

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

Teachers' Notes

This resource would provide an ideal support to teachers using *The Merchant of Venice* as a GCSE course work text. In addressing the difference between different modes of Shakespeare presentation in film, GCSE and AS drama students will also find the materials of use. That Shakespeare adaptations for the screen are a recognisable genre now we live in a post-Branagh environment, students could put those elements of the resources concerned with the 'selling' of the film to use as a part of an individual Media Studies investigation.

Synopsis

Set in sixteenth century Venice, Shakespeare's timeless comedy/drama follows the fates and fortunes of a group of noblemen and their interactions with the moneylender Shylock. Antonio borrows money from Shylock to help his young penniless friend Bassanio in his quest to win the hand of the fair Portia. The loan falls due and Shylock claims his forfeit in the form of a pound of Antonio's flesh. As Bassanio desperately tries to save Antonio from this fate, miraculous help comes from an unexpected quarter.

The Merchant of Venice

Dir: Michael Radford

Certificate: 15

Running time: 130mins



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Introduction

The press notes for Michael Radford's version of *The Merchant of Venice* speak of its being 'a timeless comedy/drama'. The fact that in 2004, cinemas across the world will be screening an adaptation of a play originally written sometime around 1597, would suggest that that the term 'timeless' is not mere hyperbole and that despite the problematic elements contained in this story of 'Christian merchants and their interactions with a Jewish moneylender', there is enough matter here both to amuse and enthrall a modern audience.

These notes offer opportunities for students to consider the attractions of this complex play as well as the problems it poses a filmmaker both in terms of its themes and its theatricality. How it has been adapted for the screen is a key element of these resources - the emphasis throughout on students coming to their own views of design and character before attempting close analysis of this latest screen version.

Much of this \$30m project was filmed on location in Venice. It presents a troubled and troubling vision of that city as more than a backdrop to the events of the story but also as its specific context. Students will be able to consider how Venice is shown and used, contrasting it with the fanciful kingdom of Belmont where Portia lives in suspense awaiting a suitor capable of passing her father's casket trick.

As part of these notes consideration is given to several of the play's key characters, relationships and the main dramatic crux in the bond scene in the Duke's palace. The exploration here of this scene and the closing events in Belmont seek to explore the extent to which Radford's interpretation manages to lose down meaning or leave us with unanswered questions - of which this ambiguous tale has the potential to generate many.

Overall, these notes are geared throughout to encouraging students to consider their own view of the play and its characters before studying Radford's vision. In this way they will be better placed to either endorse or critically challenge his interpretation.



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Stage to Screen

In the publicity pack for the film there is the following statement concerning director Michael Radford's approach to the project: **'He was looking to create a cinematic Merchant of Venice, not merely putting a theatrical production on film.'** Such an assertion deserves analysis. What do you feel are the differences between these two approaches?

Consider the following nine statements, decide whether each is either a **filmed theatre performance** or a **cinematic version** and tick the appropriate box. None of these has its opposite, appropriate for the other form of filmed Shakespeare. So when you have used them all, try to come up with the alternative statements that would fill up the gaps in the columns.

filmed theatre	cinematic version	
		1 The need for back story before the play script's actual opening. It will explain key characters and relationships and so opening up the possibility of cutting the text substantially.
		2 A film that endeavours to include every line spoken of the original text.
		3 A film that attempts to keep the camera still as though showing things from a single position. Ideally, the events will be filmed in long shot.
		4 A reliance on sets rather than actual locations. These sets may attempt to re-create the 'everywhere' feel of the playhouse rather than trying to be too specific about locations.
		5 The lines will be spoken in a natural manner as if it is everyday speech. There will be no 'voice beautiful' declaiming.
		6 There will be some use of hand-held camera, suggesting urgent movement, or the bobbing of characters in boats.
		7 Music in the film will be diegetic - in other words, it will need to feature actually in the scene rather than be an edited in soundtrack.
		8 Soliloquies may be heard in voice-over as characters go about their business, even interacting with others.
		9 Editing will be kept to a minimum so as to preserve the order of scenes as they occur in the original play.

