

Knowledge Organiser – Merchant of Venice

Plot			
1	Act One	The play opens with Antonio sad; we are unsure as to what the cause of this is. Bassanio arrives to ask Antonio for money in order to travel to Belmont to win a wealthy lady, Portia's, hand in marriage. Antonio has invested his money in ships so is unable to do so but agrees to take out a loan on Bassanio's behalf. Portia and Nerissa discuss the suitors arriving in Belmont to win her hand in marriage and her detest for them, both secretly hope Bassanio attempts the challenge. The scene ends with Antonio, Bassanio and a Jewish moneylender, Shylock signing a bond. Antonio has to repay 3000 ducats in three months otherwise Shylock can claim a pound of his flesh – this is his revenge for the way that the Christians treat him.	
2	Act Two	We are introduced to Jessica and Lancelot – their relationships with Shylock build a negative representation of him. Both Jessica and Lancelot leave Shylock separately, with Jessica converting to Christianity, stealing her mother's wedding ring, and running off with Lorenzo disguised as a man. Many suitors arrive to win Portia's casket challenge. Each suitor can only attempt once to pick from one of three caskets, gold, silver and lead, the correct casket contains Portia's counterfeit (a portrait). If they lose, they may not marry again. The Prince of Morocco attempts first – picks the gold casket which contains a skull with a scroll in its mouth - "all that glisters is not gold". The Prince of Aragon attempts next – picks the silver casket which contains a jester "with one fool's head I came to woo, now I leave with two"	
3	Act Three	Whilst Shylock dines with the Christians, Lorenzo helps Jessica, who is disguised as a man, escape from Shylock's house. She steals his money and wedding ring in the process. Meanwhile, Bassanio arrives in Belmont and wins the casket challenge and in turn Portia's hand in marriage. Upon the reveal of his engagement, Gratiano also announces that he is due to wed Nerissa. Both couples marry as Jessica and Lorenzo arrive to announce that Antonio's ships have sunk and has in turn broken the terms of the bond.	
4	Act Four	The Court Scene – the culmination of the events and the climax of the play. Shylock is blinded by his pursuit for revenge and justice ignoring the Christian's plea for him to show mercy, even offering double the money in the original bond. Portia arrives in the court disguised as a male lawyer, Balthasar, and inevitably identifies a flaw in the bond – Shylock cannot shed a drop of blood in claiming the pound of flesh otherwise he is committing murder. Shylock has to give up his wealth – half to Venice, half, upon his death, to Jessica and Lorenzo and become Christian. Bassanio and Gratiano part with their wedding rings in payment for saving Antonio, not realizing that they have given the rings to their wives in disguise.	
5	Act Five	All the characters return to Belmont. Portia and Nerissa test the loyalty of their husbands having given away the rings. They show mercy and forgive their husbands and all of the couples depart happily together leaving Antonio, whose ships did not sink, alone on stage.	
Characters			
6	Antonio	Antonio is the protagonist in this play. He is a merchant who we first encounter being depressed. He takes out the loan on Bassanio's behalf, putting his own life on the line. He has a bitter feud with Shylock but strong loyalty to the other Christian characters.	
7	Bassanio	Bassanio is a Christian character who, having gambled away his money, approaches his friend, Antonio, to borrow money to win Portia's hand in marriage. Bassanio is seen as one of the main Christian characters in this play.	

8	Portia	Portia is a wealthy heiress from Belmont. Before passing away, her father established a casket challenge to find Portia a potential suitor. Portia defies expectations of women in Elizabethan England as she takes destiny into her own hands throughout the play.	
9	Shylock	Shylock is the antagonist within this play. He is a Jew who feels mistreated by the Christian characters. He establishes a bond with Antonio in order to gain revenge for the way that he has been treated, claiming a pound of Antonio's flesh if he does not meet the terms of the bond.	
10	Gratiano	A comedic Christian character who seems to mirror Bassanio's actions within the play. He travels with Bassanio to Belmont where he marries Nerissa. He is often mocked by other characters for talking too much!	
11	Nerissa	Nerissa is Portia's servant and best friend. She helps Portia with many of her schemes throughout the play, including disguising herself as a man in the court to save Antonio. Nerissa marries Gratiano.	
12	Jessica	The daughter of Shylock who is ashamed of her father's behaviours. Jessica runs away from her father, steals his money and converts to Christianity. She is in love with Lorenzo who she runs away with leaving Shylock heartbroken.	
13	Lorenzo	One of the minor Christian characters. Lorenzo has a relationship with Jessica and, in the middle of the night, helps Jessica to run away from her father, Shylock.	
14	Lancelot	A comedic character. Having once worked as a servant to Shylock, Lancelot leaves Shylock's service and instead works for Bassanio. He has a very strong relationship with Jessica.	

