The Merchant of Venice

On a separate piece of paper, please address numbers 1 and 2. The rest is for discussion.

1. What I know about Shakespeare, in a list format.

2. What I need to know about Shakespeare, in the form of 3 questions.

Topics
- Jews in Shakespeare's England
- Usury
- Shylock's Style: Repetition
- Justice and Mercy
- Portia as Balthasar
- Venice
- Belmont
- The Jew's Daughter
- "In Such a Night"

Jews in Shakespeare's England

1. "Jew. Jew. Jew. The word echoes through The Merchant of Venice," writes Katharine E. Maus in her Norton introduction to this play (1111). Search the text for references to the word "Jew." Consider the frequency with which the word appears and the contexts in which it is used. How does the repetition of the word contribute to the creation of the context in which the play's action occurs?

2. In his depiction of Shylock, Shakespeare invokes many of the popular Jewish stereotypes of his day. But actors, audiences, and scholars have been divided over whether Shakespeare finally endorses or critiques those stereotypes. What can be discovered by comparing Shakespeare's Jew with the representation of the money-lending Jew in Shakespeare's principal source, the tale of Giannetto and the Lady of Belmonte? Examine Marlowe's Jew of Malta and in particular the episode in which Barabas Buys a Slave. How is Shylock similar to Barabas? How does he differ? What do these similarities or differences suggest?

3. What does Shakespeare's Jew look like? Consider some varied images of Jews and of Shylocks not with an eye to discovering the "true" Shylock but rather to exploring the range of possible ways of representing this character. Compare, for example, the sixteenth-century image of a "Merchant Jew" with the image of Dr. Lopez from the early seventeenth-century engraving "Lopez Compounding to Poison the Queen." How would a Shylock modeled on either of these early representations of a Jew differ from the kind of Shylock represented by the eighteenth-century actor Charles Macklin, the nineteenth-century actor Henry Irving, or the twentieth-century actor Laurence Olivier? How does attire or costume influence our perception of the character of Shylock?
Usury

1. One of the common objections to usury, derived from Aristotle's comment on the practice, was that usury involves making money breed and thereby transgresses the boundary between mineral and animal, between the living and the nonliving. Search the text for the word "breed" to see how this idea is explicitly invoked in Shakespeare's play. Is it also invoked in other ways in connection with Shylock? Consider, for example, the nature of the "merry bond." Consider, too, Shylock's language in the scene in which he talks about his daughter's flight (3.1).

2. When Bassanio describes to Antonio his proposed expedition to Belmont to woo "a lady richly left" (1.1.161) he does so in language that is at once romantic — Jason setting out for the "golden fleece" — and suggestive of a merchant setting out on a commercial venture. What does this passage suggest about the relationship between love and money in The Merchant of Venice? Is it only Shylock who blurs the distinction between human and economic values? Does the play successfully resolve the tension it evokes between these two values?

3. One of the common criticisms of usury was that the moneylender was a kind of social parasite living, as Thomas Wilson puts it, off the sweat and labor of others. How does Shakespeare represent Shylock's relation to Christian society? Does Shakespeare suggest that he is a member of an alternative Jewish society? In The Merchant of Venice, as in many other plays, feasting serves as a trope of social harmony. Shylock refuses to eat with Christians, but he does seek to cut a pound of Christian flesh "to feed," as he says, his "revenge" (3.1.45-46). How does this suggestion of cannibalism relate to the concept of the usurer as a parasite? Are there parallels to be drawn between Shylock and Caliban — his name is commonly taken to be an anagram of "cannibal" — in The Tempest?

Shylock's Style: Repetition

1. Within the general framework of his peculiar, repetitive style, the character of Shylock is open to multiple dramatic realizations, each one different from the others. Listen to Trevor Peacock's rendition of the "Three thousand ducats" exchange. How much of Shylock's character is implicit in the line "Three thousand ducats. Well." Read the speech yourself and experiment with multiple ways of adding the word "well." Note that timing can be as important as emphasis and intonation.