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Summing up A Merchant of Venice

Activity One: Darkness and Water

The screen is dark and the only sound at the start of Michael Radford's *Merchant of Venice* is the sound of water. It sounds quite benign - a gentle rippling, but it establishes a motif aurally that will be present throughout the film both visually and linguistically.

How effective do you feel such a start might be? What does the darkness of the opening suggest? What comes to mind when you hear the water - here gentle but capable, as Salario says in the first scene of 'roaring' and scattering Antonio's sea-bourne spices and rich silks? Would the sound of a ferocious wind have been as suggestive?

Activity Two: The Back Story

One of the key differences between a film version of a Shakespeare drama and its realisation on stage is that in creating it for the screen, a director may feel required to provide a back story. This is particularly true of *The Merchant of Venice*, which begins on stage very abruptly with one unnamed character (Antonio) declaring he cannot fathom why he is sad to two other unnamed characters.

Today's theatre audience members might be expected to know who they are perhaps because of programme notes, or previous knowledge, but a film director catering to the general public cannot assume such awareness. There is also his need to get a move on - establishing the place and time and dramatic circumstances, that Shakespeare, no sluggard in these respects, will unfold in a more leisurely fashion during the first Act.

Watch the opening sequence. It introduces us to Venice in 1596. Using this as the basis of your research investigate the following:

- The origins of the word 'ghetto'.
- The kinds of restrictions regarding to living space that applied to the Jewish community in Venice.
- What attractions the Jewish community appears to offer - the allure that they offer young Christian men, for example.
- The kinds of ways in which Jewish people were singled out in terms of their appearance in sixteenth century Venice.
- What 'usury' means and why it was that Jewish people were particularly associated with this activity.
- The central nature of commerce to a city like Venice.
- The sense that business was potentially cut-throat and fortunes could easily be reversed.
- The idea that Venice was a centre of many pleasures and was fairly unashamed of them. Investigate the reasons why the prostitutes were required to wear highly revealing dresses, for examples.
- The use of masks by young men and women in Venice and their significance.
- The range of prejudices Jewish people experienced in Christian communities - what fears and fantasies helped to fuel these views?

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As well as these scene-setting issues, the opening sequence in Radford's film also supplies a series of thumbnail sketches suggesting the relationships between the key characters. Before the first true Shakespearean line has been spoken we know quite a lot about:

- ~ Antonio's religious preoccupations
- ~ Antonio's attitude to Shylock
- ~ Antonio's attitude to Bassanio (Joseph Fiennes)
- ~ Lorenzo and Jessica's relationship

What does the opening sequence suggest about these relationships?



Activity Three: Scene Setting

Imagine that Radford had not bothered with a scene-setting prologue, what elements do you think are there in the first scene of the play in its entirety that provide us with clues as to our whereabouts and the kinds of people we are encountering?

Consider what hints the following images contain concerning Antonio's concerns and frame of reference:

Salerio: *Your mind is tossing on the ocean;
There, where your argosies with portly sail,
Like signiors and rich burghers on the flood...*

Continue to work through both Solanio and Salerio's opening speeches and the replies they prompt from Antonio identifying anything that suggests his (Antonio's) profession, character and predicament. Foreexample, what do you make of Antonio's response to his friends' concerns about his having merchandise at risk at sea?

Antonio: *Believe me, no: I thank my fortune for it,
My ventures are not in one bottom trusted,
Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate
Upon the fortune of this present year:
Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.*

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Does he come across as a proud man or someone full of humility? Does he seem over-confident or cautious?

Spectators to a stage play in Shakespeare's day are likely to have been provided with all sorts of clues about the status and location of characters from their dress and other props. Even the kinds of shoes they were wearing might have hinted at whether this was an indoor or street scene. Of course films are as rich in detail - much more so! It is just that probably we are not so attuned as Shakespeare's audiences were to reading the clues.

For example - Take a note of everything you can remember about Antonio's home. What suggestions are there:

- ~ That he is a rich man?
- ~ That he is a merchant?
- ~ That he is a generous man?
- ~ That others may be taking advantage of his generous nature?
- ~ That he is melancholy and that is reflected in the dominant tones of the setting in which he lives?

