This resource is designed as a reference guide for teachers. We have listed the major themes and motifs within *The Merchant of Venice* and provided examples of scenes where you can study them.

**Themes**

- Prejudice and social injustice
- Revenge, justice and forgiveness
- Money and love

**Motifs**

(Recurring elements and patterns of imagery in *The Merchant of Venice* which support the play’s themes)

- Gold/ducats, jewels and caskets
- The law
- Rings
- Music
Themes

Prejudice and social injustice and whether such attitudes and behaviour are ever justified.
Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 3: Bassanio asks to borrow three thousand ducats from Shylock, Shylock reminds him and Antonio of past mistreatment and Antonio agrees to the bond.
- Act 3 Scene 1: Shylock speaks of his bitterness at being treated as an outcast ('Hath not a Jew eyes...'), regrets the loss of the turquoise ring his wife gave him, and is excited to hear that Antonio has lost another ship.
- Act 4 Scene 1: In the trial scene Shylock demands his pound of flesh and when Portia finds a legal loophole he loses half his wealth and is required to convert to Christianity.

Revenge, justice and forgiveness and the possibility of mercy as a response to injustice.
Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 3: Bassanio asks to borrow three thousand ducats from Shylock, Shylock reminds him and Antonio of past mistreatment and Antonio agrees to the bond.
- Act 3 Scene 1: Shylock speaks of his bitterness at being treated as an outcast ('Hath not a Jew eyes...'), regrets the loss of the turquoise ring his wife gave him and is excited to hear that Antonio has lost another ship.
- Act 4 Scene 1: In the trial scene, Shylock, isolated, demands his revenge while Portia argues that 'the quality of mercy is not strained.'

Money and Love and how obsession with money can preclude love and loyalty.
Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 3: Antonio’s support of his friend Bassanio contrasts with Shylock’s bitterness over past mistreatment, including Antonio’s lending of money without charging interest.
- Act 2 Scene 2: Lancelot explains why he wants to leave Shylock’s service and work for Bassanio. He plays a trick on his blind father and then asks for his blessing.
- Act 2 Scene 3: Jessica describes her shame in being her father’s child and her plans to elope with Lorenzo.
- Act 2 Scene 6: Jessica elopes with Lorenzo, taking with her a casket of gold and jewels.
- Act 2 Scene 8: Shylock discovers his daughter has gone, with his ducats.
- Act 3 Scene 2: Bassanio rejects the gold casket in favour of the lead and wins Portia. Gratiano announces his engagement to Nerissa and Jessica and Lorenzo arrive in Belmont.
Motifs

**Gold/ducats, jewels and caskets** as representing avarice, the desire for power and control, self-interest, status, the mercantile world.
For example:

- 'Therefore the lottery that he hath devised in these three chests of gold, silver and lead'
  Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Should I not say/'Hath a dog money? Is it possible/A cur can lend three thousand ducats?'
  Act 1 Scene 3
- 'She hath directed/How I shall take her from her father's house,/What gold and jewels she is furnish'd with'
  Act 2 Scene 4
- 'The first, of gold, who this inscription bears,/Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire'
  Act 2 Scene 7
- 'All that glitters is not gold'
  Act 2 Scene 7
- 'I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear!'
  Act 3 Scene 1
- 'Thou stickest a dagger in me: I shall never see my gold again: fourscore ducats at a sitting!'
  Act 3 Scene 1

**The law** as representing justice, rationality over passion, rigidity, social order.
For example:

- 'The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree'
  Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Justice! the law! my ducats, and my daughter!'
  Act 2 Scene 8
- 'The duke cannot deny the course of law"/For the commodity that strangers have/With us in Venice, if it be denied,/Will much impeach the justice of his state'
  Act 3 Scene 3
- 'And that no lawful means can carry me/Out of his envy's reach'
  Act 4 Scene 1
- 'And earthly power doth then show likest God's/When mercy seasons justice'
  Act 4 Scene 1
- 'Therefore, Jew,/Though justice be thy plea, consider this,/That, in the course of justice, none of us/Should see salvation'
  Act 4 Scene 1
- 'I stand here for law'
  Act 4 Scene 1
- 'If thou dost shed/One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods/Are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate'
  Act 4 Scene 1
**Rings** as symbols of love and loyalty.
For example:

- 'One of them showed me a ring that he had of your daughter for a monkey'
  Act 3 Scene 1
- 'I give them with this ring;/Which when you part from, lose, or give away,/Let it presage the ruin of your love'
  Act 3 Scene 2
- 'But when this ring/Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence'
  Act 3 Scene 2
- 'Good sir, this ring was given me by my wife'
  Act 4 Scene 1
- 'If you had known the virtue of the ring./Or half her worthiness that gave the ring./Or your own honour to contain the ring./You would not then have parted with the ring'
  Act 5 Scene 1

**Music** as soothing, transformational, harmonising, reflective of mood
For example:

- 'Let music sound while he doth make his choice;/Then, if he lose, he makes a swan-like end,/Fading in music'
  Act 3 Scene 2
- 'How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!/Here will we sit and let the sounds of music/Creep in our ears'
  Act 5 Scene 1
- 'Come ho! and wake Diana with a hymn!/With sweetest touches pierce your mistress' ear,/And draw her home with music'
  Act 5 Scene 1
- 'You shall perceive them make a mutual stand,/Their savage eyes turn'd to a modest gaze/By the sweet power of music'
  Act 5 Scene 1
- 'The crow doth sing as sweetly as the lark,/When neither is attended, and I think/The nightingale, if she should sing by day,/When every goose is cackling, would be thought/No better a musician than the wren./How many things by season season'd are/To their right praise and true perfection!'
  Act 5 Scene 1