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William Shakespeare's **THE MERCHANT OF VENICE**

Laura Lippman

威廉·莎士比亚的

威尼斯商人



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INTRODUCTION

Life of Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-on-Avon in April, 1564. He was the third of eight children (the oldest of the four who survived) born to John and Mary Shakespeare. John Shakespeare was a successful merchant who, after holding various minor municipal positions, was elected Bailiff (Mayor) of Stratford in 1568. As the son of a prominent family, William doubtless attended the town grammar school, which prepared the sons of the local burghers for entry to a university. This was the only formal schooling that he ever had, and here he must have learned the "small Latin and less Greek" with which his friend the poet Ben Jonson credited him.

In 1582 at the age of eighteen, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior, and six months later their daughter Susanna was born. It has been argued that the marriage was forced because Anne was already pregnant, but this does not necessarily follow. Betrothal was considered legally binding, and conjugal rights were often performed before the wedding took place. In any case, the marriage does not seem to have been a very happy one. In 1585 twins were born to the couple, a boy and a girl, named Hamnet and Judith. By this year John Shakespeare was in less comfortable financial circumstances, and about the same time William Shakespeare left Stratford to seek his fortune, leaving his family behind.

No records remain to tell us what Shakespeare did in the years of his early twenties, although tradition has it that he spent part of the time as a country schoolmaster. It is certain, however, that during

this time he became an actor and playwright. The poet Robert Breene, in his *Groatsworth of Wit* (1592), railed against “an upstart crow beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger’s heart wrapt in a player’s hide supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you. . . . in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country.” The reference to a tiger’s skin is a parody of a line in *Henry VI*, and Shake-scene, of course, is a broad hint at Shakespeare. Probably in 1593 and 1594, while the London theaters were closed by the plague, Shakespeare wrote two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *the Rape of Lucrece*, dedicated to the Earl of Southampton. He also wrote the famous sonnets, probably during the 1590’s, which were published in 1609 without his consent.

Before 1594 Shakespeare became a member of a theater repertory company called The Chamberlain’s Men (later changed to The King’s Men). He remained with his company for the rest of his career, serving in the capacity of actor as well as playwright. Outstanding among the other members were Richard Burbage (generally playing the serious lead role), Will Kempe (the clown), and Edward Alleyn (the original Shylock). The Lord Chamberlain’s Men performed in various theaters in London and the surrounding countryside until its own theater, the Globe, was built in 1599, some years after *The Merchant of Venice* was first produced.

Shakespeare’s earliest plays, written before 1594, are rather conventional works of comedy, melodrama, and history (including *Comedy of Errors*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Henry VI*). By 1594 his plays more clearly show the stature of his genius. Among these plays of his early middle years are the comedies *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Merchant of Venice*; the tragedy *Romeo*

and *Juliet*; and the histories, *Richard II*, *Henry IV* in two parts, and *Henry V*.

During the period from 1599 to 1606, he wrote the great tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. Concurrently, he wrote the "dark" or "problem" comedies, *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Measure for Measure*. Finally, between 1608 and 1611, he wrote the romantic comedies, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*.

While Shakespeare lived in London his family remained in Stratford. In 1596 his son Hamnet died, and in 1607 and 1616 his daughters married. Shakespeare was the most popular playwright of his day, and with success came the money with which he bought his father a coat of arms (enabling him to become a gentleman). For himself, he bought New Place, one of the most elegant houses in Stratford. In 1611, when he retired from London, Shakespeare returned to live in New Place, where he died in April, 1616. He was buried in Stratford's Trinity Church and a monument was shortly thereafter erected to his memory.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MERCHANT OF VENICE.

The characterization of Shylock, the Jewish moneylender of Venice, has attracted more than a fair share of the critical interest in the play. Like Falstaff in Shakespeare's history plays, Shylock has become one of the immortal characters in English literature, upstaging the titular hero of his play and casting grave doubts on Shakespeare's intentions and apparent anti-Semitism. Historical scholars and critics of our time have made two things clear, that Shakespeare intended the noble Antonio as the hero of the play and that Shakespeare was

not actively engaged in an anti-Semitic crusade.

