

**Prejudice in Shakespeare's work and times**  
Student worksheet

Warmer – Stereotypes

Work with a partner. Look at the picture of a stereotypical Englishman and discuss the questions.

a. Do you think this is how a typical Englishman dresses, or is it an inaccurate stereotype?

b. Here are some other stereotypes about the English. How true are these stereotypes in your opinion or experience?

- They talk about the weather a lot.
- They can't express their feelings.
- They don't wash very often.
- They aren't very friendly.
- They have bad teeth.

c. What stereotypes are there about people from your country or culture? How much truth is in them?



**Task 1 – Vocabulary**

sexism	racism	prejudice	discrimination
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a. Match the nouns in the box with their meanings.

1. not liking or trusting someone because of their race, religion or gender
2. the belief that some races of people are better than others
3. the unfair treatment of people, especially women, because of their gender
4. treating one person or group worse than others

b. What is the adjective form of each noun?



c. Complete sentences 1–4 with the most appropriate noun or adjective.

1. That comedian seems to think it's funny to say women are stupid. He's really \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Hitler's belief that the Jews were inferior was an example of his \_\_\_\_\_.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ against disabled people is illegal.
4. He was \_\_\_\_\_ against her from the beginning because she came from a different class of society than him.

d. With a partner, think of an example from the news or your experience of each noun/adjective.

## Task 2 – Prejudice in Shakespeare’s time

- How do you think attitudes towards race, religion and gender might have been different in Shakespeare’s time from nowadays?
- Read the text and compare with your ideas. Does anything surprise you?

### Prejudice in the sixteenth century

People in Elizabethan England were very ignorant about different cultures, and many believed that black people were devilish or that they were able to do magic. There seem to have been quite a number of black people in London. At least enough that, in 1596, Queen Elizabeth decided to deport them, claiming that there were ‘too many’. However, some historians argue that this was about religion, because they were not Christians, rather than race.



Elizabeth I, Queen of England  
1558-1603



The fate suffered by many women who  
were believed to be witches

Elizabethan women had few legal rights, especially when married. For example, they were not allowed to work in the professions (as lawyers, doctors, politicians, etc.). Many historians believe that Queen Elizabeth I deliberately stayed unmarried so that she would not lose her power to her husband. Women were expected to give everything they owned to their husbands and obey them without question. Single women were treated with suspicion and sometimes accused of being witches, so women’s options were in general extremely limited.

## Task 3 – Prejudice in Shakespeare’s plays?

Work in groups of three. Read **one** summary each of three of Shakespeare’s best-known plays. Tell your partners about the play. Do you think any of the plays show sexism, racism or any other kind of prejudice? Why?/Why not?

### A *The Taming of the Shrew*

Bianca is beautiful and gentle, and several men want to marry her. However, her father will not let her marry until her older sister, Kate, does. Kate is well known for being bad tempered and hard to control and no one wants to marry her except Petruchio, who has not even met her, but wants to marry for money. Once married, Petruchio takes Kate to his house and refuses to let her eat or sleep until she obeys him. They return to Padua where Bianca has got married. At a banquet the men make a bet on who has the most obedient wife. Each wife is given orders to carry out, but only Kate obeys and she then tells everyone how important it is to obey your husband.

### B *Othello*

Iago is jealous because Othello, a Moorish<sup>1</sup> general of Venice, has given Cassio a job that he, Iago, wanted. He decides to take revenge. First he tells Brabantio that Othello has secretly married his daughter, Desdemona. Brabantio is horrified because Othello is black and she is white. He is so shocked that he disowns his daughter. Iago then tells Othello that Cassio has been having an affair with Desdemona. He shows him some 'proof' and

Othello believes Iago and orders him to kill Cassio.

Othello becomes so jealous that he kills

Desdemona, but when he finds out that she was innocent he is overcome with grief and shame and kills himself.

Kate (sitting) and Petruchio (in hat)



Othello about to kill Desdemona

in Shakespeare's *Othello*

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<sup>1</sup> In Elizabethan times, **Moorish** referred to Muslims who originated in North Africa, especially Morocco.

### C *The Merchant of Venice*

Antonio, the merchant of Venice, lends his friend Bassanio some money to help him marry Portia. However, he has to borrow this money from Shylock, a Jewish moneylender whom he has previously offended. Shylock agrees to lend Antonio the money only on condition that if he doesn't repay the loan on time he will have to give Shylock a pound of his own flesh.



Shylock being harassed by children in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

His greed and cruelty is seen by many characters in the play as being typical of

someone Jewish, though Shylock suggests that it is simply revenge for having been badly treated by Christians. News arrives that Antonio's ships have been lost, which means he cannot repay his debt. Without Bassanio knowing, Portia disguises herself as a young male lawyer. She argues that Shylock should be given a pound of Antonio's flesh, but that he may not spill any of Antonio's blood – which means he can't take it. In the end Shylock is forced to convert to Christianity and to give his money away.

#### Task 4 – A different perspective

Read the opinions below and discuss them in a small group. Do any of the opinions make you think differently about the plays? Why?/Why not?

Many people see *The Taming of the Shrew* as a sexist play. According to the accepted customs of the time, Kate, as a wife, would have to respect and obey her husband, Petruchio. However, Shakespeare makes it very clear that Kate and Petruchio are intellectual equals and both of them have to learn to improve their behaviour throughout the play.

Although Othello makes a terrible mistake, he is clearly the hero. At the start of the play Shakespeare has some characters say racist things, but when Othello arrives on stage he is an admirable character. Iago, on the other hand, is clearly the villain. The play turns the Elizabethan audience's racist assumptions (that the villain will be black and the hero white) upside down.



*The Merchant of Venice* is definitely quite racist towards Shylock, showing him as cruel and obsessed by money, two unacceptable Jewish stereotypes. However, Shylock's daughter is a sympathetic character (although she does marry a Christian) and Shakespeare also gives Shylock one of the best speeches in the play in which he explains why he is taking his revenge upon Antonio and asks for religious tolerance.

Shakespeare was not sexist because so many of his female characters were very strong and clever. For example, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* has to dress up as a man to be allowed to act as a lawyer, but she turns out to be an excellent lawyer and saves Antonio's life.

### Task 5 – Shylock's speech from *The Merchant of Venice* Act 3 Scene 1

Read this famous speech (mentioned in Task 4) and discuss the following questions in pairs.

SHYLOCK [Antonio] hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies — and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? 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, do we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.

*The Merchant of Venice* Act 3, Scene 1, 58–68

1. What does Shylock say that Antonio ('he') has done to him? Why does he think he has done it?
2. What examples does Shylock give to say that Jews are no different from anyone else?
3. Do you think Shylock makes a good argument to explain why he wants to have revenge on Antonio? Why?/Why not?
4. Do you think this speech makes Shylock a more sympathetic character? Why?/Why not?

**Task 6 – Class discussion**

*Which of the following statements do you agree with most?*

- a. 'If a book or play written in the past has attitudes which are unacceptable today, it should be staged differently or rewritten.'
- b. 'People need to accept that attitudes were different in the past. If a book or play is racist or sexist, that doesn't stop it being great art.'

*Work with a partner. Take one of the statements and think of arguments or examples to support it.*