



The Merchant of Venice

by William Shakespeare

Know-the-Show
Audience Guide
researched and written by
the Education Department of

The
SHAKESPEARE
Theatre of
New Jersey



Artwork by
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The Life Of William Shakespeare



National Portrait Gallery, London

William Shakespeare, widely recognized as the greatest English dramatist, was born on April 23, 1564. He was the third of eight children born to John Shakespeare and Mary Arden of Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, England. Shakespeare's father was a prominent local merchant, and Shakespeare's childhood, though little is known about it for certain, appears to have been quite normal.

In fact, it seems that the young

Shakespeare was allowed considerable leisure time because his writing contains extensive knowledge of hunting and hawking. In 1582, he married Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a farmer. She was eight years his senior, and the match was considered unconventional.

It is believed that Shakespeare left Stratford-upon-Avon and went to London around 1588. By 1592, he was a successful actor and

playwright. He wrote approximately 38 plays, two epic poems, and over 150 sonnets. His work was immensely popular, appealing to members of all social spheres including Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. While the plays were well-liked, Shakespeare's work was not considered by his educated contemporaries to be exceptional. By 1608, Shakespeare's involvement with theatre began to dwindle, and he spent more time at his country home in Stratford. He died in 1616.

Most of Shakespeare's plays found their first major publication in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, when two of his fellow actors put the plays together in the First Folio. Other early printings of Shakespeare's plays were called quartos, a printer's term referring to the format in which the publication was laid out. These quartos and the First Folio texts are the sources of all modern printings of Shakespeare's plays.



The Shakespeare Family
Coat of Arms

The Merchant of Venice

An Introduction

The responses to and interpretations of *The Merchant of Venice* have changed and varied greatly since it was written in the mid-1590s. As one of Shakespeare's most suspenseful plays, *Merchant* has a wonderfully intricate plot, complex characters, and some remarkably funny moments; all of which have kept it quite popular. Much like *The Taming of the Shrew*, however, its social-politics have given many contemporary audiences pause. However, looking at this one aspect of the play alone undermines its many attributes, including the fact that it contains some of Shakespeare's most beautiful, pithy, and memorable lines. When approaching the play, here are some ways to break it down for a more intricate examination. **[Caution: Spoilers Ahead]**

THE ROMANTIC COMEDY:

The Merchant of Venice is, by structural definition, a romantic comedy. This was a very popular and often-performed genre in Shakespeare's day. Other plays that fall into this category include *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*. In all these plays, the chief element and motivation for the action is love. In addition to the hero and heroine, usually two or three other couples are united by the end of the play. In this play, Portia and Bassanio (the hero and heroine) are married along with Gratiano and Nerissa, and Lorenzo and Jessica. In these plays the heroine also spends a portion of the play successfully disguised as a man; in this case, Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves

as barristers or lawyers. The basis of the plot in most romantic comedies like this is the conflict between the lovers and someone or something keeping them apart.

The principle obstacle in *The Merchant of Venice* is Shylock's hold on Antonio, best friend to Bassanio.

Common to all of these works is the fact that, despite the label of "romantic comedy," there is often a bittersweet or cruel undertone to the joy that concludes each play. Antonio, though freed from Shylock's murderous bond and his ships miraculously saved, is more alone at the end of the play than he was in the beginning. Shylock is forced to reject Judaism as punishment for his murderous plot to destroy Antonio and is forced to become a Christian. Jessica, though willing to convert for the man she loves, is still an outsider in a world of Christians. These are all examples of what makes Shakespeare's romantic comedies a rich tapestry of emotions, a complex portrait of society, and why they continue to be popular and meaningful today.

FOUR STORIES IN ONE:

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare has skillfully woven two major



Jessica and Lorenzo in Belmont by John Boydell.



dramatic plots and two minor plots together. The “casket story” centers on Portia and Bassanio. In accordance with her father’s will, Portia may only marry the man who chooses correctly among three small caskets; one of gold, one of silver, one of lead. This is the first obstacle the hero and heroine must overcome. The “bond story” focuses on the conflict between Shylock and Antonio. When Antonio is unable to repay a debt to Shylock on time, Shylock demands that, as the bond states, he receive a pound of Antonio’s flesh cut from the place nearest the heart. Shylock is unrelenting and is only defeated by Portia in the last moments of the trial scene.

