To bait fish withal; if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He 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, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled 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, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge! The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.
The Merchant of Venice Notes and Activities created by the RSC

Act: Three  Scene: One
Character: Shylock

About the speech
_The Merchant of Venice_ is a play that focuses on love and revenge in a world of religious intolerance between the Christian and Jewish population of Venice. In this speech, Shylock, a Jewish merchant, is talking to two Christian men called Salerio and Solanio. They are teasing him because his beloved daughter Jessica has run away from home with a Christian man. Solerio and Solanio are friends of Antonio who has borrowed money from Shylock. Shylock has made Antonio sign a contract which states that if he cannot repay the loan he will instead repay Shylock with a pound of his own flesh.

Shylock starts the speech by saying “To bait fish withal”, referring to what he will do with Antonio’s pound of flesh: he will use it as bait to catch fish. During the speech, Shylock makes it clear that his hatred is born of what he sees as Antonio’s bullying behaviour. Shylock goes on to point out that Christians and Jews are unified by their common humanity, despite their different religions.

How actors work
During rehearsals, directors and actors often investigate the background of the play and character they are bringing to life. Shakespeare often highlights events happening in Elizabethan England through the language, characters and plots of his plays. Understanding the context in which these plays were written will help you make interesting choices about how to perform a particular speech. Actors also connect the character they are playing with their own experiences and the world around them.

This is a challenging speech for any actor to work on. One reason for its difficulty is the fact that it deals with anti-Semitism (the dislike of Jewish people).

Find out about the attitudes that existed towards the Jewish population in Elizabethan England. Does this change your view of Shylock’s behaviour? Does your knowledge of how Shylock is treated change the way you approach the character?

Performance Suggestions
There are many ways that you can perform the speech. Many famous actors have played Shylock over the years and the character has been approached in lots of different ways, sometimes as a merciless villain, sometimes as a tragic character. Some actors choose to connect the emotion in the speech with the fact that Shylock has recently learned that his daughter has run away with a Christian. They link his anger at her betrayal with his anger against Antonio, another Christian man.

Try saying the speech in each of these three different ways and see how it brings out different interpretations. Try saying the speech as if Shylock is:

- bullied, a victim
- overwhelmed with emotions because his daughter has run away
- completely out of control

Shylock uses a lot of questions in this speech. Who is he directing them to – himself, the audience, Salerio or Solanio? Deliver the speech as if Shylock is:

- asking questions of himself
- asking questions to the audience
- asking questions to Salerio and Solanio

Take a look at the language of the speech and try mixing these different choices to see which ones work best for specific moments.