

Who's behaving badly?

Look at the conversation below between Solanio and Salarino in Act 3, Scene 1:

Solanio: Now, what news on the Rialto?

Salarino: Why, yet it lives there unchecked that Antonio hath a ship of rich lading wrecked on the Narrow Seas; the Goodwins, I think they call the place – a very dangerous flat, and fatal, where the carcasses of many a tall ship lie buried, as they say, if my gossip Report be an honest woman of her word.

Solanio: I would she were as lying a gossip in that as ever knapped ginger or made her neighbours believe she wept for the death of a third husband. But it is true, without any slips of prolixity, or crossing the plain highway of talk, that the good Antonio, the honest Antonio – O that I had a title good enough to keep his name company! –

Salarino: Come, the full stop.

Solanio: Ha, what sayest thou? Why, the end is, he hath lost a ship.

Salarino: I would it might prove the end of his losses.

Solanio: Let me say 'amen' betimes, lest the devil cross my prayer, for here he comes in the likeness of a Jew.

Enter Shylock

1. What sort of words and phrases does Solanio use when he talks about Antonio? Underline or highlight any that you find. Do you think he is pleased or upset that Antonio has probably lost his ships?
2. Now underline or highlight, in a different colour, the words used to describe Shylock. What impression does this give you (and the audience) of Solanio's feelings towards him?
3. Your answers to the above questions have already helped you explore Shakespeare's language and how he creates particular impressions of characters. Now think about why Shakespeare might want to make the audience think in a particular way about the various characters: do his characters' words make us sympathise, or even empathise, with one person rather than another? Which man do you feel sorrier for here: Shylock; Solanio or Salarino? Give reasons for your choice and be prepared to explain them.
4. Are your views affected by previous appearances of these characters? Make a note of any speeches given by these characters earlier in the play that made you feel they are either good or bad.
5. Have any events occurred to these characters that might give them reason to speak as they do here? Have any events occurred that might make us feel a particular way about any of the men present?
6. What do you think are Shakespeare's intentions in presenting the characters in the way he does? Who do you think he wants us to sympathise with and why? Be prepared to back up your ideas with evidence from the text, from this scene and earlier.

The Merchant of Venice

Now look at the conversation between Shylock, Solanio and Salarino:

Solanio: How now, Shylock, what news among the merchants?

Shylock: You knew, none so well, none so well as you, of my daughter's flight.

Salarino: That's certain; I for my part knew the tailor that made the wings she flew withal.

Solanio: And Shylock for his own part knew the bird was fledged, and then it is the complexion of them all to leave the dam.

Shylock: She is damned for it.

Salarino: That's certain – if the devil may be her judge.

Shylock: My own flesh and blood to rebel!

Solanio: Out upon it, old carrion! Rebels it at these years?

Shylock: I say my daughter is my flesh and my blood.

Salarino: There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory; more between your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish. But tell us, do you hear whether Antonio have had any loss at sea or no?

1. Why do you think Solanio asks Shylock what news he knows of? Do you think he is really interested or do you think he is just trying to upset Shylock?
2. What opinion do you think Solanio and Salarino have of Jessica's elopement?
3. What sort of words and phrases do Solanio and Salarino use that suggest they do not like Shylock and are rude about him even when he is in distress at the loss of his daughter?
4. Why do you think Shylock speaks in such short sentences here?
5. Do you feel sympathy for Shylock here or do you think he deserves the mockery of Solanio and Salarino? Give an explanation for your answer.
6. Why do you think Salarino asks Shylock whether he has heard about the possible loss of Antonio's ships? Think back to the agreement between Antonio and Shylock and the bond that was promised if the money was not re-paid.

The Merchant of Venice

Finally, look at Shylock's reaction to Antonio's loss:

Shylock: There I have another bad match: a bankrupt, a prodigal, who dare scarce show his head on the Rialto, a beggar that was used to come so smug upon the mart. Let him look to his bond. He was wont to call me usurer; let him look to his bond. He was wont to lend money for a Christian courtesy; let him look to his bond.

Salarino: Why, I am sure if he forfeit thou wilt not take his flesh. What's that good for?

Shylock: To bait fish withal; if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies – and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

1. Now highlight or underline, with different colours for each point, the following:
 - words and phrases Shylock uses to describe Antonio.
 - Instances of, 'let him look to his bond'.
 - repetition of the word 'revenge'.
 - questions.
2. What do you notice about all the questions Shylock poses? They are all rhetorical so he is not expecting Solanio or Salarino to answer but they also all refer to aspects of us as humans. Try to devise (create) a diagram to illustrate all the aspects of what it is to be human that Shylock mentions; you might start by deciding on categories such as 'physical attributes'; 'positive emotions' etc.
3. Why do you think Shylock reacts in this way to Salarino's lines, 'Why, I am sure if he forfeit thou wilt not take his flesh. What's that good for?'. Why does he appear to be so angry?
4. What is Shylock's promise (or threat) at the end of the speech? Do you think this is funny, surprising, shocking, repulsive? Give reasons as to your choice and explain how you think a Shakespearean audience and a modern audience might react to Shylock's statement.
5. What sort of opinion do you have of Shylock now?
6. Has the mood of the play been changed by this exchange? In what way? Explain your ideas.