Shakespeare then interweaves these stories with an “elopement tale” and a “ring story.” Though not essential to the overall plot, the elopement of Jessica and Lorenzo is a principal contributor to Shylock’s rage. The ring story, which takes place in Act V, is another example of the heroine’s ability to outwit the men in the play.

GREED VS. GENEROSITY:

The contrast between greed and generosity plays a vital role in *The Merchant of Venice*, and acts as a scale by which we judge the characters in the play. Shylock, as a money-lender, values money for its own sake. He sees it as the means and the end of his desires, and Shakespeare paints a portrait of a man obsessed with his possessions. When relating to others, Shylock treats them as items that he either does or will possess. When his daughter elopes and takes his money, he cannot distinguish which loss is more painful, crying, “My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter! ... my ducats and my daughter” (II. viii). In contrast, Portia, Bassanio and Antonio, treat money merely as a means to *gain* their ends, not as an end in and of itself. Antonio does not hesitate to offer his credit to Bassanio, his dear friend. Bassanio

only uses the money to court his love. Portia, a wealthy heiress, offers all her money to save her love’s friend. This generosity, however, does not make them perfect people; Shakespeare paints them as far more complex characters, with each their own set of foibles.

In the “casket story,” Portia’s suitors are required to choose between gold, silver and lead caskets. The suitors who have chosen the gold and the silver caskets are mocked for their obvious greed. Both are more interested in Portia’s dowry than the woman herself. Bassanio chooses the leaden casket, which says “who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.” Precious metals are not important to him. He chooses the casket that warns him that, as in any successful and loving relationship, one must give of oneself and risk personal loss. Bassanio’s choice involves ‘giving’ rather than ‘getting’ and he is therefore victorious in winning Portia’s hand in marriage.

MONEY, MONEY, MONEY

“Marxist interpretations of the play have shown the Christians of Venice to be as obsessed with wealth as Shylock. Conversations among Salerio, Solanio, Gratiano, and Lorenzo in particular reveal the dehumanizing centrality of commerce, jewelry, gold, and profit in Christian Venice. Even in the first scene of the play, it is possible to read Antonio’s depressive state as an aspect of his overwhelmingly material existence.”

-Leslie Dunton-Downing and Alan Rider, *Essential Shakespeare Handbook*



The Merchant of Venice

A Synopsis

Please note: Below is a full summary of the play. If you prefer not to spoil to plot, consider skipping this section.

Meeting on the Rialto in Venice, Bassanio asks his friend Antonio, a Venetian merchant, for a significant loan. He is seeking the money so that he may travel to Belmont where he hopes to marry the wealthy heiress, Portia. Antonio has no ready funds available, but confident of his investments in trading expeditions, he tells Bassanio he may borrow the money on Antonio's credit. Bassanio seeks out Shylock, a Jewish money-lender, and borrows 3,000 ducats on Antonio's credit. Shylock only agrees to lend the money on the condition that Antonio signs a bond which requires the merchant to yield a pound of his own flesh if he is unable to repay the loan. Antonio signs the bond.

In Belmont, Portia is frustrated that she cannot choose a husband for herself. According to her father's will, she may only marry the man who correctly selects between three small chests; one gold, one silver, one lead. The Prince of Morocco greets Portia, who tells him of the terms of the challenge. If he chooses the correct chest, he will win Portia's hand in marriage and all her estate. If he chooses the wrong chest, he will lose Portia forever and never be permitted to marry any woman. The Prince accepts these terms, and incorrectly

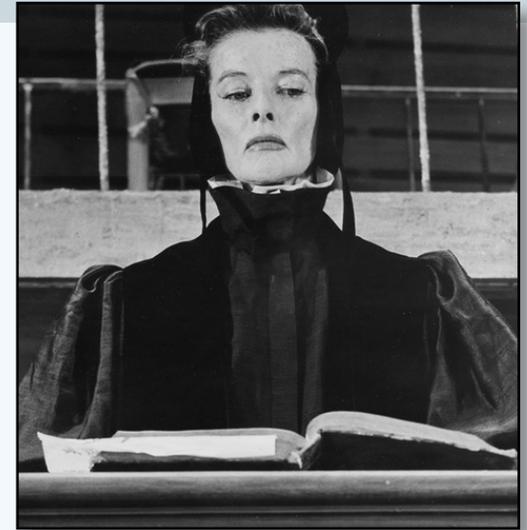
selects the gold chest. Defeated, he leaves Belmont.

