

MERCHANT OF VENICE
EDUCATION PACK

CONTENTS:

- 1) **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND** - A look at the Elizabethan attitudes that were prevalent when the play was written. Discussion use for the classroom.
- 2) **VERSE** - Student handouts on iambic pentameter to support part of the workshop.
- 3) **POETRY and IMAGERY** - A translation of Portia's "Quality of Mercy" speech and an explanation of some of the imagery terms. Also used in the workshop.
- 4) **FORMAL or CLASSICAL PRESENTATION** - Northern Broadsides' approach to the classics, for anyone interested in the workings of the unique company.
- 5) **THEMES** - An exploration of ideas and concepts within the play, such as: racism, religion, love, hatred, money, wealth, friendship, justice, mercy, loyalty, appearance, reality, and parent/child relationships. This is a major part of the workshop and should be continued in the classroom as stimulation for discussion and to give some ideas for further activities.
- 6) **SUMMARY** - Hopefully, a useful tool in just following the story.
- 7) **PLOT** - A more detailed look at the structure and make up of the four main and two subsidiary stories. Another major part of the workshops, containing improvisation ideas relating these stories to modern times.



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INTRODUCTION :

This pack is designed as a useful aid to **Key Stages 3 & 4 English Literature, Drama, PHSE and Citizenship**. It accompanies the Northern Broadsides' workshops and gives a detailed insight into the 2004 touring production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Artistic Director, Barrie Rutter (who plays Shylock in the show) formed Northern Broadsides in 1992. Based at Dean Clough, Halifax, the multi award winning company has toured throughout the world and specialises in performing classical or formal theatre in a northern voice. The purpose of the workshop is to provide some useful tools for looking at the play. Shakespeare is meant to be performed, not studied. Whilst this workshop will not help directly to answer "A" level or "O" level English questions it will hopefully provide ways of making the text and the show more interesting and accessible.

1) HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

ELIZABETHAN ATTITUDES

The Merchant of Venice was written around 1597, an age of maritime exploration in Elizabethan England. The common potato had just arrived. It was a time of religious tension between the Catholics and Protestants. They had none of the modern day inventions that we take for granted, today. They had different beliefs, values and attitudes. We cannot watch, listen, read or perform the play without the way we think now, having an affect on the text. The character of Shylock gives us an ideal opportunity to explore differences between the Elizabethan and modern responses to the play. The way Shylock's character and religion is ridiculed and the lack of respect by every character was more acceptable in Elizabethan times. It reflects the fashionable view in Elizabethan drama that Jews were to blame for everything from economic worries to the plague. Someone writing a similar modern play might be accused of inciting racial violence. Elizabethan audiences found different things funny than we might do today. The play is called a comedy but that does not particularly mean it is meant to be funny. It simply means it follows the convention of a comedy, rather than a tragedy or history play. For instance, in a conventional comedy no one dies and it usually ends with a marriage.



2) VERSE :

BLANK VERSE and IAMBIC PENTAMETER

Why do we find Shakespeare difficult? It's in a 400 year old language and therefore hard to understand. We do not identify with many of the expressions or the humour. It's mostly written in **blank verse, iambic pentameter.**

Blank verse is simply verse that doesn't necessary rhyme. **iambic pentameter** is a form of verse that was instantly recognisable to the Elizabethans and used by most dramatists of the day.

iambic - from iambus: a rhythmic foot of stressed and unstressed syllables, **de-dum.**

Pentameter - from the Latin for **five** (Pentagon, pentangle) tells us how many feet are in each line.

De-dum, de-dum, de-dum, de-dum, de-dum. Each line consist of ten syllables, alternatively stressed and unstressed.

"The **qual** it **ty** of **mer cy** **is** not **strained.**
It **drop** peth **as** the **gen tle** **rain** from **Heaven.**"

"To **be** or **not** to **be** that **is** the **question.**"

"Tomorrow **and** tomorrow **and** tomorrow
Creeps **in** this **petty** **pace** from **day** to **day.**"

In Northern Broadside we speak with northern accents. The hard granite stone consonants and short vowels of the northern voice are perfect for the rhythm and pulses of iambic pentameter.

The first line of the play, said by Antonio demonstrates the use of **iambic pentameter.**

"In sooth I know not why I am so sad."

Every alternative word or syllable is emphasised, the last one in the line being the loudest.