Activity Four: The Pitch

At some early stage in a film's creation, someone creatively involved in the project - the director or producer - will need to make a pitch to the people that hold the purse strings. In the case of *The Merchant of Venice*, there were probably a large number of financial meetings because the film received support from a number of backers in addition to a complex arrangement of tax deals and advance international rights sales.

Making a pitch involves explaining 'in a nutshell' what the movie is about and what makes it commercially viable. For the following activities, the idea is to put yourself in the shoes of director Michael Radford having to 'sell' the idea of a film version of this most challenging of Shakespeare's plays.

100 words or less

In a group, or individually, work out what it is about *The Merchant of Venice* that might make it a viable project. What dramatic elements does it contain? What kinds of variety of emotions might it appeal to? Why is this a good time to be making the film version of this play? When you have collected your thoughts, write out a proposal explaining your support for the project in 100 words or less.

What's your selling point?

The following statements might all have had an influence on getting the film 'green-lit' - in other words financed so that it could move from paper into production. Your job is to arrange the following into the order you feel they deserve - the most important first.

- A It is a tale about compelling emotions such as intolerance and revenge.
- B It is a play about mercy and as actress Lynn Collins (Portia) suggests '...it is about forgiveness and how we rise above the norm for us, the prejudice and our differences.'
- C As producer Jason Piette puts it: 'We are in a society that is rent by racism so obviously that aspect of the play is going to come under a big magnifying glass.'

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- D The play is the main element of the pitch - it has not been made a major star-studded feature film before. There were a number of versions in the era of silent movies and in the forties key speeches from the play were incorporated into a couple of films. Since then there have only been three attempts to translate the play in its entirety to the screen in modern times. These include two Jonathan Miller productions (1969 and 1980) and a Trevor Nunn directed film for ExxonMobil Masterpiece Theatre in 2001. None of these were overly cinematic, being made in a somewhat reverential manner and attempting to capture essentially stage productions on film.
- E A wild mixture of emotions. As actor Kris Marshall (Gratiano) puts it: 'It's quite a paradox in a way. It's a tragedy but it is also a comedy. It's a love story and it's a story about hate. It pretty much covers the gamut of human emotions: envy; jealousy; trust; love; greed; racism... It covers so many different things and weaves between them effortlessly.'
- F The play contains a number of strong female roles - it could be attractive to both male and female audience members.
- G It culminates in a dramatic court scene - always a mainstay of police dramas and something that will help sell the movie.
- H It is a brave and controversial project. As the production/publicity notes say: 'The complexity of The Merchant of Venice has frequently produced reluctance on the part of many directors and producers to attempt to bring it to the screen.'
- I The securing of major stars in the shape of Al Pacino and Jeremy Irons - both giving the film prestige.
- J Getting Joseph Fiennes involved. He was a central part of the success of the hit 1998 movie Shakespeare in Love. He has a good track record both as an appealing actor but also one with a first rate screen Shakespeare reputation.
- K Its being filmed in Venice, enabling the director to achieve a scale and sixteenth century period feel for a small relative price. The City's council was also immensely accommodating allowing filming on the Rialto Bridge, in part of the Doge's Palace and even on the Grand Canal.
- L The Merchant of Venice is likely to generate sales in lots of different markets and enjoy a long 'shelf-life' as DVD and video - particularly in the education market.
- M The involvement of director Michael Radford. He has a good, varied track record, making intelligent, highly textured period films such as White Mischief and Il Postino which is still among the biggest grossing foreign language films of all time, being nominated for five Academy Awards.



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Characters

It is a consequence of the power of pictures that once seen, a film version of a book or a play can become imprinted in people's minds in a way that actually narrows down its meanings. At the very least, the fact that a character is performed by a famous star or well-known character actor may fix their interpretation in viewers' imaginations.

Activity One: What is Your Vision of Shylock?

The play may have a title suggesting it is about Antonio but it is Shylock who, despite only a handful of appearances, often remains the main focus of attention. There have been thousands of interpretations of the character over the centuries. Even the versions of him on film, though far less numerous, demonstrate considerable variation.