Meanwhile, back in Venice, Launcelot Gobbo, Shylock's servant, debates whether he should find a new master. On the request of Old Gobbo, Launce's father, Bassanio takes Launcelot into his service as he prepares to leave for Belmont. Lorenzo, Gratiano, Solanio, and Salerio make arrangements for a festive masque to celebrate Bassanio's last night in Venice.

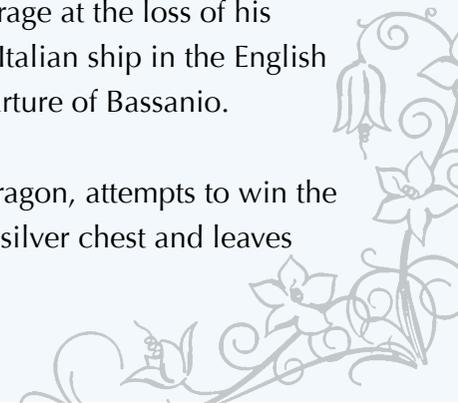
As Jessica, Shylock's daughter, says good-bye to Launcelot she gives him a letter for young Lorenzo, her secret love and a dear friend of Bassanio. In it, she states that she will rob her father and, in disguise as a boy page, elope that night with Lorenzo. With the assistance of Gratiano and Salerio, the couple rush off to be married, taking Shylock's treasures with them.

Solanio and Salerio gossip about Shylock's rage at the loss of his daughter and wealth, the destruction of an Italian ship in the English Channel, and Antonio's sadness at the departure of Bassanio.

In Belmont, another suitor, the Prince of Arragon, attempts to win the hand of Portia. He incorrectly chooses the silver chest and leaves defeated.



Katharine Hepburn as Portia in the 1957 production in Stratford, CT.





News soon arrives in Venice that the wrecked ship was one of Antonio's merchant vessels. Shylock, still in a rage at the elopement of his daughter, enters and declares that if the merchant is unable to repay the loan, he will take the pound of Antonio's flesh as promised in the bond. He begins the process of having Antonio arrested.

In Belmont, Bassanio faces the challenge of the three chests, and correctly chooses the leaden chest. Portia gives Bassanio a ring as a symbol of her love and makes him promise never to part with it. Adding to the joyous celebration, Gratiano announces that he and Portia's friend, Nerissa, will also marry. Salerio, Lorenzo, and Jessica arrive with the news of Antonio's financial ruin. Portia offers to pay the debt many times over and tells Bassanio to return to Venice immediately to save his friend. Portia and Nerissa pretend to leave



The Casket Scene - *Merchant of Venice*. Engraving by W Hollidge from the picture by F Barth. From Extra Supplement to the Illustrated London News, 20 March 1875.

for a monastery while the men are in Venice. Instead, they travel, disguised as men, after their husbands to Venice in the hope of being of assistance.

In Venice, Antonio seeks leniency from Shylock, but Shylock insists that the terms of the bond must be fulfilled. Antonio resigns himself to die. Before the Venetian court, Bassanio offers to pay three times the principal of the loan, but Shylock demands that the terms of the bond be fulfilled; he must have a pound of Antonio's flesh. Portia enters disguised as a doctor of law. She eventually saves Antonio's life, arguing that the bond allows Shylock a pound of flesh but not a drop of his blood, an impossible task. Shylock is found guilty of plotting the death of a Venetian and is forced to forfeit his estate and suffer execution. Antonio asks the Duke to reduce Shylock's penalty if the money-lender will convert to Christianity. Bassanio offers the disguised Portia the three thousand ducats he brought to give Shylock, but she, instead, demands the ring that she gave to him. Bassanio refuses. Portia departs as if insulted. Antonio asks Bassanio to give the ring to the "man" who saved his life. Bassanio sends Gratiano after her with it. Gratiano gives the disguised Portia Bassanio's ring. Nerissa decides to try to obtain from Gratiano the ring that she gave to him.