"In **sooth** I **know** not **why** I **am** so **sad.**"

If you take out the unaccented words we are left with:

"**sooth, know, why, am, sad.**"

These emphasised words are the only ones needed to tell the story. Shakespeare has done this with almost every line of the play. The groundlings

This is emphasized more in the repetitive exchanges of “**In such a night**” between Lorenzo and Jessica at the beginning of Act 5.

Not all verse is written in iambic pentameter, the poems in the caskets are deliberately different. For instance in the gold casket, written in a verse called tetrameter, the last word of every line rhymes with gold.

The pulse of the iambic pentameter verse also echoes the **heartbeat** and therefore corresponds with emotions and feelings.

Sometimes different characters will use an alternate rhythm or speak in prose to show their emotions or relationships to each other. Shylock and Tubal speak in prose to each other, not only because of the informality between friends but because when Shylock hears about Antonio’s losses and his daughter’s spending he is not in control of his feelings. Launcelot Gobbo speaks in prose because he is a servant and a comic character. Solanio and Salerio are city boys and would normally speak in verse but in Act 3 Scene 1 they are just mates having a chat and therefore speak in prose.

3) **POETRY and IMAGERY:**

Look at Portia's speech then at the same speech translated into modern language. Which is easier to understand?

MERCHANT OF VENICE - Act 4 Scene 1:

PORTIA:

The quality of mercy is not strained,
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
 Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed:
 It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.
 Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes
 The thronéd monarch better than his crown:
 His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
 The attribute to awe and majesty,
 Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings:
 But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
 It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
 It is an attribute to God himself;
 And earthly power doth then show likest God's,
 When mercy seasons justice. Therefore Jew,
 Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
 That in the course of justice none of us
 Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy,
 And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
 The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much,
 To mitigate the justice of thy plea,
 Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
 Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there.

MERCHANT OF VENICE - Act 4 Scene 1:

PORTIA:

By nature, mercy never needs to be forced.
 It happens as naturally as when gentle rain falls from heaven to
 earth.
 It is twice blessed.
 It blesses the one who gives and the one who receives.
 It is at its best when practised by the mighty.

It is more becoming to a king than his crown.
 His sceptre shows how powerful he is in earthly terms.
 It is the symbol of his awe, his majesty, the reason why kings are held in dread and fear.
 But mercy is above the simple rule of a sceptre.
 It is enthroned within the hearts of kings - an aspect of God himself.
 Earthly power is nearest to God's when justice is tempered by mercy.
 Therefore Jew, though you claim justice for yourself, consider this.
 None of us could expect salvation if we had justice alone. So we pray for mercy.
 And in seeking it ourselves, we learn to be merciful to others.
 I have said all this to explain the meaning of your justice.
 If you insist on it, then this strict Venetian court has no choice but pronounce sentence against the merchant there.

If the modern speech is easier to understand why do we persist with the archaic language of Shakespeare? The whole play is a poem, full of imagery and pictures. They didn't have television in Shakespeare's day so he had to make pictures with words, to create images or ideas in the reader's mind. Imagery makes what is being said more powerful. In *The Merchant of Venice* animals, storms, and of course because it is set in Venice, water, are common images. These images can be made through **metaphor, simile or personification**.

Metaphor: Act 1 Scene 1: Gratiano tells Antinio "Fish not with this melancholy bait for this fool-gudgeon, this opinion," creating the idea that good opinion is like a fish, to be caught. **Simile:** Act 1 Scene 1: Bassanio: "His reasons are as two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff." **Personification:** describing something abstract as though it were a person. Lorenzo in Act 5 Scene 1 says: "The sweet wind did gently kiss the trees."

4) FORMAL or CLASSICAL PRESENTATION:

Barrie Rutter's distinctive approach to theatre is fuelled by his passion for language and a celebration of the musicality of the northern voice. These plays were meant to be performed. Northern Broadsides specialise in performing formal or classical works. Formal or classical presentation differs from other work because it is in verse. It is not natural or based in reality because we don't speak in verse in every day speech. However, we are still actors and we have to make what we do **believable**. Barrie Rutter has no truck with "What would my character do?" There is no psychological investigation involved during the rehearsal process. The notion of character internalisation did not exist during Shakespeare's time. "I don't believe in the word character," says Rutter. The characters have characteristics, given to them by the poet. It is our job as actors to interpret and play them.



