

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S  
**THE MERCHANT  
OF VENICE** 1936  
EXTENDED STORYTELLING PLATFORM



**EDUCATION PACK**

## **Play Activities in The Ritz**

### **ACTIVITY 1 – Graphic Novel Tableaux**

This is a practical drama activity to consolidate student understanding of the plot and characters in *The Merchant of Venice*. You may want to use computers for the Development task, or to set this for homework.

We suggest that this task takes place over two lessons, or one lesson plus homework time.

- **Starter**

Play the Plot film clip [The Ritz | Merchant 1936](#) , and distribute the Potted Plot handout from the addendum for students' reference. Explain that the students' task is to turn these plot points into a graphic novel.

- **Main**

Divide the students into groups of 4-5. Each group can choose whether they want to 'perform' (by creating physical tableaux and photographing them) or 'design' (by drawing each plot moment).

Set a timer and give performing groups a maximum of three minutes for each plot point.

Design groups should divide the plot points to make 2-3 illustrations each within their group, taking 10-15 minutes per plot point.

- **Development**

Students should compile their graphic novels in their groups, rewriting each plot point in their own words.

- **Plenary**

Students can display or present their graphic novels for assessment and feedback.

### **Stretch and Challenge**

Students could annotate their graphic novels to explain the choices they made. For example, how did they demonstrate the difference in status between Antonio and Shylock?

## ACTIVITY 2 – Character Social Media

This activity is designed for students to consider character traits and character development in *The Merchant of Venice*

- **Starter**

Explore the 'characters' page [The Ritz | Merchant 1936](#). Each student should choose one character who interests them to focus on today.

- **Main**

Ask the students to design this character's social media presence at the beginning of the play. Each student can choose their own form of social media. This could for example be a blog, podcast, TikTok, Instagram or Twitter account.

- **Development**

Students should consider the character's journey through the play. What key turning points might they post about on their social media? Update their profile accordingly.

- **Plenary**

Ask the students to display their final post on their desks. They should then tour the classroom and 'like' or draw equivalent emoji reactions to the social media pages which they feel their character would respond to.

### Stretch and Challenge

Consider the character's relationships. Who might they follow at a distance, regularly interact with, or block completely?

## **Production Activities in Portia's House**

### **ACTIVITY 3 – Model Box Sharing**

This activity is for students to consider design choices in theatre, and what these can communicate to an audience.

This activity could be carried out individually or in groups, depending on class size.

- **Starter**

Show students a short extract from the interview with set and costume designer Liz Cooke, on the 'design' page, from the beginning of the interview until 2 minutes 20 seconds. [Portia's House | Merchant 1936.](#)

Discuss: what makes a good theatre designer? What can design choices communicate to the audience? (For example: character status, location, period, character personality, the time of day, whether a scene takes place indoors or outdoors, whether a setting is welcoming or hostile, the mood and atmosphere)

- **Main**

Tell the students that on the first day of rehearsals for *The Merchant of Venice 1936*, Liz Cooke presented her set and costume designs to the cast by showing a model box - a scaled down model of the whole set – and her costume design drawings.

Invite the students to choose a design focus, such as lighting, set, costume, or sound. Ask the students to create a presentation to share their designs and the reasons behind them with the class.

- **Development**

Students should present their designs to the class.

- **Plenary**

Display images of other productions of *The Merchant of Venice*. Discuss, what do the designs imply about the characters and setting?

### **Stretch and Challenge**

Students should choose two moments in the play, or two characters, that show a stark contrast with each other. How will they reflect this contrast in their design?

## ACTIVITY 4 – Programme Page

This activity is designed to increase students' knowledge of career pathways and training options in the creative industries.

- **Starter**

Create a whole class mind-map of job titles in the creative industries on the whiteboard. Encourage students to include backstage roles such as Producer, Casting Director, Talent Agent, Lighting Technician, and Head of Marketing.

- **Main**

Ask the students to individually choose an industry professional for their focus: they could be from this production, or any practitioner who's work the student admires. Students should research their career and training.

For a starting point, direct the students towards the interviews with Stage Manager Maddie Baylis and Head of Wardrobe Mark Jones, on the 'design' page: [Portia's House | Merchant 1936](#).

- **Development**

Students should use their findings to write a feature about this individual for the programme. You could display the production programme from the website Info page as an example: [Info | Merchant 1936](#).

- **Plenary**

Ask each student to give a fact about their chosen professional as an exit ticket from the classroom.

## Stretch and Challenge

Students should research alternative training courses and career pathways into the professional role they have chosen.

## **History Activities in Cable Street**

### **ACTIVITY 3 – Creative Writing Response**

This is a cross-curricular English and History activity. The students will engage with historical context imaginatively, through creative writing in the third person.

You will find the videos, testimonies, articles and timeline needed for this lesson on the Historical Context webpage: [Cable Street | Merchant 1936](#).

- **Starter**

Play an archive video of The Battle of Cable Street to the class. Ask them to imagine what they might have felt if they were the person holding the camera.

- **Main**

Give your students time to thoroughly research and plan their creative writing, using the Historical Context webpage testimonies, archive materials and articles to inspire and inform their work.