2. Note that in the passage for study, Shylock speaks first in prose and then in verse. What is the effect of this shift in register? Why does it come when it does? In this instance the change in register comes in the middle of a scene. Elsewhere entire scenes written in verse are juxtaposed with entire scenes written in prose. Consider the effect of embedding 3.1, which is entirely in prose, between scenes entirely in verse. How is the register of these scenes related to their substance, the issues being dramatized?

3. Shylock's reliance on the fixity and dependability of language reaches its climax in the trial scene (4.1.230-58) when he insists that the bond be executed exactly as written. He is thwarted by Portia's famous quibble about the cutting of an exact pound of flesh without shedding any blood. In effect, Portia has accepted Shylock's view of language and used it against him. Does
Portia, then, demonstrate that language really is not fixed in meaning as Shylock would wish it to be?

**Justice and Mercy**

1. There are two plots in The Merchant of Venice, the love plot centered on Bassanio's venture to win Portia and the bond plot centered on Antonio's indebtedness to Shylock. Consider in what ways Portia's subjection to her father's will — his institution of the casket choice as the test for winning her love — may be regarded as parallel to Antonio's subjection to Shylock's bond. Examine the story of Giannetto and the Lady of Belmonte in which Shakespeare found the outlines of the love plot. Note that in the prose tale the Lady of Belmonte's father is not mentioned. How does it change the significance of the story to make the love test a matter of obedience to a dead father's will?

2. The passage for study ends with Shylock insisting on the penalty and forfeit of his "bond." Search the text for "bond" to see how frequently this key word appears in the play and to locate the circumstances under which it is invoked. A bond is a legal term for a deed by which a person binds himself to pay a certain sum of money. But it is also a term which suggests shackles and restraints, or alternatively the force or influence by which a union is maintained, as in "bonds of matrimony." As the discussion of his style suggests, Shylock characteristically seeks to limit the meanings of words, and by "bond" here he plainly means merely "deed." But can he completely rule out the other possible meanings of the word?

**Portia as Balthasar**

1. Shakespeare found the story of the lady dressing as a lawyer and defeating the Jew in the Italian tale of "Giannetto and the Lady of Belmonte". How closely has he followed this element in the Italian tale? Has he developed the significance of the episode differently from the earlier version?

2. The ring plot also appears in the tale of "Giannetto and the Lady of Belmonte." How closely has Shakespeare followed this element? How does Shakespeare treat the ring plot so that it can be seen as mirroring the bond plot?

3. Portia masquerades as Balthasar for a time but then resumes her role as the Lady of Belmont. Likewise, the prince in 1 Henry IV consorts with highway robbers and tapsters before resuming his role as the heir apparent. In one case the masquerade concerns gender, in the other social class. Consider the parallels between the two masquerading figures. How might the Elizabethan theater have been charged with destabilizing class as well as gender roles?

**Venice**

1. Shylock and Othello are both aliens in Venice, yet each has a significant role in the life of the city. Their roles had historical precedent: Venice was known for its Jewish moneylenders and was also known to employ foreigners to lead its armies. How do the public roles of the two characters compare? Do they have analogous relationships to the city's ruling class? Are their
fates in any way parallel? What can be said about the depiction of the place of aliens in society in these two plays?

2. The Duke of Venice plays a small but pivotal part in both The Merchant of Venice and Othello. Compare the role of the Duke in the two plays. How does his role in each case relate to the specific conception of Venice in each play? How does the representation of Venice in each case relate to the larger concerns of the drama?

Belmont

1. Both Belmont and Venice figure in the old tale of "Giannetto and the Lady of Belmonte," Shakespeare's probable source for most of the key elements of his story. How does the representation of Belmont in the tale compare to the impression of Belmont conveyed by the play? How do Giannetto's travels between Venice and Belmonte in the tale compare to Bassanio's travels in the play?

2. Many of Shakespeare's romantic comedies establish an opposition between the "real" world of the city or court and an alternative world that lies outside it. Since this alternative world is often a forest or other natural setting, as it is in A Midsummer Night's Dream, it is sometimes referred to as the "green world." In what ways is Belmont unlike the "green world" of A Midsummer Night's Dream? In what ways is it like that world? Can you find parallels between the opposition of court and tavern in 1 Henry IV and the opposition of "real" and "green" worlds in A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Merchant of Venice?