5) THEMES :

During the workshop there will be a practical session exploring and discussing the themes. Working in small groups of 4 or 5, each group will use a “Theme Card” to stimulate this. This exercise could be continued in the classroom. Using the cards discuss the theme then present a moving tableau to present the ideas and interpretation of the theme. The final image should be underlined with the title of the theme. The themes relate to the text as follows:

MONEY and WEALTH

Most of the action in the play comes from Bassanio’s need for money and all the characters are concerned with it in some way. Miserliness and greed compel Shylock. Antonio is a merchant venturer. Bassanio seeks to clear his debts and impress Portia who already has a fortune. He mentions her money before her beauty. She is “richly left”. The hatred between Shylock and Antonio is because of Antonio’s attitude to interest. For centuries before Shakespeare Landowners and the aristocracy controlled wealth. Lending money for gain was considered irreligious. Only non-Christians could be moneylenders. When Shylock is forced to give up his religion, it means he can no longer earn his living because he is no longer a non-Christian. Shakespeare wrote when a new class of businessmen and merchants were emerging. Ventures had to be financed and borrowing



became legal in England but still frowned upon because it had to be done from Jews. Many would already have a poor opinion of Shylock’s character, which thinks more about his ducats and gems than his daughter, Jessica. “Would she were hearsed at my foot and the jewels in her coffin.” Antonio annoys Shylock because “he brings down the rate of usance here with us in Venice.” Portia turns down payment. “He is well paid that is well satisfied.” The play is laden

with images of wealth and riches and the concept of risk and hazard that surround Antonio’s shipment and the caskets.

PARENT and CHILD RELATIONSHIP

There are three father/child relationships in the play. Portia and her dead father, Jessica and Shylock and Launcelot and Old Gobbo. It is interesting to contrast Jessica with Portia. Although Portia’s father is dead, his influences stretch beyond the grave through the caskets test. Portia is compliant with this; Jessica is disobedient towards Shylock. Portia follows her father’s wishes and gives over her wealth to her new husband; Jessica’s marriage is founded on a breach of trust and stolen wealth from her father. Ironically, after Portia has been passed from father to husband her great feat of the trial



should display her potential for controlling her life. However, she can take no credit for it because she has had to do it in disguise. One of Jessica's main roles in the play is to spark emotions from Shylock. She does draw some human feelings but mostly she fuels his revenge. She herself shows little remorse in deserting him, seemingly just because he is a killjoy and she displays no sorrow over the fact that her father has been destroyed and left destitute. Although Launcelot teases his father, there is obviously fondness between them. The comic 'double act' provides a taste of the lowly family life to contrast against the wealthy businessman of Shylock and the aristocracy of Portia's father.

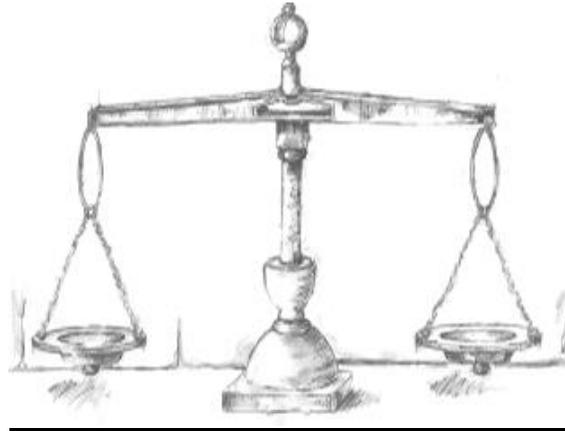
FRIENDSHIP and LOYALTY

"In sooth I know not why I am so sad." The reason for Antonio's melancholy is never given. It has been suggested that maybe he is "gay" and is sad because Bassanio has declared his love for a woman. There is nothing in the text to either confirm or deny this. Whatever the reason, there is no doubting Antonio's loyalty and friendship for Bassanio. He takes his loyalty and generosity to the point of endangering his life. Even as he thinks he faces certain death, his wish is to see his friend before he dies; and after all the trouble he has gone through in helping Bassanio, he is still ready to vouch for his friend's ability to keep Portia's ring safe in the final scene. Bassanio does return the friendship and has genuine concern when Antonio is in danger. Presumably the reason Portia comes to the aid of Antonio is because she recognises her new husband's affection for him. However, Bassanio himself makes no attempt to seek legal advice in order to rescue the friend he has placed in danger. As, good friends of Bassanio and Portia, Gratiano and Nerissa serve to let us hear the thoughts of the protagonists. Other friendships such as Solanio with Salerio and Tubal with Shylock are mainly there to give news and information.

