



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2016 Volume I: Shakespeare and the Scenes of Instruction

Character and Choice in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

Guide for Curriculum Unit 16.01.01
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Readers, young and old, can learn about themselves by vicariously facing the conflicts, disappointments and triumphs lived out by the fascinating characters they encounter in literature. Shakespeare's plays remain popular because they so evocatively and powerfully portray our human experience, as we live it today. That exposure to this mysterious, dynamic quality of life that allows us bravely to face conflicts and creatively learn from our mistakes is one of the most important lessons that we need to begin to teach our children.

Through the use of select children's books and simplified versions of the well-known 'three caskets scenes' in the play, *The Merchant of Venice*, students will gain a familiarity with its fairy-tale-like storyline. The focus will be on the challenge that Portia's suitors face in the context of this moral trial during which the suitors will have the rare opportunity to look beyond mere appearances in making their choices. But will they take a risk and do that? In these scenes we will look at how the choice of each of the suitors reflects his own character and decides his ultimate destiny.

This unit, divided into 3 sections, is interdisciplinary in scope and incorporates reading, writing, art and drama:

- 1: Pre-reading Activities
- 2: The Three Caskets Scenes
- 3: Post-reading Activities

Designed with first-graders in mind, this unit could easily be adapted for use in other primary and intermediate grades.

(Developed for Language Arts, grade 1; recommended for Language Arts, grades 1-5)

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