In Belmont, Portia and Nerissa feign surprise and great dismay that their husbands have given away their rings. Antonio steps in to plead with Portia to forgive Bassanio. At this request, the women return the rings to their husbands and reveal that Portia was the lawyer who saved Antonio. Portia also tells Antonio that three of his ships have successfully returned, and informs Lorenzo that he is Shylock's heir.



Who's Who in the Play

IN VENICE:

DUKE OF ATHENS: Judge in the dispute between Antonio and Shylock; bound by the letter of the Venetian law.

ANTONIO: A prosperous merchant of Venice and dear friend to Bassanio; he enters into a money-lending bond with Shylock to help Bassanio.

BASSANIO: Suitor to Portia, friend to Antonio.

GRATIANO: "Too wild, too rude, and too bold"; friend to Bassanio and Antonio.

LORENZO: In love with Shylock's daughter, Jessica; friend to Bassanio.

SOLANIO: Friend to Antonio and Bassanio.

SALERIO: Friend to Antonio and Bassanio.

SHYLOCK: A wealthy Jewish money-lender; he sees Antonio as his enemy, and strikes a bargain with the merchant that requires a pound of flesh if the debt is not repaid.

JESSICA: Shylock's daughter; in love with Lorenzo. She makes plans to steal some of her father's jewels and elope with Lorenzo.

TUBAL: A Jew who aids Shylock with ducats to be lent to Antonio.

LAUNCELOT GOBBO: Servant to Shylock, he flees his master to work for Bassanio.

OLD GOBBO: Father to Launcelot; a poor, blind man.

IN BELMONT:

PORTIA: A wealthy heiress of Belmont; her father's will stipulates that she may only wed a suitor who correctly chooses between three caskets —one gold, one silver, one lead.

NERISSA: Friend to Portia; later wooed and wed by Gratiano.

DUKE OF MOROCCO: Suitor to Portia; he incorrectly selects the gold casket.

PRINCE OF ARRAGON: Suitor to Portia; he incorrectly selects the silver casket.

BALTHASAR & STEPHANO: Servants to Portia



Concept board and costume renderings for Portia, by Costume Designer Candida Nichols ©2017.

Sources & History

Shakespeare derived the plot for *The Merchant of Venice* from various sources. A play called *The Jew* was a precursor and possibly influenced the composition of the play. Written circa 1578 (approximately 15-20 years prior to *Merchant*), the play was “shown at The Bull [Theatre], representing the greediness of worldly choosers, and bloody minds of usurers.” Scholars are unsure as to whether Shakespeare knew of this play or not. A more direct source is probably a selection within a collection of stories by Giovanni Fiorentino called *Il Pecorone* (“The Dunces”). The story follows very closely the Belmont plot in *The Merchant of Venice*. A young woman tricks her suitors and a young man is loaned money from his adopted father. Shakespeare not only embellished this plot but deepened the significance of the circumstances and broadened the themes. Another Italian story, Masuccio Salernitano’s *Il Novellino*, contains a parallel to the Jessica-Lorenzo subplot. Additionally, Richard Robinson’s translation of *Gest a Romanorum* contains an analogous casket story. Though not directly borrowed, other sources that have bearing on the composition of the play include the Bible and morality and miracle plays that Shakespeare witnessed as a youth.

The Merchant of Venice is one of Shakespeare’s most frequently performed plays. It is a popular production in part because of its rich and complex characters and plot. It raises issues of justice

BLOOD-LIBEL INSPIRATION

A collected world history from Genesis to the Last Judgment, *Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493), “includes attacks on and false allegations against Jews, including the ritual murder of a Christian boy. The false accusations of blood-libel, the murder of Christian children for rituals using their blood, were myths that first appear around the 12th century. In 1475, there was a blood-libel trial in Trent after the body of a Christian boy, Simon, was discovered, and Jews were accused of the ritual murder and crucifixion of Simon. Additionally, the *Nuremberg Chronicle* depicts the accusation of the crucifixion by Jews of an English child, William of Norwich (Schedel, 201v). Shakespeare’s play, *The Merchant of Venice*, teems with anti-Jewish ideas and blood-libel charges; likewise, the woodcuts in the *Nuremberg Chronicle* presents ‘evidence’ for the baseless charges for blood-libel (Schedel, 239v). The myth of blood-libel and the story of the murder of Simon of Trent was popularized by the widespread publication of the *Nuremberg Chronicle* and may have influenced Shakespeare or his audience. Sadly, the passage from *The Merchant of Venice* plays on Christian fears of the alleged Jewish desire for Christian blood.”