3. Antonio, Bassanio, Portia, Gratiano, Nerissa, Lorenzo, and Jessica are all gathered together at Belmont at the end of the play. Shylock, however, disappears at the end of the trial scene. What is Shylock's role in the opposition between Venice and Belmont? Why is he not brought together with the other major characters at the end?

The Jew's Daughter

1. Shylock mentions his wife, Leah (3.1.100-2), in passing, referring to the turquoise ring that she gave him when he was a bachelor, but she never appears in the play; nor is Portia's mother mentioned, though her dead father figures prominently. Likewise in A Midsummer Night's Dream, Hermia's father, Egeus, is significant, but no mothers are mentioned. Fathers and daughters are common in Shakespeare's plays, but mothers are relatively rare. (Gertrude in Hamlet is a notable exception; Volumnia in Coriolanus is another.) Consider why this may be so. In a hierarchical and patriarchal society such as early modern England, a father might be said to represent the family as a king might represent the state. But how does this absence of mothers color the play's concerns?

2. The marriage of Jessica and Lorenzo mirrors the marriages of Portia and Bassanio and Nerissa and Graziano. What other duplications are there in this play? Note the way the economic bond of the Shylock plot mirrors the dutiful bond of the lady of Belmont plot. Consider how the comic figures of Lancelot and Gobbo relate to the other characters.
3. Shortly after the witty exchange between Lorenzo and Jessica, he speaks to her of the music of the spheres (5.1.57-64) and the script calls for musicians to play. Consider how this literal music at the end of the play relates to the comedic harmony that Shakespeare is attempting to establish at this point. How does the fact that Shylock does not seem to like music — he commands Jessica to shut up the house (2.5.27-35) when the masquers go by — relate to his absence from the finale?

"In Such a Night"

Analysis of the play’s final scene:
1. Having observed the shining moon — the lamp of love but also the symbol of change — Lorenzo recalls Chaucer's tale of Troilus and Cressida and the image of the Trojan prince sighing for the lady who will, as both he and Jessica know, soon be unfaithful to him. (Shakespeare was to use this tale as the basis for his play Troilus and Cressida.)

2. Jessica counters this allusion and its implication that women are by nature unreliable with the tragic story of Thisbe, a lady faithful unto death. (Shakespeare had recently used this story as the basis for the workmen's play in A Midsummer Night's Dream.)

3. Thisbe killed herself for love, and it is perhaps this element of the story that makes Lorenzo think now of Queen Dido, who also killed herself, vainly beckoning Aeneas to return to Carthage. The point to note here is the suggestion that sometimes heroic duty — the gods tell Aeneas to leave Dido and travel to Italy, where his descendants will found Rome — calls men away.

4. Jessica retorts with the story of a powerful woman, Medea, who dared terrors and worked wonders to restore her lover Jason's father, Aeson, to life.

5. Yet Medea's story has another aspect: Medea betrayed her own father to secure the golden fleece for Jason, and then sailed away with him to Greece. The parallel with Jessica's own story is clear, and Lorenzo alludes to it when he now speaks of Jessica herself as if she were a mythic figure stealing away from Shylock for her "unthrift love" — that is, for himself.

6. Lorenzo's comparison of Jessica to Medea is a romantic acknowledgment of what she has done for him. Yet, as Shakespeare's audience would have known, Jason was eventually unfaithful to Medea, and Jessica cleverly turns this aspect of the tale back onto Lorenzo, suggesting that his vows too will prove false.

7. The game, which began with Lorenzo hinting that Jessica might prove unfaithful, has now come full circle with her quite directly suggesting the same of him. To which he with equal directness retorts:
   In such a night
   Did pretty Jessica, like a little shrew,
   Slander her love, and he forgave it her.
At which rather touching point the messenger from Portia arrives and interrupts the game.

Questions for Discussion, Writing, and Research:
1. The exchange between Lorenzo and Jessica suggests at once cleverness and genuine feeling. Consider how the invocation of these stories — all of which end badly — gives a new dimension to the play’s treatment of love. How does the mood established in this exchange prepare the audience for the remainder of the finale? More specifically, how does it prepare for the resolution of the ring plot, when Portia and Nerissa forgive their husbands?