An early French movie called *Shylock* (1913) turned the character into a particularly grim caricature redolent, critics even said then, of earlier and less tolerant times. So money-grabbing was actor Harry Baur in the role, that he performed Shylock bathing with his gold coins and almost finding it impossible to hand over the cash to Antonio following their agreement. The 1969 film of Jonathan Miller's National Theatre production records Laurence Olivier as a Shylock placed at the heart of a nineteenth century mercantile society - virtually indistinguishable in appearance and desperately seeking assimilation. In this same cause most of his virulent anti-Christian lines were removed.

In between these two interpretations lie the horrors of the rise of Nazism in Europe and the Holocaust. All post-war performances of *The Merchant of Venice* are rightly touched by the knowledge that the play exists somewhere on a cultural spectrum that has Auschwitz at one end of it.



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Activity Two: Discussing Shylock

But does that mean that the play should not be performed? Or should, as in the Miller/Olivier stage production and film, Shylock's line '*I hate him for he is a Christian...*' be removed?

What is your vision of Shylock? In the play, he does not appear until the third scene and is not mentioned before he appears, unless Antonio's lines to Bassanio carry overtones of the kind of bargain Shylock will extract and the kind of physical danger he (Antonio) will carry alongside his overextended finances: '*Try what my credit can in Venice do:/ That shall be rack'd, even to the uttermost, / To furnish thee to Belmont...*'

Work your way through Act I Scene 3 discussing the possibilities for interpretation that are on offer to an actor playing Shylock or a director creating this scene. For example:

- How might it begin? Will the opening with Shylock weighing up Antonio's request for three thousand ducats be in marked contrast to the scene and mood that has just concluded and which introduced us to the magical world of Belmont and its charmed inhabitants - Portia and Nerissa? (Radford's film begins with a shocking close-up of meat being cut and weighed in a market.)
- How might Shylock's refusal to give an immediate answer to the request be presented - sinister? - cautious? - playful? - full of resentment? - amusement?
- How might an actor catalogue Antonio's current commercial concerns -leading up to the 'Pi-rats' joke? Again - is he turning the screw on Bassanio, enjoying the young man's discomfort and suspense or is he sensibly considering the kind of security the loan needs, given the fact that Antonio's wealth is literally 'all at sea'?
- What of that first 'aside' speech in which Shylock is revealed to harbour all sorts of resentments against Antonio, the principal one being that he has undermined Shylock's business by offering interest-free loans (recall that money-lending was about the only profession that Jews could perform in Christian societies of that time once the guilds protecting and regulating other trades had closed their ranks against allowing them in as members.)
- How will Shylock remind Antonio of his previous horrible behaviour towards him - spitting on him where he does his business each day on the Rialto Bridge and its canal-side?
- Is Shylock's offer of friendship sincere?
- Where does the idea of the pound of flesh come from? Does it spring from Shylock's mind unprompted - as if the notion has been festering there as some sort of fantasy for some while, or does it proceed from the precise circumstances or surroundings that the characters are in?

Once you have made up your mind about these issues, compare your vision of the scene with the way it is presented in Radford's film version. How does the director use the meat market as a context with which to explain some of the scene's content? What do you feel about Pacino's Shylock and the fact that, apart from his red hat and the seal he carries around his neck, is little different from the Christian characters?

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Activity Three: No Jewish Representative

Central to the success or failure of this and every production of the play in portraying Shylock is its ability to 'individuate' him and his experiences. It is important to Pacino and the makers of this film version, that we should see the character as a person who makes inappropriate choices, born of their own suffering and not as some grim manifestation of his community.

As you watch Radford's film, or reflect on it afterwards, consider how successful it is in the following ways:

- Do you feel any sympathy for Shylock at the start of the play?
- Do you feel his anger towards Antonio is justified, albeit acting on this anger is deeply flawed?
- Do you feel that it is the loss of his daughter or his money that most disturbs him? Consider his reaction to the tale of Leah's ring supposedly being exchanged for a monkey.
- Do you feel he is as much an old man as he is a Jewish moneylender? Old men seeking to lock up their daughters were a very common comic stereotype in Shakespeare's age.
- Do you feel any sympathy for Shylock forced to dine among the Christians while we know his house is being robbed - or do we just hope Jessica can get away?
- Do you feel any sympathy for Shylock when he is finally condemned and forced to convert to Christianity and hand over half of his wealth to the Venetian state?
- Do you feel that Shylock's enemies are morally superior or better people than him? Would they be found wanting if judged by Portia?