Key Quotations

	Who said it?	Quotation	Who/What is it about?
15	Antonio	"A stage where every man must play a part and mine a sad one"	Antonio
16	Antonio	"my purse, my person, my extremist means lie all unlocked to your occasion"	Bassanio
17	Bassanio	"In Belmont is a lady richly left"	Portia
18	Portia	"So is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father"	Casket Challenge
19	Shylock	"I hate him for he is a Christian"	Antonio
20	Shylock	"You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog"	Antonio
21	Shylock	"Spit upon my Jewish gaberdine"	Anti-Semitism
22	Jessica	"Our house is hell"	Shylock
23	Jessica	"ashamed to be my father's child"	Shylock
24	Jessica	"I have a father, you a daughter lost"	Shylock
25	Casket	"All that glitters is not gold"	Appearance
26	Solanio	"O my ducats! O my daughter!"	Shylock
27	Shylock	"It will feed my revenge"	Revenge
28	Shylock	"Hath not a Jew hands?"	Anti-Semitism
29	Shylock	"If you prick us, do we not bleed?"	Mistreatment
30	Shylock	"The villainy you teach me, I will execute"	Revenge
31	Shylock	"I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear"	Revenge
32	Shylock	"Since I am a dog, beware my fangs"	Revenge
33	Portia	"The quality of mercy is not strained"	Mercy
34	Shylock	"My deeds upon my head! I crave the law!"	Justice
35	Portia	"He shall have merely justice and his bond"	Justice
36	Shylock	"I shall have my bond!"	Justice

Key Themes			
Appearance and Reality	The play highlights the danger of only seeing what is on the surface (the gold and silver casket conceal a <i>'death's head'</i> and a <i>'blinking idiot'</i> – the unpromising lead casket rewards the one who chooses <i>'not by the view.'</i>) Characters, consciously or subconsciously, appear to be someone they are not: Portia and Nerissa pretend to be men, as does Jessica. Bassanio pretends to be rich; Shylock pretends to be Antonio's friend. 'Masques' are worn literally in 2.6 to conceal identity.		
Prejudice and Intolerance	Prosperous Venice tolerates private prejudice against Jews. Portia is courteous to her suitors whilst criticizing them in private for their behaviour or skin colour (which also fits in with the theme of deception). It seems that the play endorses these prejudices, but Shakespeare may be subtly criticizing the prejudices of his characters; after all, it is hypocritical of the Christians to criticize Shylock for moneylending (see Usury in Context) and he has <i>'learned'</i> his hatred from the Christians. Shylock argues that all people are the same biologically and under the law in 3.1.		
Justice and Mercy	The idea of revenge surfaces throughout the play, sometimes seriously and at other times more comically: Shylock attempts to kill Antonio; Portia punishes Shylock; Antonio makes Shylock convert; Portia and Nerissa trick their husbands and watch them squirm as they try to explain. Although revenge is illegal, Shylock seeks it by sticking to the letter of the law within the Venetian justice system. In 4.1, both the Duke and Portia present mercy as a better alternative to revenge, but Shylock explicitly refuses, whereas the Christians show him mercy. Therefore, one interpretation of the play's structure is that Shakespeare meant to contrast the mercy of the main Christian characters with the vengefulness of a Jew, who lacks the religious grace to comprehend mercy. The Old Testament portrays a God who is vengeful if his laws and commandments are broken, whereas the New Testament teaches mercy and forgiveness.		
Love and Friendship	Central romantic relationship of Portia and Bassanio is paralleled by elopement of Jessica with Lorenzo and marriage of Nerissa and Gratiano. Some critics suggest that the strongest friendship in the play, that between Antonio and Bassanio, approaches romantic love. However, close friendships between men were common at the time, and Shakespeare may have intended the audience to see Antonio as a sort of guardian figure for Bassanio. There are strong ties between all the Venetian Christian characters – they all rally round Antonio. But the play also demonstrates how the apparent purity of love can be tainted by economic concerns, beginning with Bassanio borrowing money to woo.		
Techniques/Language Devices			
Dramatic Irony	Audience knows more than the characters		
Soliloquy	One character, alone on stage, sharing their inner thoughts or feelings, making an audience complicit.		
Rhyming Couplet	Two lines that rhyme, normally used at the end of a scene		

	Antithesis	People or things that oppose each other	
	Hyperbole	Overstatement of exaggeration	
	Repetition	The repetition of words or phrases for deliberate effect	
Context			
	Anti-Semitism	The hatred of Jews, or of their religion	
	Jewish stereotypes	Shakespeare would likely have never met a Jew and therefore Shylock is based on stereotypes. Greedy, bearded, hooked nose, red hats, evil, elderly.	
	Jew of Malta	A play written by Christopher Marlowe which was popular at the time Shakespeare wrote The Merchant of Venice. Features a villainous Jew called Barabas.	
	Dr Lopez	A Jewish doctor who allegedly tried to poison Queen Elizabeth around the time of Merchant of Venice	
	Usury	Jews were only allowed certain occupations that were deemed 'un-Christian'. Usury meant that Jews were seen as being increasingly greedy and were therefore immensely disliked.	
	Repression	Within society, many aspects of an individual may be repressed in order to conform to societal expectations. Homosexuality as well as attitudes towards religion would have been considered inappropriate and therefore likely not discussed.	
	Women	Women were seen as being inferior within Shakespearian England. Often women were objectified for their beauty or wealth. Shakespeare presented women in a stronger way within his plays, perhaps to appease Queen Elizabeth	