, Portia warns Shylock that his quest for justice without mercy may result in his own damnation. Although it seems as if Portia is offering an appeal, in retrospect her speech becomes a challenge, a final chance for Shylock to save himself before Portia crushes his legal arguments.

Only mercy can save Antonio’s life, nothing else. To make her point clear, Portia uses several [metaphors](#) to convince Shylock. According to her, mercy is like the rain that falls naturally. Mercy is a humane thing. It does not come forcefully. The quality of mercy blesses one who shows it and one who receives it.

Mercy is more powerful than the sway of the gravity of the crown. It places a king not only in the hearts of other kings but also in his people’s hearts. By showing mercy, one can become like God as it is an attribute to Him. In this way, Portia requests Shylock to have mercy on Antonio as it can only save the defaulter’s life.