

| CONTEXT |
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| Marriage: Marriage was less a love match and more an arrangement between families. Both men and women rarely chose their own marriage partner. This was especially true of noble families. |
| Usury: In modern times usury means lending money for excessive interest. In Shakespearean times usury meant any kind of money- lending. Money-lending was considered to be a disreputable trade, mainly because Christians believed the Bible forbade it. However, in reality, most merchants of the time borrowed money to speculate on new investments. |
| Anti-Semitism: When the Merchant of Venice was staged, most of the audience would never have knowingly met a Jewish person. Jews had been expelled from the country 300 years before and so the few that were in England practised their religion in secret. Elizabethans therefore were often hugely anti-Semitic, believing stories and outlandish rumours that said Jewish men were child killers, womanisers and had a strange and fetid smell. |

| PLOT / SUMMARY OF POEMS / BREAKDOWN OF STORY (Delete/amend as appropriate) | |
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| Act 1 | Bassanio asks Antonio for a loan of 3,000 ducats. Antonio has to borrow from Shylock and the bond is a pound of flesh. Portia complains to Nerissa about the way her father has insisted she find a husband – by choosing one of three caskets – and mocks the suitors so far. |
| Act 2 | The Prince of Morocco arrives and chooses the gold casket and so fails to win Portia's hand. Jessica steals money and jewels and escapes from Shylock with Lorenzo. Shylock is enraged. We find that some of Antonio's ships have been lost. The Prince of Arragon arrives and chooses the silver casket so he does not marry Portia either. |
| Act 3 | More of Antonio's ships have been lost. Shylock says he will have his pound of flesh. Bassanio arrives to woo Portia. He chooses the lead casket and is able to marry her – the two declare their love. Nerissa and Gratiano reveal their love also. Portia and Nerissa give each man a ring. Bassanio hears that Antonio is ruined and leaves to help his friend. Antonio is in prison and Shylock will show no mercy. Portia and Nerissa say they are retiring to a convent but secretly go to Venice to help Antonio. |
| Act 4 | Antonio is on trial. Bassanio begs Shylock to be merciful, but he will not rescind his bond. Bassanio offers 6,000 ducats to no avail. Balthasar, who is really Portia dressed as a man, arrives at court to help Antonio. Bassanio offers ten times the debt or his own life but Shylock will not yield. Balthasar/Portia insists that Venetian law must be followed. Antonio and Bassanio say goodbye. Shylock is about to cut Antonio when Balthasar/Portia reminds him that the bond mentioned no blood and he must not spill a drop. Now Shylock says he'll take the money but Portia insists he have his bond. Shylock drops the case. He is then punished for attempting to take the life of a citizen of Venice. The Duke is merciful and gives Shylock a fine. Bassanio wants to give Balthasar/Portia a token of appreciation. Portia asks for his ring and gets it. Nerissa also gets Gratiano's ring. |
| Act 5 | Portia and Nerissa arrive home just before their husbands. Bassanio, Antonio and Gratiano arrive and give the good news. Portia and Nerissa 'find out' that the men have given their rings away and pretend to be cross. Eventually, the two women give their husbands back their rings and all is revealed. Antonio hears that some of his ships are safely home. Lorenzo hears he will inherit Shylock's fortune. |

| CHARACTERS | |
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| Antonio | A very good friend of Bassanio, Antonio is shown as kind – he borrows money to help Bassanio and is prepared to lose his life for it – but also unkind as he is anti-Semitic. |
| Bassanio | A Venetian nobleman who often borrows from his friend Antonio. He is in love with Portia and proves worthy of her love when he passes the casket test. |
| Portia | A rich and clever noblewoman from Belmont who must choose a husband with three caskets. She loves Bassanio and he passes the casket test. Portia dresses as a man and saves Antonio from Shylock. |
| Shylock | A money lender and a Jew who is very angry about his treatment at the hand of the Christians of Venice, particularly Antonio. He lends Antonio money with a bond of a pound of flesh. Shylock is eloquent and defends his own humanity yet seems merciless and cruel. |
| Nerissa | Portia's lady in waiting and friend. Nerissa marries Gratiano and accompanies Portia to Venice disguised as a male clerk. |
| Gratiano | A friend of Bassanio's who is very critical of Shylock during the trial. Falls in love with and marries Nerissa. |
| Jessica | Shylock's daughter who falls in love with Lorenzo who is a Christian. She is ashamed to be Shylock's daughter, elopes with Lorenzo and becomes a Christian. |
| Lorenzo | A friend of Bassanio. In love with Shylock's daughter Jessica, he helps her run away from her father with the aid of Gratiano and Salerio. |

| THEMES | | SYMBOLS |
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| Love | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Friendship Familial love Romantic love | <p>The pound of flesh</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jews were portrayed as bloodthirsty murderers at this time and so Shylock's demand for a pound of flesh would epitomise the way Jews were regarded. Shylock has also just lost his own 'flesh and blood' – Jessica. So the pound of flesh could represent his revenge on Christians generally. <p>Rings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Portia gives Bassanio a ring to represent love and commitment. Nerissa gives Gratiano a ring which represents the same. The turquoise ring that Jessica stole from Shylock represents his memories and love for his wife who has died. <p>The three caskets:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The gold casket: appearances can be deceptive Silver: being a fool Lead: modesty and good judgement. |
| Prejudice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jews/Christians Mixed relationships Shylock: 'If you prick us, do we not bleed?' | |
| Misogyny | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women were not free to marry who they chose – even if their father had died! Women are strong and make their own decisions in the play. However, they can only influence events by either doing it in secret (Jessica) or disguising themselves as men (Portia and Nerissa). | |
| Justice and mercy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shylock is expected to be merciful but isn't. Antonio is merciful. Portia: 'The quality of mercy is not strained' Is justice done by the end of the play? | |
| Money | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mistrust of money lenders Support for merchants | |