2. The "wit combat" is a device Shakespeare used for various purposes in a range of plays. (Perhaps the most famous in a comedy are the games of wit between Beatrice and Benedick in Much Ado about Nothing.) Consider the way Shakespeare uses the wit combat to define the interaction between the prince and Falstaff in 1 Henry IV, for example, at the start of 1.2. Consider the very different way he draws upon the form to define the interaction between Hamlet and Polonius in Hamlet, for example, in the "fishmonger scene" (2.2).

3. Many actors and critics have regarded The Merchant of Venice as essentially Shylock's play, and have seen the Belmont finale (5.1) as an awkward afterpiece to the action proper. The eighteenth-century critic B. Walwyn, for example, said contemptuously of the shift from the grandeur of the trial scene to the Belmont resolution, "It can only be compared to the necessity of turning our attention from the ocean to a fish pond." How would the play be affected by entirely omitting the finale and concluding with the trial scene, as has sometimes been done? What would be gained? What would be lost?

The Merchant of Venice

1. Draw a set of concentric circles on a piece of paper to represent society in play, and place the main characters to show the relationship of each to the mainstream society in the center. Explain your choices in positioning each character (as ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’). What are the relationships between specific characters? Explore the perspective or understanding of a particular character.

2. Group activity: identify a pair of characters who have something in common. One student will play each character, and the third will interview the characters. Together compose a series of questions for the interviewer to pose, designed to explore, compare, and contrast what the two characters have in common. The characters players will answer primarily without a script. If the group has four students, students can plan to rotate roles.

3. Katherine Eisaman Maus poses a series of opening questions about the play:
   a. What is the play’s representation or stance regarding anti-Semitism? Note that Jews had been deported from England in the Middle Ages, and were still depicted in highly negative ways in contemporary writings and literature.
   b. Does Portia represent "womanly virtue" or is she a manipulative virago?
   c. What are the obligations of majority cultures to minorities in their midst? Do the play’s characters favor their own "kind"?
   d. Are there universally shared human characteristics, and if so, do they outweigh religious and cultural differences, or are such differences decisive? (Norton ed. p.1081)

4. Venice is represented as a cosmopolitan marketplace and community where trade among nations and different cultures thrives. Explore the significance and effects of the play’s setting in relation to such social and economic relations. As Maus notes, Shakespeare juxtaposes social relations based on similarity with social relations based on
economic interest, but the Christian merchant-adventurers tend to take risks in their getting and spending, and their "generosity, grace, and self-assurance have a disconcerting racist tinge" (1083).

5. Shylock is portrayed largely in terms of his isolation (from daughter, servant, larger social groups). What produces such isolation and what meanings does his separateness convey? Does he identify with particular people or values that contrast with his apparent isolation?

6. Maus also notes that the Christians' magnificent improvidence is a distinctively aristocratic attitude of professed unconcern with monetary expenditure. It may also be linked to a Christian outlook of belief in divine grace and a willingness to risk all to be saved or to be charitable, in contrast to the emphasis within Judaism on justice and respect for adhering to the letter of the law, even as it applies to or privileges economic relations in Shylock's primary view. Despite the initial "pound of flesh" bargain, however, Shylock is not only concerned with monetary matters. Explore consistencies and inconsistencies or contradictions within the different social groups and in characters' speech and behavior.

7. Maus notes that such inconsistencies "haunt the play's friendships and marriages" (1086). Marriage is a hybrid social relation that is associated with love, with reproduction, and with property relations. She notes that the language of Bassanio's courtship and attraction to Portia is full of the metaphors of commerce and exchange. For example, examine the casket test scene with such considerations in mind (3.2).

8. Consider the extent to which Portia's cross-dressed disguise (as the young lawyer, Balthasar, 4.1.162 ff.) offers greater liberty of action for her, and note how it may coincide with the presence of a "scapegoat" outsider figure such as Shylock: is there more freedom for women in this play when men and women are not so directly opposed to each other in the context of the opposition men and women in a dominant national community may share in opposition to an "alien" in their midst?