APPEARANCE and REALITY

Choice confronts many characters in the play. Choosing reality does not necessary make it the right choice though Bassanio's statement that "The world is still deceived with ornament" reinforces the truth that everything is not always what it seems. "All that glisters is not gold." When Portia's father posts the messages on the caskets, he obviously intends each suitor to interpret and choose according to their own unique qualities. Shylock pretends to Antonio, "I could be friends with you and have your love" but in Act 1 Scene 3 he declares in his aside, "I hate him for he is a Christian". Nevertheless, Antonio recognises that "The devil can cite scripture for his purpose" and that he views Shylock as a "Goodly apple rotten at the heart". Of course, Antonio would not have made the choice to accept the bond had he known his cargo would fail to arrive on time, but Shylock himself cannot have known this either. It really is a "Merry Bond" when he makes it. When Portia appeared as Balthazar, the lawyer, the Elizabethan audience received a double deception. They would be asked to

accept Portia pretending to be a boy; what they were seeing was a boy playing himself. And of course the ring plot wouldn't have worked had Portia and Nerissa not been in disguise to develop it.



MERCY and JUSTICE

In Portia's trial scene speech, Shylock learns that as salt and pepper flavours food, "Mercy seasons justice". This sums up this important theme. She tells Shylock mercy cannot be forced from someone; it must be freely given. Ordinary people are seldom asked to display this quality. It is a gift given from kings and rulers. This links to the idea the Elizabethans had that rulers are direct representatives of God on earth, with a "Divine Right". Shakespeare explores the tension between justice and mercy through the attitudes of Shylock and Portia. The interplay is stylised rather than realistic. The abstract qualities are dwelt upon rather than the fact that a girl is disguised as a lawyer. On one side of the scale Shylock justly asks for his bond, legally agreed. On the other side, Portia asked for mercy. Justice overrides mercy and then the situation is reversed. However, most Elizabethans would probably think that Shylock receives mercy by being spared his life. Making him change his religion was probably giving him salvation.

LOVE and HATE

In contrast to money greed and hate, the love theme runs throughout the text. Three pairs of lovers, Portia/Bassanio, Gratiano/Nerissa, and Lorenzo/Jessica carry it. Shakespeare shapes the plot so that we know Bassanio will choose the right casket. Gratiano and Nerissa reflect the elegant couple. The purpose of Lorenzo and Jessica's elopement is to provoke Shylock's revenge; hate grows from love. The idea that friendship is more important than romantic love is shown in the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. In preparation of his death Antonio says, "Say how I loved thee". Bassanio replies, "Life itself, my wife and all the world are not with me esteemed above thy life". Shylock is portrayed as the "typical" Jew, to whom money is more important than even his own daughter. But when he is offered many times what is owed to him, it is his hatred that makes him prefer revenge.

RACE and RELIGION

SHYLOCK - Act 3 Scene 1:

“I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses affections passions? - 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?”



Jews were banned in England from 1290 until the mid 1500s and the few that were around in Elizabethan times were barely tolerated. Shakespeare reflects the plight of the outsider in this society. Antonio does not deny it when accused of insulting and spitting on Shylock. In fact he reinforces the accusation by saying he will probably do so again. The justification of this reaction suggests it comes from someone who obviously feels superior. It is sometimes argued that the play itself is racist. Certainly by today's standards it is understandable if some people take offence at what many of the characters say and do. However, if Shakespeare wrote the play because he wished to voice his own anti-Semitic feelings, why would he put such words as the “Hath not a Jew” speech into Shylock's mouth? Racial tension and religion has no boundaries in either time or place as the cause of bitterness and inequality. The attitudes shown to Shylock and the Prince of Morocco could just as easily be shown today as they were then. Race or religion has been the backcloth to events from the Crusades to the Holocaust, from “Apartheid” to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The Prince of Morocco expects to be met with a negative response to his skin colour. “Mislike me not for my complexion.” His assessment is accurate. Before she meets him, Portia already speaks of a suitor who may have “the complexion of a devil”. When his suit has failed she says, “A gentle riddance - let all of his complexion choose me so”. It could be seen as salvation or the final insult when Antonio insists that Shylock becomes a Christian. In the same way it may seem that Jessica's conversion is her only hope. On the other hand, in the marriage of Lorenzo and Jessica, Shakespeare may be saying that unity and equality is possible between two people with great differences.