Shayna Miller,
Drew University
Special Collections
website





Shylock on the Rialto as illustrated by John Gilbert.

and mercy and has two great starring roles in *Shylock* and *Portia*. In addition, the play features excellent character parts in Bassanio, Gratiano, Nerissa, Jessica, Lorenzo, and Lancelot Gobbo. The role of the actual merchant, Antonio, remains one of Shakespeare's most elusive and mysterious characters.

Though we don't have an exact date, the play was probably first performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1596-97. The first recorded performance was on Shrove Sunday, February 10, 1605 when it was performed for King James I. No other performances are recorded until after the Restoration when George Granville rewrote the play as *The Jew of Venice* in 1701. This version lasted on the English stage for forty years. Typical of the time, lines were cut, characters were omitted, and new scenes were added.

The Actor-Manager Charles Macklin "revived" the play in the 18th century but we do not know how much of Shakespeare's text was retained or omitted. Though essentially a secondary role, beginning with Macklin, productions of *The Merchant of Venice* became

directly associated with the actor who was playing Shylock. Macklin's interpretation dominated the 18th century stage. Many of the great actors of the 19th century played Shylock, among them: Charles Kean, Edwin Forrest, Charles Macready, Henry Irving, Ira Aldridge, and Edwin Booth. 20th century productions sought to return to a broader inquiry into the play's issues rather than centering around the portrayal of Shylock.

Following World War II, whether they chose to or not, directors were forced to deal with the anti-semitic themes of the play. Choices varied from production to production. Productions in our time continually oscillate between tragedy and comedy. Despite this, productions are still identified by the actor playing Shylock. Notable productions in the past 30 years have featured some of the most famous actors playing Shylock, among them: Laurence Olivier, Patrick Stewart, David Suchet, Antony Sher, Dustin Hoffman, and Al Pacino.



The trial scene as illustrated by Robert Dudley

Shylock:

Villain or Victim?

It is difficult to find a character more widely debated than Shakespeare's Shylock. To some he is the quintessential victim of society and racism. Others see him as a bloodthirsty usurer set on destroying Antonio. Discussions of Shylock's character become even more troubled when one considers the views of the period in which the play was written versus contemporary moral and social views. When considering Shakespeare's tragic miser, one must take into account many elements that led to his creation.

When one looks closely at *Merchant*, one discovers that there are in fact "two Shylocks" in the play; the villain that catapults the plot, and the victim who loses his property, his daughter, and is stripped of his religion. As a function of the play, Shylock's character is necessarily the villain. "The fact that he is a Jew, is, in a sense, an accident." (Cliffs) To contrast greed and generosity (as stated in the introduction), Shakespeare needed to create a usurer, or money-lender. In the Middle Ages, usury was an occupation forbidden by the church for Christians. Considering the precarious position in which the Jews were placed in Europe at this time, it was often the only occupation they could legally undertake. For this reason, the archetype of the Jewish money-lender became a common image in English drama.

Shylock is not a Jewish name. It was created by Shakespeare for this play. There is a Hebrew word *shalakh*, which in translation means "cormorant." A cormorant is a sea bird which eats fish so

voraciously that the word has come to mean the personification of greed and voraciousness.

The "human" Shylock in *Merchant* is a much more compelling character for

most audiences to consider, seeing him as a man "more sinned against than sinning." But nowhere in the play are we led to believe that Shakespeare was concerned with anti-semitism or pro-semitism. One who attempts to use Shylock as the sole source by which to judge Shakespeare's view of Jews, might also consider the treacherous acts of King Richard III as defining his view of the English or the bloody ambitions of Macbeth as Shakespeare's sole interpretation of the Scottish. Any of these would be narrow-minded attempts to oversimplify the view of a much more profound writer.

The greatest problem with Shylock, and the reason for the great debates surrounding him, is the fact that Shakespeare wrote him so well. The role of Shylock transcends the category of mere villain because Shakespeare penned the role with great complexity, providing Shylock with arguments and reasons and qualities that



Shylock after the trial, an etching by J. Gilbert



compel us to view him sympathetically, and to understand him and his motives despite his faults and his own brand of bigotry. There is no doubt that the controversy surrounding this character will continue. In the end, it is up to each individual director, actor, and audience member to determine his/her own individual take on this fascinating character.