9. Evaluate and analyze Portia's initial plea for mercy (perhaps founded on a Christian premise of saving grace), and her ensuing judgment which cites a law against any alien who plots the death of a Venetian citizen; Shylock's life is spared, but at least half of his wealth is demanded, he must become a practicing Christian, and he must provide for his daughter, Jessica who has eloped with Lorenzo, a Christian. To what extent does a spiritual life and social recognition, in this play, depend upon material prosperity?

10. To what extent does the scene between Jessica and Lorenzo, even despite their allusions to unhappy love stories (5.1) offer an alternative vision of interaction between ethnic groups (in relation, for example, to the trial scene and its outcome).

11. How do you/we understand Portia-as-Balthazar's request for Bassanio's wedding ring as payment for legal services, and Bassanio's compliance with this request (and note as well that Graziano gives up Nerissa's ring, see 4.2 and 5.1).

12. Reflect on how McEvoy's commentary affects your understanding and perspectives. For example, he states that "it can be argued that this is a play that ends with a woman very much empowered, while the men have been embarrassed and outwitted" (Shakespeare: The Basics p.165 in Second Edition), as for example when the ring as symbol of "male possession of women is transformed into a symbol of women slipping out of male power" (167), just as riddling language in the final scene also marks such slippage, and may pose the question: "Could a woman be the sort of friend (/lover) to a man that Antonio was to Bassanio?" (168). Do such egalitarian sentiments affect the representation of Shylock?

1. Explore the opposition of Mercy versus Justice set up by Portia's speeches in the courtroom. (4.1)
2. How does the play examine male/male relationships and male/female relationships (or force them to compete)? (1.1, 4.1)
3. How are Antonio's "human" concerns confused with financial concerns in 1.1?
4. Explore whether Shylock's speech in 3.1 changes the play's overall tone from anti-Semitic to sympathetic to Jews and/or Shylock.
5. Why might this play be difficult to fit into conventional comedic form? Is it funny?
6. What is relevant to today about the positions of outsiders in this play? Who would Shylock and Jessica be? What groups occupy similar positions to these characters today?
7. Trevor Nunn, director of Masterpiece Theatre's *The Merchant of Venice*, states, "My intention is to show that the play is as much anti-Christian as it is anti-Jewish. It is a masterpiece about human behavior in extremis." Is this approach warranted by the text?

8. John Drakakis argues that *The Merchant of Venice* generates a difference "between its own historically specific concerns and those of the modern world," as well as generating a "sameness in so far as those historical differences can be collapsed into a timeless presence." How do we reconcile/interpret the play in light of this difference and sameness?

9. Leslie Fiedler, in an analysis of *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, asserts, "exploited outsiders tend to resemble each other strangely, so that women and Jews fall together not only in Shakespeare but in the imagination of the Western world as a whole." Do women and Jews “fall together” in *The Merchant of Venice*? If so, where does one locate Jessica, Shylock’s Jewish daughter turned Christian?

10. While Jessica’s conversion to Christianity suggests a "normalizing" return to the dominant order of Venetian society and a rejection of the "otherness" of her father, does her subversion to her father's patriarchal authority, mark a reversal of obedience to dominant power?

11. What does the play, in its attack on Shylock's value of money, and the riddle of the caskets, say about material wealth in Venetian society?

12. What is the effect, on the play as a whole, of Shylock's forced conversion?

13. Explore the importance of gender boundaries and cross-dressing to the three characters, Jessica, Portia, and Nerissa. Do they achieve power or reinforce gendered identities in *The Merchant of Venice*?

14. Is John Drakakis' assertion that "Jessica is, more substantially than the other female characters in the play, that symbol of excess that patriarchy will always fear," an accurate assertion about Jessica as an erotic other?

15. Explore Lancelot's role/position. How does he treat Jessica and how does that position him in Venice?

16. Is Shylock an isolated figure? If so, how does this add to his demonization as a Jew or lessen the anti-Semitism of the play?

17. Examine the play's critique of Christianity through Shylock's speech. (3.1)

18. Explore how the play may or may not enact a vision of assimilation. Which characters have access to this vision?

19. Explore the roles/positions of Salerio, Solanio, and Graziano.