6) SUMMARY :

Bassanio, a scholar and soldier, asks his friend, Antonio (The Merchant of Venice) to lend him some money to clear his debts and buy gifts to impress the wealthy Portia, whom he hopes to marry. Antonio has no spare money so he offers Bassanio his credit instead.

Meanwhile, in Belmont, Portia talks with her maid Nerissa, about a test that her recently deceased father devised to choose her a husband. Her husband will be the man who finds her portrait hidden inside one of three caskets - one made of gold, one of silver and one of lead.

Using Antonio's credit as security, Bassanio asks Shylock, a money lending Jew, for a loan of 3,000 ducats for three months. Shylock hates all Christians, especially Antonio because Antonio often lends money for nothing, spoiling Shylock's business. However, Antonio is expected to earn a lot of money when his shipments arrive so Shylock offers to lend him the money. Almost as a joke, Antonio agrees that instead of paying interest, he will give Shylock a pound of his own flesh if he cannot pay on time.

With the help of Shylock's servant, Launcelot Gobbo, his daughter Jessica elopes with her Christian lover Lorenzo, taking with her, some of her father's money and gems. Shylock is furious when he finds out and on hearing from his friend Tubal that Antonio's ships have been wrecked, the Jew is determined to have his revenge.

Back in Belmont, the Prince of Morocco chooses the gold casket and the Prince of Arragon the silver. Both fail to find the portrait. Bassanio correctly chooses the lead casket and Portia gives him a ring as a token of her love. He promises not to part with it under any circumstances. Bassanio's friend, Gratiano announces his intentions to marry Nerissa, Portia's maid, and he too receives a ring.

Antonio is resigned to losing his life to the vengeful Shylock but wants to his friend Bassanio before he dies. Portia urges Bassanio to go back to Venice to see him. Portia and Nerissa pretend to go to a monastery but, disguised as men, they also go to Venice.

Antonio's case comes to court and pretending to be a young lawyer, with Nerissa as her clerk, Portia takes up the defence of Antonio against Shylock. Despite all appeals for mercy, Shylock will not forfeit his bond. However, Portia discovers a loophole to win Antonio's case; no blood must be spilled and the flesh taken must weigh exactly one pound. Shylock is outwitted and punished for threatening the life of a Venetian citizen. He must forfeit the money he lent to Bassanio, he must give all his wealth to Jessica and her husband Lorenzo after his death and the final insult is that he must become a Christian.

Portia and Nerissa, still disguised as Lawyer and clerk, persuade the reluctant Bassanio and Gratiano to part with their rings in payment for winning the court case. When the lovers are reunited in Belmont, the girls accuse the men of betraying them. Eventually they come clean and everyone is happy, apart from Shylock. Even Antonio's ships arrive safely back in port.

7) PLOT:

Structure

There are four main stories in *The Merchant of Venice*.

During the workshop there will be a practical session exploring, presenting and retelling parts of these stories. Working in small groups of 4 or 5, each group will use "Plot Cards" to stimulate this. This exercise could be continued in the classroom. The object for each group is to retell a part of the story of their "Plot Card". This may be done in any way the group chooses. As seen from the structures of the four main stories, the plots and themes all interweave with each other. A further exercise would be to take the suggested improvisations and either act out the scenes or discuss the possible scenarios.

a) Antonio, Bassanio, Shylock and the bond

The Bond is the main focal point and the main plot. It is introduced early on in the play. How other factors and events come to bear on The Bond, and that it poses a threat to Antonio's life, is made clear to the audience in Act 2. In Act 3 the situation is so serious that Antonio's death seems inevitable, and in Act 4 the tables turn, there is a climax and the plot is resolved.



