Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

The Merchant of Venice

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Plot

- Bassanio needs money to woo the wealthy Portia, so his friend Antonio, a merchant, borrows 3,000 **ducats** from Shylock, a Jewish moneylender. Shylock, whom Antonio has insulted and spat on, demands a pound of Antonio's flesh if the loan isn't repaid.
- Portia's **suitors** must choose between gold, silver and lead caskets. Bassanio chooses lead and wins her.
- Shylock's daughter, Jessica, elopes with Lorenzo, a Christian, taking her father's money.
- Antonio's ships are reported lost, and Shylock demands his **bond**. In court, Portia, disguised as a young lawyer, pleads for **mercy**, then argues that the **bond** allows flesh but no blood. Shylock loses his case, his wealth is taken and he is forced to become a Christian.
- In a comic final act, Portia and Nerissa tease their husbands about rings they gave away to the 'lawyer' and 'clerk'.

Themes

- Prejudice and **antisemitism**, **mercy** and **justice**, money and wealth, love and friendship, and appearance and reality ('All that glisters is not gold').

Context

- Written around 1596–97. Jews had been expelled from England in 1290, and most Elizabethans held strongly antisemitic views. **Usury** (lending money for interest) was forbidden to Christians by the Church, so moneylending was linked with Jewish people.
- Venice was a rich trading city, whose laws had to be applied fairly to foreign merchants.

- Modern audiences, especially after the Holocaust, often see Shylock as a victim of prejudice as well as a villain.

Key quotations

- 'Hath not a Jew eyes?' and 'If you prick us, do we not bleed?' (Shylock).
- 'The villainy you teach me I will execute' (Shylock). 'The quality of **mercy** is not strained' (Portia).
- 'All that glisters is not gold' (the scroll in the gold casket).

How to get top marks

- Handle Shylock with care. 'Hath not a Jew eyes?' asks for sympathy, and also leads on to revenge: discuss both.
- Think about two audiences: Elizabethan audiences, and how we see the play's **antisemitism** today.
- Use the courtroom as your main scene, to write about law against **mercy**.

Key terms

Antisemitism	Hostility or prejudice against Jewish people.
Usury	Lending money and charging interest.
Bond	A legal agreement, such as Antonio's promise of a pound of flesh.
Ducat	A gold coin used in Venice.
Mercy	Showing kindness or forgiveness when you could punish someone.
Justice	Fair treatment according to the law.
Suitor	A man who wants to marry a particular woman.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Why does Bassanio need money?
2. What bond does Shylock make with Antonio?
3. How much does Antonio borrow from Shylock?
4. Which casket does Bassanio choose?
5. Who elopes with Lorenzo?
6. Who says 'Hath not a Jew eyes?'
7. How does Portia defeat Shylock in court?
8. What is Portia disguised as during the trial?

Your notes

Answers

1. To woo Portia
2. A pound of Antonio's flesh if the loan isn't repaid
3. 3,000 ducats
4. Lead
5. Jessica
6. Shylock
7. The bond allows flesh but no blood
8. A lawyer

What to do next

Practise 12 questions on this topic

Try 4 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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