Activity Four: Other Stereotypes

England of the 1590s had a lot to be thankful for. In 1588 it had managed to defeat the Armada sent against it by Phillip of Spain and in that victory had preserved itself both from foreign invasion and also a reversion to Catholicism as state religion. At the same time, all was not secure. England was at war with Spain in the Netherlands and there were regular invasion alarms. Meanwhile, London was one of the most populous cities in Europe and as well as visitors, it was also home to sizeable communities of foreigners there by choice or compulsion due anti-Protestant persecution on mainland Europe.

It is in this very precise context that Shakespeare's frequent stereotyping of foreigners needs to be understood. He lived at a time when to be a stranger from abroad in England was to be both a source of fascination and also some suspicion. And the most obvious way of dealing with such ambiguous feelings was to revert to laughter.

Shylock is not the only character in *The Merchant of Venice* subject to satiric portrayal. In fact the presentation of the various international suitors seeking Portia is far more one-dimensional than the rich representation that Shylock receives.

The main scenes in which Portia and Nerissa comment on or interact with these 'foreigners' are Act I Scene 2, Act II Scene 1 and Act II Scene 9. Your task is to compare these scenes in the play with the way they are realised in Radford's film version.

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- Radford greatly reduces the number of thumbnail nationality sketches that Nerissa and Portia indulge in during Act I Scene 2. Which nationalities does he choose not to focus on and why do you feel these are excluded?
- What is your response to the portrayal of the Prince of Morocco in Act II Scene 1 in the film? What stereotypes does this scene contain concerning Islamic or Middle Eastern/North African people? Is this a figure out of a fairy tale or something that might be offensive to people?
- What is your response to the portrayal of the Prince of Arragon Act II Scene 9? What makes this character amusing? Is it his 'foreignness' or his effeminacy that is the joke?
- To what extent do you feel these characters' choice of caskets is a reflection of their national characteristics?

Places

Venice

Shakespeare, as far as we know, never travelled abroad, and never visited Italy or Venice. To an average London playhouse audience member in the late 1590s Venice would be as exotic and strange as Belmont - a completely fictitious realm. Today, travel shows and holidays have rendered Venice more familiar, so it is Belmont that will need to function as the more exotic of the two locations. What comes to mind when you think of Venice?

Do you feel the film falls into the trap of giving us a kind of travelogue version of the city - albeit Venice in the 1590s - or do you feel it manages to make it seem alien and dangerous? Several of the actors talk of the impression the film provides of the city as a place of hidden pleasures and pains, of dark corners and hypocrisy - reflecting the psychology of the merchants and parasitic noblemen engaged in their dance of privilege, risk, trade and profligacy. Do you feel this is true?

Contrast Antonio's home with Bassanio's. What messages does Bassanio's hall convey about his attitudes to money and the kind of expenditure that he complains to Antonio has 'disabled his estate'? What about Shylock's home? How is it designed to reflect the kind of 'hellish' environment that Jessica complains of in Act II Scene 3?



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Belmont

Belmont - meaning 'beautiful mountain' - is Shakespeare's invention. It is meant to contrast strongly with the world of Venice. The following speech is spoken by Bassanio explaining to Antonio why he must travel to Belmont and try his luck and judgment in the test that may give him Portia's hand and wealth.

Bassanio:

*In Belmont is a lady richly left;
And she is fair, and, fairer than that word,
Of wondrous virtues: sometimes from her eyes
I did receive fair speechless messages:
Her name is Portia, nothing undervalued
To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia:
Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,
For the four winds blow in from every coast
Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece;
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strand,
And many Jasons come in quest of her*

What idea does this speech give you of both Portia and Belmont? Which words are repeated? Read through the speech highlighting in each line the key word that, for you, carries the most meaning. What patterns does your eventual list contain, if any? What mood does the list suggest? What hints to a designer might this speech offer when it comes to creating the interiors of Portia's palace?

In Radford's film, this speech runs with images of Portia and her palace. Explain how the setting reflects the following:

- ~ Light
- ~ Femininity
- ~ Intrigue
- ~ Magic/Fairy Tale



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Relationships

As well as the fraught relationship between Antonio and Shylock, there are a number of crucial character combinations in the play that need to be interpreted by the actors and the director. The following is a far from exhaustive list of connections to study and map. Often the most interesting things about relationships are the bits that have been left out to create the streamlined film script.