The students' plans should include which perspective they will write from. They could consider writing from the perspective of a character who they personally disagree with, such as a violent police officer or Mosley himself.

Ask students to use the digital timeline to trace their chosen narrator's journey through the events of the day.

- **Development**

Ask the students to write about The Battle Of Cable Street from their chosen third person perspective. They might wish to do this as if it were a monologue, letter, diary entry, or chapter from a historical novel.

- **Plenary**

Share a book recommendation for historical fiction. Ask the class to share their own recommendations from their wider reading.

### **Stretch and Challenge**

You could encourage high performing students to write this in verse, using 'The Charge of The Light Brigade' or another poem you have already studied as a structural model.

## ACTIVITY 4 – Living History

This activity encourages students to consider the social history being created in their own lifetimes, and engage with this through non-fiction writing or spoken testimony.

- **Starter**

Watch an extract of Binnie Yeates' Testimony as a class, from 15 minutes 30 seconds to 20 minutes 30 seconds.

[Cable Street | Merchant 1936.](#)

- **Main**

Discuss: what have you lived through? What news events have stuck out to you from the past few years? What history is being made in the world around you right now?

- **Development**

Ask students to write down or audio-record their own testimony of a piece of social history. For example, they could record your experience of lockdowns in 2020, their initial response to a news event which shocked them, or a reflection on this point in history through the lens of climate change.

- **Plenary**

Using post it notes or mini whiteboards, ask each student to write down a prediction of something that will change in the next 10 years. Ask students or stick these to the white board, or hold them up for their peers to see, and discuss.

### Stretch and Challenge

In pairs, encourage students to share their work in a way that they feel comfortable with: some testimonies may be very personal, so the student might want to describe their chosen focus rather than swapping books. Following this, ask students to write three follow up interview questions for their partner. The students can use these as prompts to embellish and deepen their accounts.

## Addendum

### Potted Plot

1. Antonio wants to help his intimate friend Bassanio - a privileged young man who has spent his inheritance - to woo the heiress Portia. But Antonio's own money is all tied up in shipping investments. Antonio decides to take out a loan on unsecured credit, so that Bassanio can dress to impress.
2. Having no luck getting a loan through the usual channels, Antonio and Bassanio approach Shylock, a working class widowed pawnbroker and moneylender. Despite the fact that Antonio is openly antisemitic towards Shylock, she agrees to make the loan, without charging interest, saying in "merry jest" that Antonio must promise a pound of his "fair flesh" as collateral.
3. Portia is besieged with suitors from all over the world. But her late father's will gives her no choice in who she marries. Wary of fortune hunters, her father set a challenge. If they want to marry Portia they must choose between three caskets - gold, silver or lead: her portrait is inside the right one. Portia dislikes and despises her foreign suitors, but has fond memories of a local man she once met, called Bassanio.
4. Jessica, Shylock's teenage daughter, is planning to elope with Lorenzo, a privileged Christian, and repudiate her Jewish faith. Shylock's Christian servant Mary colludes in this. While her mother is out, Jessica steals gold and family jewels, including a ring given to Shylock by her late husband before their wedding. She runs away.
5. Shylock is feeling the pain of Jessica's betrayal, as well as the grief of her loss. People mock her in the streets, even Mary - another betrayal. Shylock speaks powerfully against their prejudice: 'Hath not a Jew eyes'. She hears that a ship of Antonio's has sunk, and his other creditors think he will be bankrupt, and vows to take her revenge, her pound of flesh.
6. Following a queue of failed suitors, and helped by a song containing subliminal clues, Bassanio selects the lead casket. Victory! He can now marry Portia. Portia gives him a ring, symbolising her gift to him of authority over herself, her house and her servants.
7. Festivities are interrupted with the unexpected arrival of the runaway couple Lorenzo and Jessica, and the news that Antonio is bankrupt. Antonio has written to tell Bassanio he has no choice but to honour his bond with Shylock and give his pound of flesh in the court case. He is



resigned to this death if Bassanio will come to visit him. Portia tells him to go: she will repay the loan on Antonio's behalf

8. Portia secretly arrives at the court in disguise as a young lawyer to assess Antonio's case. She beats Shylock on a technicality. She humiliates Shylock by stripping her of her house and possessions and forcing her to convert to Christianity. Shylock's wealth will all be inherited by Lorenzo and Jessica.
9. Portia, still in disguise, tests Bassanio's loyalty by asking for the ring, in return for winning the case. Encouraged by Antonio, Bassanio gives 'the lawyer' his wife's first gift. When they all return to Portia's there is a row about it. Antonio promises that Bassanio will never again betray her trust, and Portia gives Bassanio back the ring.
10. Jessica sees how happy Lorenzo is about inheriting her dispossessed mother's wealth. At the end of this production, Jessica decides to walk away from her privileged new life, remove her Christian cross, and go home. The Jewish community and their East End neighbours stand together against Antonio and the fascists, holding banners of protest. Mary is there. Jessica returns to her mother, to join the anti-fascist demonstration and stop the march.