***The Merchant of Venice***

Discussion questions

1. Is the play anti-Semitic? If so, does the anti-Semitism belong only to some of the characters or also to Shakespeare himself? (If you have read Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*, compare/contrast its treatment of its title character with this Shakespeare play’s treatment of Shylock.)
2. Is Shylock a realistic character or a stock type? This play is a comedy; is that a realistic or a conventional genre, generally? Are its characters human beings or stereotypes, archetypes, etc.? Are its plots drawn from human actions or from narrative fiction, folk tale, etc.?
3. Consider the plots of this play in particular: having a pound of flesh as collateral for a loan and having a choice among caskets as determining a husband are not normal human actions. Then consider the characters: Why are Antonio and Bassanio such close friends? Why do Bassanio and Portia love each other? Do any of the characters change, develop, or grow?
4. Who is the merchant of the title? Whose play is this? Which is the main plot, which the subplot?
5. Do these questions get us closer to the theme or themes of the play? What do the casket choices tell us about the theme(s)? What attitudes toward money are found in the play? What connects the two plots to each other despite their seeming opposition in setting and tone?
6. Can we get closer to the theme of the play by saying that both plots – Portia’s courtship and Shylock’s lawsuit – involve the issue of value? Is “value” always economic, or can it be something non-monetary? Think, among other things, about Shylock’s daughter and his ducats.