From the earliest years of the English Renaissance in the sixteenth century, English philosophers and scholars looked to Italy, where the body of humanist learning was evolving in the neo-Platonic Christian schools. Emerging from the Middle Ages, which early humanists regarded as a crude and barbarous period, they searched for a pattern of gentility by which they could cultivate and civilize the rude manners and language of their age. Books like Ascham's *Scholemaster*, Elyot's *Boke of the Governour*, Lyly's *Euphues*, Sidney's *Arcadia*, and Spenser's *Faerie Queene* proposed systems of behavior and standards of morality which the educated gentleman and courtier was expected to follow. The ideals of the perfect Christian gentleman, which had been formatted in Italy, were most completely expressed in Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*), written in 1508 and published in Italy in 1528. This book, subsequently translated into English by Thomas Hoby and published in 1561 and 1588, had a wide influence on English thought, manners, and literature, and is probably the best source book for understanding the characterization of Shakespeare's heroes. The young Prince Hal (hero of two of Shakespeare's history plays) was used as an illustration in Elyot's book on the education of a prince, who was expected to be profligate in youth but well-tempered and wise in maturity. Hal is so developed in the two parts of *Henry IV*, and in *Henry V*, that he is the ideal prince. Hamlet also displays all the marks of the perfect courtier, soldier, scholar, friend, and lover, which combined to make the ideal Renaissance gentleman. The same system of thought must be applied to Antonio and Bassanio, two gentlemen in *The Merchant of Venice*. Antonio, the titular and actual hero of the play, is an older man who has achieved the sobriety of maturity. Bassanio is just emerging from the

prodigal ways of youth. Together they display the realized and potential gentility of the perfect Renaissance man. Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* as a romantic comedy, in which the heroic Antonio serves as a model for all good men and through whose passionate friendship and Christian generosity Bassanio, Lorenzo, and Shylock are led to the good way of life.

Fortunately or unfortunately, Shakespeare's powers of characterization were far too rich to enable him to subordinate the fascinating and repulsive personality of Shylock to his sober and humble hero. The critic Charlee Norton Coe perceptively notes that Shylock is "overcharacterized" for the role he was intended to play; that Shakespeare had become too interested in the role he was creating to effect a favorable balance between the comic subordinating player, Shylock, and the intended hero of the play, Antonio. More than a century of sentimental Romantic criticism has helped to increase misunderstandings about the play by concentrating on the humanitarian justification of Shylock as the victim of Christian intolerance. A proper balance can be restored to the reading of *The Merchant of Venice* when it is understood that Shakespeare knew and was interested in the Elizabethan gentleman, that he purchased a coat of arms and the right to be called gentleman for his father and himself, and that he himself displayed the virtues and ideals of the perfect Renaissance man.

The research of J. L. Cardozo in *The Contemporary Jew in Elizabethan Drama* has made it clear that Shakespeare did not know any Jews personally and that he was not actively engaged in an anti-Semitic crusade. He was simply following a centuries-old stereotype of the Jewish people which had penetrated the life and literature of western Europe and survived in England long after the Jews had

been exiled from that country. It is to Shakespeare's credit that he was able to impart human qualities to Shylock even while he perpetuated the stereotype; he created a living portrait that has caused critics to wonder whether Shylock is merely a comic villain or the tragic victim of Christian cruelty.

The story of the Jews in medieval Europe throws a good deal of light on the events of the play and provides us with the Shakespearean frame of reference which is necessary for an understanding of both the major themes and minor details which are the fabric of *The Merchant of Venice*. During the entire Middle Ages, the Jewish people were alternately protected and persecuted by the temporal powers of whatever land they inhabited. Their experience in England is typical of their history in Christianized Europe. After the Norman Conquest in 1066, Jewish people, fleeing from the persecutions of the French clergy, made their way to England. Economic possibilities were offered in the newly conquered country, and the Normans wanted the tribute money and the financial experience for making business transactions, which only the Jews could provide. It had been established by the Church long before that Christians were not to lend money at interest, for to do so would be a violation of the *New Testament* concept of charity. Restricted as they were from owning real property and keeping serfs, which were essential to the agrarian economy of the Middle Ages, more and more Jews became tradesmen and financiers. Although they were generally abused because of their religious differences, Jews were also frequently tolerated and invited into a country to stabilize its shaky financial structure.