Here is what other critics have said about Shylock:

“In creating (Shylock), Shakespeare seems to have shared in a widespread and, from our point of view, despicable prejudice against Jews. In Shakespeare’s England there had been no Jews for a long time, except an occasional visitor, and so there was no direct experience to counteract the prejudice. Shylock would have been regarded as a villain simply because he was a Jew.



Edmund Kean as Shylock in an early 19th century performance.

Yet Shakespeare was led by his art of language to put onstage a character who gave such powerful expression to the alienation he felt because of the hatred around him that, in many productions of the play and in the opinions of many famous actors, Shylock emerges the hero of *The Merchant of Venice*. In fashioning in Shylock a character whose function is to frustrate the satisfaction that we are invited to desire for the play’s

lovers, Shakespeare has, for many people, brought forth a character which rivals the lovers in the power he exerts on us.”

-Paul Werstine,
introduction to The New Folger Library edition

“Scholars ... have looked elsewhere in Shakespeare’s work for references to Jews and from them to discover more about his attitude. The references, such as those in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Henry IV: Part 1*, and *Macbeth*, are hardly complimentary, though usually offhandedly

remarked and consistent with the dramatic character. The references in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, on the other hand, are clearly humorous ones, depending in part on word-play to gain effect. No allusions at all appear in the poems or sonnets. Anti-Semitic slurs thus do not appear to be important in Shakespeare’s vocabulary or his thinking, with the outstanding exception of *The Merchant of Venice*. There, in the view of some critics, Shakespeare unleashed a venomous attack upon Jews — not only money-lenders and usurers, but all Jews. To cite only one piece of evidence, Shylock is rarely referred to by name; instead, he typically is referred to or addressed as ‘Jew’, a term then as now (in some quarters) of considerable contempt.”

-Jay L. Halio, introduction to the Oxford World’s Classic edition



Charles Macready as Shylock in an early 19th century performance.



The Merchant of Venice

Antisemitism in Shakespeare's London

When considering Shakespeare's viewpoint on the Jewish community, one must take into account the history of the Jews in England prior to Shakespeare's writing of the play.

"In these post-Holocaust days, it may be difficult for us to conceive how Jews were regarded and treated in Europe, including England, during the Middle Ages. They had few rights and could not claim inalienable citizenship in any country. Typically, they depended upon rulers of the realm for protection and such rights as they might enjoy. In the thirteenth century in England, for example, under Henry III and Edward I, they were tantamount to the king's chattel. The king could — and did — dispose of them and their possessions entirely as he chose. Heavy talladges, or taxes, were the sovereign's financial needs, and when the moneys were not forthcoming, imprisonment and/ or confiscation (of property) usually followed. At the same time, the Church vigorously opposed the existence of Jews in the country, but as they were under the king's protection the Church was powerless to do more than excite popular feeling against them."

"Contrary to popular belief, not all Jews were money-lenders, although usury was one of the few means to accumulate

such wealth as they had.

Many Jews were poor and served in humble, even menial capacities. But as non-believers in Christ, they were a despised people, however useful, financially and otherwise (as doctors, for instance). Near the end of the thirteenth century, when Edward I had practically bankrupted his Jews, who found it impossible to meet the increasingly exorbitant demands for payments, the king decided to play his last card — expulsion."

-Jay L. Halio,
introduction to Oxford's World's Classic edition

It is also important as an audience member or a reader of *The Merchant of Venice* to look beyond the treatment of Shylock. As a necessary villain in the plot of the play, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between the villainous money-lender and the race of which he is a member. To better interpret Shakespeare's view (and the take of the production) on pro- or antisemitism, an audience member must also consider the treatment of the other Jewish characters in the play; Jessica and Tubal. Because their roles in the play are not mandated by the plot to be villains or victims, the readers (and actors, directors, and audience members) are able to use the treatment of these characters as a touchstone by which to judge the semitic tone of the play.

"Antisemitism was rife in Shakespeare's London; audiences of the day, primed to view Shylock as a natural-born villain, would therefore have been surprised to find any of his speeches moving."