Antonio and Bassanio

Are they more than friends? Does it matter? Male friendship in Shakespeare's day was likely to have been a lot more accepting of degrees of affection, even love, than in our society today. That said, what is your reaction to the opening scene in Antonio's bedroom in which Bassanio tells Antonio of his plans and asks for money. To what extent is this seduction? Or do you feel Antonio knows perfectly well what is going on? Read the following comments by the actors Joseph Fiennes and Jeremy Irons about their relationship and see whether you agree that their performances in the film bear their views out.

Fiennes *'I don't think it (their love) is an undertone. I think it very palpable and I also think the film is at its heart a love story but he never nails it into a homosexual love story or just a father/son story. It's what the audience wants to take out of it. I think in our day and age we are obsessed with sexuality.'*

Irons *'I think we're terribly two dimensional in our understanding of sexuality nowadays. Male friendships in Elizabethan times were regarded as the highest form of friendship. So there's this strange sort of paternal/filial relationship whereby an older man would befriend and maybe fall in love in a platonic way, I believe, with a young man, lending him money if he needed it, supporting him and sort of dreading the day when the young man falls in love and goes off and makes his own life. It's what parents do with their own sons.'*

Jessica and Shylock

What is your view of this relationship? Shakespeare does not give the two characters much time together and then Shylock is always ordering the poor girl around. The truth of their relationship only really emerges once they are apart and reflect on their separation. What are these reactions? Do you feel there is much grief at parting? How does Radford emphasise that, for Jessica, living in a Christian world is not without considerable regret?

Gobbo and his father

Why do you feel Radford chooses not to make Gobbo a hunchback as his name suggests he should be? Why did he choose not to include the teasing scene when Gobbo pretends not to be himself so as to trick his blind father?

Gobbo and Jessica

Do you feel that there is a strong feeling between these two characters in the film version of the play? What do you make of Radford's decisions regarding the difficult scene (Act III Scene 5) in which Gobbo suggests that she Jessica will be damned because she is a Jew's daughter and in which we hear he has made a black woman pregnant - something that he more or less disregards. What would you cut from this scene and what would you retain?

Gobbo and Jessica

Do you feel that they will be happy? Does the film suggest how we might respond to their whirlwind romance? Does it suggest elsewhere what Gratiano is like - does he deserve entry to the magical world of Belmont? How does Radford present his behaviour during Shylock's trial?

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The Courtroom Scene

Imagine that you were responsible for staging or filming this key scene. The success or failure of the play hangs on the impact of the events here and the performances the actors muster. Your task is to study the scene and continue this list of questions:

- How do we see the Duke and the Magnificoes that are to oversee the enforcement of Shylock's bond? How will we know that they have ultimate authority in this room? Where will they be placed?
- Where is Antonio - how does he enter and how does that entrance suggest the pressures he is under?
- How does Shylock enter? What is his mood? How does he react to the appeal from the Duke for mercy?
- In what way should Shylock perform his first speech '*I have possessed your grace...*'

Next - watch and, if you can (once it is on video or DVD) re-watch, the scene and attempt to write down all the instructions that the director Radford might have included on his script. Alternatively, look at how Pacino performs in this scene and make a note of all his gestures, actions and where he chooses to emphasise a word or pause. Do these ideas match up with your vision for how the scene should be performed or directed?

- What is the dominant mood of the scene as it unfolds? Work out the dominant 'feeling' from page to page of the script and then see if this is echoed in the film version.
- Do you feel that Shylock is mistreated? What do you feel about Portia that has so managed to entrap him? What do you feel about the judgment - is it valid or trickery?
- How do you feel Shylock's fellow Jews feel about his stand? What messages does Radford convey about Shylock's behaviour as a reflection on all of them?

Endings

What do you make of the ending of Radford's version of the play? Why introduce Nerissa and the ring at this point? What of the scene in the lagoon of fishermen spearing fish - why include this detail? Is it only there to create atmosphere or could it suggest a lot about Jessica's fate and that of all the women in the play to some extent or another?