During the two centuries following the Conquest, Jews continued to emigrate to England, usually in order to escape from overzealous crusaders. A liberal charter was granted them by Henry I (1100-35)

in exchange for a percentage of their profits in all trade and moneylending transactions. The King became the heir of every Jew and took over his estate upon death. Consequently, moneylenders were forced to charge high interest rates, which increased as the King's demands grew. Thus, the Jew became the buffer for the King's extortions and the symbol of the hated usurer. He was, in effect, the King's scapegoat.

Religious persecution was added to the economic pressures on the Jews in England after Aquitaine became part of England's domain. At the coronation of Richard I (the Lion-hearted), systematic massacres and immolations of Jews formed part of the people's coronation celebrations. By the end of the twelfth century, legal spoilation and extortion of the Jews in England matched that on the continent, only more openly. Richard, for example, required the registration of all Jewish moneylending businesses and had state records kept of all lending transactions. To this end, he herded all Jews into the larger cities where records were being kept. John Lackland, Richard's brother and successor, replenished some of his depleted funds by imprisoning or executing Jews on various charges in order to seize their properties. At the same time, he gave them protection in the city of Lincoln, where he established the Jews as the King's chattel (property, livestock), making it illegal for anyone to injure the King's Jews just as it was illegal to harm the King's hounds. (The Jew and the dog will be associated frequently in *The Merchant of Venice*.)

By 1254, conditions were so bad that the Jewish people petitioned the King to allow them to leave the country. After some delay, they were finally ordered out by Edward I. By October of 1290, sixteen thousand Jews had left the country, sailing to Flanders, Germany,

and Spain where they were alternately tolerated for their financial prowess, persecuted for their religious “stubbornness,” and forced into conversion, slavery, and suicide. England did not see Jews again until the latter half of the seventeenth century, when the Puritan protector Cromwell allowed them to return.

It can be seen from Shakespeare’s treatment of Shylock, from the allusions Shylock makes to the persecutions and humiliations suffered at the hands of Christians, that Shakespeare was familiar with the plight of the Jewish people in the Christian world, that he created an appropriate and accurate background for the character of Shylock, and that he did not find Antonio’s abuse of Shylock inconsistent with the character of the perfect Renaissance gentleman. In fact, the final forced conversion of Shylock, from the Renaissance Christian point of view, was regarded as a kindness to the obstinate Jew, who had stubbornly refused, through the centuries, to accept Christ as the Messiah, to adopt the Christian faith, and thereby secure salvation in heaven, which Christ promised only to his followers. With Christ’s life as an example, the only Christian thing to do was to follow the Gospel’s precepts and convert the Jews.

THE LITERARY BACKGROUND. During the Jews’ four-hundred year’s absence from England, legends from the continent helped to perpetuate English stereotypes of the Jews. It had become conventional in Europe to attribute unexplained deaths, plagues, and other disasters to Jewish hatred for Christians and their desire for revenge against their persecutors.

Jews and devils were thought of as alter-egos, and stories of ritual murders and poisoned wells grew into an extensive literature. In the Old English poem, *Elene*, written long before the Jews came to

England, Jews were accused of concealing the true cross; Chaucer's tale of the Prioress charged a Jew with the murder of a nameless little boy because of his devotion to the Virgin, and the miracle plays of the late Middle Ages portrayed *Old Testament* figures as wicked and comic characters.

By Shakespeare's boyhood, the character of Judas Iscariot was conventionalized as the embodiment of all that was evil. Judas had evolved as a low-comic character, usually portrayed by an actor in a red wig, red beard, and long nose (as Shylock was played until well into the eighteenth century). The Judas would become the victim of playful beatings by other characters in the play, and members of the audience were allowed to use him as a scapegoat.