-Leslie Dunton-Downer & Alan Riding
Essential Shakespeare Handbook



Commentary & Criticism

“(Shylock) transcends the (comic Jewish villain) type, shatters the conventional image with his appeal to our common humanity, and leaves us unsettled in our prejudices, disturbed in our emotions, and by no means sure of our convictions.”

-Jay L. Halio, introduction to Oxford's World's Classic edition

“Critics and editors insist on viewing every character and incident [in *The Merchant of Venice*] in the broad light of common day. Bassanio ... is removed from the play and, because Shakespeare has made him sufficiently real for his purpose, is discussed as though he were a person whom we should hesitate to invite to dinner. He is charged with being a spend-thrift and a gold-digger. He sponges on his best friend and marries for money. Antonio, for all his fine speeches and impressive deportment, is a spineless nonentity; Jessica a heartless minx who robs her father. Each character, removed from its context, is submitted to everyday tests of moral worth and social decorum. Shakespeare, in giving these people just enough reality to make them humanly credible for the purpose of his story, has succeeded to such good purpose that they are brought to judgment as human beings true for all time or in any place.”

-John Palmer, *The Comic Characters of Shakespeare*

“*The Merchant of Venice* is a play about contrasted attitudes toward wealth and the life-styles dictated by each, but it is also a comedy which returns to that question of love and friendship and the rivalry between them which Shakespeare had first explored in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.”

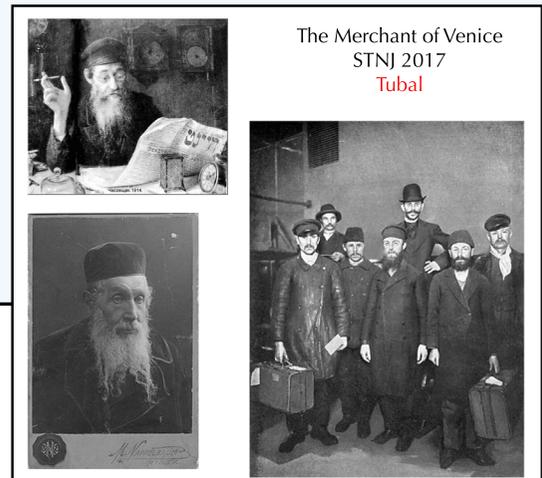
-Anne Barton, introduction to *The Riverside Shakespeare*

“With the high drama of the courtroom scene, the fairytale world of Belmont, the enmity between Christians and Jews, and a number of outstanding speeches, comical and sentimental, *The Merchant of Venice* makes for captivating reading.”

Leslie Dunton-Downing & Alan Riding,
Essential Shakespeare Handbook



Well dressed, but not as nice as Antonio. Glasses
Three piece suit
Beard



The Merchant of Venice
STNJ 2017
Tubal



Concept boards and costume renderings for Shylock and Tubal by
Costume Designer
Candida Nichols
©2017.



Theatre in Shakespeare's Day

SEEING A PLAY -VS- HEARING A PLAY

Modern audiences go to the theatre to see a play; but Shakespeare's audiences would go to the theatre to *hear* a play. His audience was much more attuned to the language of the play, the inflections of the actors' voices, and rhythms of the poetry. This is not to say that Shakespeare's plays lacked visual interest; just that the visual elements were not nearly as important as the language.

We see this in someways true today, at least in the words we use to describe attending the theatre. People who attend the theatre are most often referred to as an "audience" sharing the root of *audio* or sound in the name. Conversely, people who attend movies are often referred to as "movie-goers"; sports enthusiasts are often referred to as "spectators."



Second Globe Theatre, detail from Hollar's *View of London*, 1647.

WHAT DO I WEAR?

People often ask if shows at The Shakespeare Theatre will be performed in "traditional dress" or "like real Shakespeare." This comes up even more often with the history plays.



Will Kempe in *The Nine Wonders*, ca. 1600.

It is interesting to note that, though often sumptuous and expensive, the costumes used in Shakespeare's plays were rarely correct to the period of the play. Most often, actors were dressed in their finest attire (or clothes donated by wealthy patrons), and then these clothes were adorned with capes or crowns or other items denoting the character's status. The shows in Shakespeare's day were simply put up too quickly to create elaborate period-accurate costumes for the full company. Therefore, despite popular assumption, a more accurate "traditional dress" approach to Shakespeare plays would be to dress actors in their finest contemporary clothing adorned with capes and crowns to denote status.

