

Textual Analysis of *Merchant of Venice* Activity



Activity should be completed after students have read *Merchant of Venice*.

Creators:

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Rationale:

Because many early modern plays, especially those authored by Shakespeare, were printed more than once, many of these plays have textual differences depending on which publication one is referencing. The 1623 First Folio edition included *The Merchant of Venice*, but this play was also published in a quarto in 1600, and then republished again in a second quarto in 1619. Often, burgeoning Shakespearean scholars are not aware of how early modern printing affected (and still affects) the way texts are received, understood, and circulated, even in the twenty-first century.

One aspect of the plays that has changed drastically since the original printings is the division of the plays into acts and scenes and expanded stage directions. This in-class assignment is intended to expose students to early editions of Shakespeare, to help them understand the differences and nuances of early printing, and to reinforce the performative nature of the plays.

Activity:

- Print Act II, Scenes 7-9 from the 1600 (Q1) edition. (Though any selections from the play may be used, I have selected these scenes because of the many stage directions throughout them. The 1600 edition may be found on EEBO.)
- Assign students the various roles found in these scenes. (Depending on class size, the class could be divided into groups so that every student has the opportunity to read for a role.)
- Have students read/act out the lines and actions, emphasizing that students should act organically and do what seems natural alongside the dialogue.
- Once completing the reading, ask students the following questions:
 - Were there any moments in the reading that were confusing or difficult to act out?
 - What textual evidence did you rely on to make the theatrical decisions you did?
- As a class, compare the quarto with the edition read for class. Have students note and distinctions, improvements, and detractions between the two editions.

- If time allows, consider a brief discussion on early modern printing and textual reproduction. Though this can be done prior to the activity, the most organic student responses will originate from classrooms in which students are not primed in this way.

Learning Objectives:

- Reading:
 - Students will encounter non-modernized early modern text. Students should demonstrate understanding of the nuances of early modern typography.
- Analysis:
 - Students should be able to critically examine two different versions of a text. Students should also be able to analyze the text as a piece of drama.