In Tudor England, the Jew was purely a dramatic or literary figure, for there were few known Jews living in the country at the time. It is true, however, that the 1594 trial of Dr. Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese Christian convert and physician to Queen Elizabeth who was accused of an attempt on her life, may have suggested the idea for Shakespeare's Shylock. But Lopez was already a convert and was involved in a plot which did not involve his Jewish heritage. Shylock is too much like the conventional Jew of English literature to resemble Lopez. Even so, considerable interest was aroused by the trial of Lopez, and the historical scholar John Palmer insists that anti-Semitism was in fashion "when Shakespeare sat down to write '*The Merchant of Venice*.'" E. E. Stoll adds that Marlowe's play, *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1588), remained popular over a period of four years, and during the trial of Lopez between May and December, 1594, the play was performed twenty times. Marlowe's play featured the Jew Barabas who embodied "all the qualities which a persecuting majority commonly attributed to its victims" and demon-

strated that, in the theater, anti-Semitism was the popular view. Barabas in Marlowe's play is abused by the governor of Malta. Along with other rich Jews, he is required to give half his estate to pay tribute to the Turks. When Barabas refuses, he is deprived of his entire estate. From then on, he becomes the personification of evil and a statement of the essential greed, cruelty, ambition, and treachery of the stereotyped Jew. Partly out of revenge, partly out of his hatred for Christians, Barabas helps the Turks take Malta, then assists the governor of Malta in a counterplot against the Turks, which he fails of achieving because he accidentally falls into the boiling cauldron he has prepared for the Turks.

Shakespeare's Shylock has the same motives as Barabas. He admits his hatred of Christians in general and on one Christian in particular, Antonio, because of their ill-treatment of Shylock's people and his own person. Like Barabas, Shylock is moved by the desire for general and particular revenge. However, he is not merely a conventional stage Jew or symbol of evil and hatred; Shylock is endowed with human qualities and is given specific motives for revenge. He has been spat upon, called dog, vilified for pursuing the only trade which the Christian world has left open to him; he has had his daughter "stolen" by a Christian, and for this he is expected to show mercy. As the conventional Jew, he remains staunch in his cruelty, just as Antonio, the epitome of Christian love, humility, charity, friendship, and forgiveness, willingly accepts his fate at the hands of his enemy. Antonio shows true Christian spirit in his submission to the injuries he must endure even to the point of death, while Shylock, like the vengeful God of the *Old Testament*, demands that the letter of the law be carried out.

SOURCES OF THE MERCHANT OF VENICE. The two intertwin-

ing stories of the play were familiar to Shakespeare from the existing body of European literature. Tales about usurers were fairly common, and the theme of the pound-of-flesh has ancient analogues in religious tales of Persia and India. It appeared in various western versions, particularly in Italian sources. In at least one of these the Jew is not the villain but the victim of the contract. Leti's *Viat di Sisto Quinta* tells of a Christian merchant who (in 1585) wins a wager from a Jew and claims his pound of flesh according to the bargain, before the Pope intervenes to save the unfortunate Jew. An English variant, Anthony Munday's *Zelauto* (1580), tells of two university students who, with their wives, outwit their creditor's demand for his pound of flesh, and in this case all participants are Christian. It has been suggested by some scholars that a lost play called *The Jew* was actually Shakespeare's main source for *The Merchant of Venice*, for it was described by Gosson in 1579 as "representing the greediness of worldly chusers, and bloody mindes of Usurers." However, since the text of this play is lost, it is impossible to determine to what extent Shakespeare drew upon it.

The Merchant of Venice does, however, bear very strong resemblance to a tale in the Italian collection, *Il Pecorone*, which had been compiled in 1378 by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino but was not published until 1558. The story tells of a young man, Gianetto, who woos and finally wins the Lady of Belmont, aided financially by his godfather Ansaldo. The Lady of Belmont has agreed to marry any man who can manage to stay awake in bed with her long enough to take advantage of his situation. Many men have tried and all have failed because of a sleeping potion that the Lady secretly slips them before they retire to bed. After two unsuccessful attempts, Gianetto learns from the Lady's maid the secret of the drugged nightcap, and the next time he only pretends to drink it. Then, when he is in bed

with her, he makes the most of his wakefulness and the Lady agrees to marry him. In the meantime, however, his godfather is in trouble. In order to finance Gianetto's three voyages to Belmont, Ansaldo had borrowed money from a Jew to whom he had promised to pay a pound of flesh if the money was forfeit. Just as in Shakespeare's play, this potential victim is saved by the Lady who, disguised as a lawyer, defends him in court. The final confusion over the ring is also included in this tale, which ends in happiness for all except the Jew.