There were also very strict laws in Shakespeare's day detailing what clothes, styles, and colors citizens were allowed to wear. This was a deliberate maneuver to reinforce the class structure of the era. Penalties for violating these Sumptuary Laws could be quite severe — loss of property, imprisonment, fines, and even loss of title. These Sumptuary Laws meant that fashionable clothes could only be worn by the wealthy and were often only seen at a distance.



In this Production



The trio of friends before the new money from Antonio.
Suits are more woolens & tweeds, rough.



The Merchant of Venice STNJ 2017
Bassanio- Lorenzo-Gratiano



By The House of KUPPENHEIMER

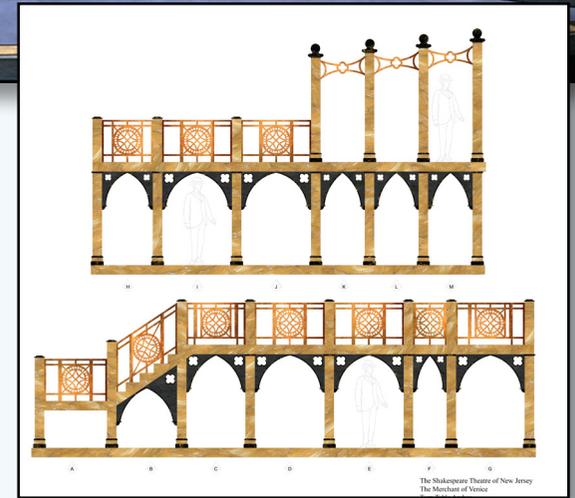


New Money brings updated fashions.
More colorful suits spats & new collars.



ABOVE and RIGHT: Scenic model and paint elevations for *The Merchant of Venice* by Scenic Designer Brian Ruggaber ©2017.

LEFT and BELOW: Concept boards and costume renderings by Costume Designer, Candida Nichols ©2017.



The Merchant of Venice STNJ 2017
Antonio



Well dressed. Full suit, outerwear.

The Merchant of Venice STNJ 2017
Nerissa

Nerissa is dressed in a softer silhouette than Portia.

We are drawing upon the early 1900s, mixed with modern inspiration.



Evening wear



Garden/Act III



The Merchant of Venice STNJ 2017
Old Gobo & Launcelot

We will spuce Launcelot up with some new items when he moves to work with Bassanio & friends
A new vest, Collar Tie, these types of things.



Sources & Further Reading

THE ANNOTATED SHAKESPEARE, Introductions, Notes, and Bibliography by A.L. Rowe

THE ARDEN SHAKESPEARE: THE MERCHANT OF VENICE edited by John Drakakis

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CAMBRIDGE STUDENT GUIDE: THE MERCHANT OF VENICE edited by Robert Smith, Richard Andrews, and Vicki Wienand

THE COMPLETE IDIOT'S GUIDE TO SHAKESPEARE, by Laurie Rozakis

THE ESSENTIAL SHAKESPEARE HANDBOOK, by Leslie Dunton-Downer and Alan Riding

FOLGER SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY: THE MERCHANT OF VENICE edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine

FREEING SHAKESPEARE'S VOICE by Kristin Linklater

THE FRIENDLY SHAKESPEARE by Norrie Epstein

A READER'S GUIDE TO SHAKESPEARE by Muriel B. Ingham

SHAKESPEARE A TO Z by Charles Boyce

SHAKESPEARE AFTER ALL by Marjorie Garber

SHAKESPEARE FOR BEGINNERS by Brandon Toropov

SHAKESPEARE FOR DUMMIES by Doyle, Lischner, and Dench

SHAKESPEARE IN PERFORMANCE, Consultant Editors Keith Parsons and Pamela Mason

SHAKESPEARE: THE INVENTION OF THE HUMAN by Harold Bloom

SHAKESPEARE OUR CONTEMPORARY by Jan Kott

SHAKESPEARE'S CRIMINALS: CRIMINOLOGY, FICTION, AND DRAMA by Victoria M. Time

THEATRE: A WAY OF SEEING, Third Edition by Milly S. Barranger

SHAKESPEARE SET FREE, edited by Peggy O'Brien

SHAKING HANDS WITH SHAKESPEARE, by Alison Wedell Schumacher

