

Reading *The Merchant of Venice*

As we shift from tragedy to comedy, keep in mind the following:

Whereas **tragedy isolates** the protagonist, **comedy assimilates** characters into the community through the final action. Macbeth, for instance, becomes distanced from everyone, even from Lady Macbeth, and seemingly dies alone; but Portia welcomes even Antonio, who has caused the early separation in her marriage, into life at Belmont—though not without teaching him a lesson.

In Shakespeare's festive comedies (as opposed to the dark comedies like *Measure for Measure* or *All's Well That Ends Well*), at the heart of the action Shakespeare places a **beautiful, brilliant, resourceful woman** who solves all the plot snarls and manages to integrate all the characters into a resolution.

But even in festive comedies like this one, the play may end with an **especially demanding character not entirely happy** with the outcome (e.g., Shylock, Malvolio, Sir Toby Belch) though still viewed as part of the community.

In comedy, as in romance, the **crisis** occurs when the action changes from complication to denouement. But in comedies, the complication suggests the protagonist cannot prevail; after the crisis, we see the protagonist's situation improve and his former isolation end. (Just the opposite of tragedy: during complication, his will seems to prevail; but during denouement we see his supposed successes turned to nought.) Indeed, Macbeth seems to prevail in complication—he successfully slays Duncan and blames others; Malcolm and Donalbain flee rather than oppose him for the crown; he stands for coronation at Scone; he manipulates murderers to kill Banquo for him. But then, at the crisis, Fleance escapes. From then on, all Macbeth has achieved has just led him farther and farther into blood so that he can't even tread backward across that river of blood. All the Weird Sisters tell him will come to pass, but not as he wishes to understand those truths. He is doomed. By contrast, Antonio seems to lose everything—Bassanio leaves to woo Portia, his argosies fail-- until the crisis: once

Bassanio chooses the leaden casket and, thereby, wins Portia, Antonio is secure despite what Shylock may cry about his bond.

Shakespeare's festive comedies end with a dance, a feast, or a marriage—or a combination of these three. The festive comedies include *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *A Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*.

1. Who are Salerio, Solanio, Lorenzo, and Gratiano? How do they differ from one another?
2. Why is Antonio melancholy? What do we know about his fortunes, his values, his expectations? Describe his relationship with Bassanio. Why do you suppose WS chose to omit his source material's clarity about this relationship?
3. Why does Bassanio need Antonio's money? What happened to his own fortune? What is particularly apt about his metaphor using the bow and arrow—and a second arrow?
4. Describe Bassanio's attitude toward Portia. Why does he wish to win her?
5. What is the relationship between Portia and her father? Why did her father devise the test involving three caskets? What is Portia's attitude toward this test? Toward the variety of suitors? Describe Portia's relationship with Nerissa.
6. How does Shakespeare parallel, compare, and contrast relationships between parents and children throughout *MV*?
7. Portia's attitude toward money most resembles that of whom else in the play? What do these characters think money is best used for?

8. Characterize Shylock (a) as he sees himself, (b) as Antonio sees him, (c) as Jessica sees him, (d) as Launcelot sees him.
9. Why does Shylock call his deal with Antonio “a merry bond”? List precisely the bond’s conditions.
10. Compare and contrast Jessica and Portia—as daughters, as lovers, as independent women.
11. In the hilarious Good News, Bad News scene between Shylock and Tubal, how does Shakespeare manipulate our attitudes toward Shylock. Be specific, line by line.
12. List the speeches in which WS creates sympathy for Shylock?
13. Think about these terms and how WS weighs them literally or figuratively in *MV*: legal and illegal, law and crime, the letter of the law and the spirit of the law, justice and mercy.
14. Why should we know about the treatment of Jews in Europe during the 16th and earlier centuries? Why should we know about usury and laws against usury—religious or secular—in 16th-century Europe? Why should we know about Elizabethan dietary and sumptuary laws?
15. Where—and why—are rings important symbols?
16. What is the symbolic value of the gold, silver, and lead caskets?

17. Why does Shakespeare need to create sympathy, in Act 5 especially, for Jessica and Lorenzo?
18. In what ways do you find Shylock cruel, heartless?
19. In what ways do you find the Christians cruel, heartless?
20. Obviously WS named the play for Antonio the merchant. But what has happened, if anything, to Antonio in this play? Has he grown, changed? If so, how and why? If not, why not? Upon what evidence?