The major change that Shakespeare made in Ser Giovanni's story concerns the lovers. Whereas the Lady of Belmont in the early tale resembles the enchantresses of ancient lore who bewitch their wooers and cruelly mock them, Shakespeare's Portia is a charming, intelligent, and honorable young woman. Her suitors woo her in an entirely different way, one suggested in the compilation of medieval Latin stories, the *Gesta Romanorum* (translated and printed in 1577 and 1595), which includes an account of a young man who must win his lady by choosing among three caskets. This device is theatrically more effective than the bedroom plot, and it also makes the Lady a more virtuous figure than she is in Ser Giovanni.

Thus we see that the main elements of *The Merchant of Venice* are to be found in earlier sources: the usurious Jew, the pound-of-flesh contract, and the wooer who must choose among three caskets. What is so extraordinary about this play, however, is the way in which Shakespeare manages to combine the various themes into a tightly unified and highly poetic whole. The characters of Bassanio, Antonio, Jessica, Lorenzo, Gratiano, and particularly Portia and Shylock, are far more interesting and complex than their predecessors.

DATE AND TEXT. *The Merchant of Venice*, written some time between 1594 and 1598, was first published in 1600 in a good edition called the Heyes Quarto, from which the Quarto of 1619 and the Folio version of 1623 were taken. The Quarto of 1653 provide the first list of characters, which has since been expanded and is now a standard in all texts. The Folio text divided the play into acts and gave a few stage directions, but many stage directions and the scene divisions were provided by later editors.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

Bassanio, a young Venetian nobleman, seeks to win back his fortune and to gain the woman of his heart at one and the same time by marrying Portia of Belmont. He asks his friend the merchant Antonio to lend him the money necessary for the voyage to Belmont. Antonio does not have the cash on hand because his money is tied up at present in ships trading on the seas. However, he gladly uses his credit to borrow the money from Shylock, a Jew and a professional usurer. Shylock is very bitter against Antonio, who has often criticized him for the kind of business he does, but in this case he says he wants to make friends with the Christians. He therefore proposes as a "merry sport" that he will lend the 3,000 ducats for three months and that Antonio will sign a contract, providing that, if the money is not repaid in time, he will forfeit a pound of flesh. Antonio, confident that his ships will return a month before the date, agrees to these terms.

In the meantime, Portia is being wooed by numerous suitors attracted by her wealth, beauty, and virtue. She does not take a fancy to

any of them, but she is not free to decide whom she will marry. Her father had stipulated before his death that she must marry whatever man correctly chooses which of three caskets (one gold, one silver, and one lead) contains her picture. Before choosing, her suitors must promise that if they fail to guess correctly, they will never seek to marry at all. This condition frightens away some aspirants, but before Bassanio arrives the Prince of Morroco has already wrongly chosen the gold and the Prince of Arragon the silver casket.

Back in Venice, Bassanio's friend Lorenzo, who is in love with Shylock's daughter Jessica, elopes with the girl, who takes a large part of her father's possessions. Jessica becomes a Christian as well as Lorenzo's wife. Shylock, furious that his daughter has abandoned him, and especially that she has taken so much money and such valuable jewels, feels that the entire Christian community has conspired against him. Meanwhile, he is still anxious to get even with Antonio by claiming the pound of flesh if he is not repaid on time.

Bassanio stays in Belmont for quite some time before finally choosing among the caskets. Portia fervently hopes that he will choose correctly, and he does so, by selecting the lead casket. When Portia and Bassanio marry, Portia's maid, Nerissa, and Bassanio's friend Gratiano (who has accompanied him to Belmont from Venice) also wed. The two women each give their husbands a ring, from which, they tell them, they must never part. Immediately after the betrothal Lorenzo and Jessica arrive, accompanied by Salario, another friend from Venice, who brings Bassanio a letter from Antonio. It seems that Antonio's ships failed to return on time and that his bond to Shylock is forfeit. Although various friends have offered to pay what Antonio owes, Shylock insists on claiming his pound of flesh. Antonio writes that he is prepared to die and only hopes to see his