Suggested modern improvisation: A known racist desperately needs some money. He has tried everywhere and cannot get the required loan. His friend suggests an Asian, who might lend him the money. The Asian knows the racist but is glad to be in a position of power over him. He lends him the money but lets him know why. Improvise scenes where the racist's friend suggests going to the Asian (Act 1 Scene 1): the racist asking for the loan (Act 1 Scene 3) and the racist and his friend discussing the situation afterwards (Act 1 Scene 3).

b) Portia and the caskets

The Caskets test is also an important plot. It is interwoven with the bond plot until Bassanio's correct choice resolves it. He does this before the trial scene. In Act 2 short scenes flit between The Bond plot in Venice to The Caskets plot in Belmont.

Suggested modern improvisation: A rich aristocrat dies leaving his only daughter. At the hearing of the will she discovers her father had old-fashioned ideas. He didn't believe a woman would be capable of looking after his business. The will suggests that suitors for his daughter should invest in one of his three companies; the suitor that makes most profit after six months will marry her and take over all his businesses. A boy she is in love with is one of the suitors. Improvise the reading of the will (Act 1 Scene 2): a scene where the daughter discusses with her friend the possible suitors (Act 1 Scene 2) and a scene where her lover discovers his investment has been the most successful (Act 3 Scene 2).



c) Lorenzo and Jessica's elopement

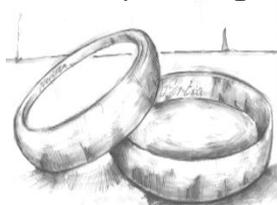
The Elopement forms a sub plot. It has more significance as a matter affecting other characters and events than it has in itself, although it is a big part of the love theme. The Elopement feeds the bond plot by adding fuel to Shylock's need for revenge against Antonio. The disobedience and mischievousness of the eloping couple makes a good comparison with the romance of Portia and Bassanio. Shakespeare also uses the couple, in Act 5, to demonstrate that reconciliation between Jews and Christians is possible.

Suggested modern improvisation: The son and daughter of two feuding families, one Catholic and one Protestant, fall in love. The father of the Protestant daughter forbids her to see the boy. They decide to run away together. Improvise the scenes where the father tells his daughter she must end the relationship (Act 2 Scene 5): the two lovers discussing running away and stealing the father's car, which is his pride and joy (Act 2 Scene 4) and a scene where a friend of the father tells him the abandoned car has been discovered; it is a write-off but the couple are nowhere to be found (Act 3 Scene 1).



d) The rings

The Rings is also a sub plot. It is mainly a comic device to provide light relief after the seriousness of the trial scene, not even introduced until Act 3 Scene 2. Minor squabbling over rings provides brightness to the end of the play and allows



the audience to leave light hearted after the gravity of what's happened between Antonio and Shylock. There is also a significant aspect to The Rings in the echo of a bond, oaths and the difficulties posed by Bassanio's and Gratiano's dilemmas. Also on the serious side, it could be argued that playing such a trick on your boyfriend just for a joke is not a very nice gesture.

Suggested modern improvisation: Baz's hobby is visiting chat rooms. His girlfriend, Paula doesn't mind; she even knows his "handle", "The City Boy". One day, in the chat room, Baz meets a fellow "United" supporter, "The Lawyer". They become great friends, sharing their love for football, but Baz mostly talks about how much he loves Paula. On his birthday, Paula presents him with a very rare commemorative medal, telling him it is a token of their love and he must never lose it. A few months later, United reach the final. Tickets are difficult to come by. "The City Boy" and "The Lawyer" have never managed to meet each other at matches. "The City Boy" begins to fantasise about how excited it would be meet up at the final. "The Lawyer" tells him he could get them both tickets but the price would be the rare commemorative medal that Paula had given him for his birthday. After much deliberation Baz relents and sends him the medal. When Paula discovers this they have a blazing row and split up. Baz consoles himself with the fact that he has a ticket for the final and he is at last going to meet his friend "The Lawyer". When he gets to his seat at the final, Paula sits there. She shows him the medal. She was "The Lawyer" all the time. Improvise Paula as "The Lawyer" in the chat room, asking "The City Boy" about his girlfriend (Act 4

Scene 1): the scene where Paula discovers he has swapped the medal (Act 5 Scene 1 and the scene when they meet up at the final Act 5 Scene 1).

There are also two other simpler stories.

- e) Launcelot Gobbo's change of employment
- f) Gratiano and Nerissa.

Devise some improvisations similar to those suggested for the other stories.



