

EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS FOR



# THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

by William Shakespeare

SOUTHWEST  
SHAKESPEARE  

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COMPANY

2024

Written by Susan Willis

# THE MERCHANT OF VENICE



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## The Title Tells Us

**Venture. And Venice.** Venetian life is venture, and Venetian love is venture. It tells us merchants, so inevitably moneylenders and the judicial system. Not the average setting for what is called a romantic comedy, but then Shakespeare is not your average playwright.

## A Play of Two Worlds—or Two Settings?

- **We start in Venice amid friends**, two of whom have secret money problems, as one confesses asking the other for a loan. Money is always an issue in the play, for **money is the lifeblood of Venice**— venturing, borrowing/lending, selling, profiting in this renowned Renaissance gateway between East and West.



*Venice, City of Light, a “bridged” city of 118 small islands. Its Rialto Bridge, in its earlier version, was site of important business deals in the Renaissance.*

- That borrowed money is crucial in order **to woo the beautiful young heiress in distant Belmont**—the “lovely mountain”: **two different worlds?** But her dead father’s test is not money; it’s character.
- Once Bassanio wins Portia we start **another contest, this one judicial, again about lifeblood,** and money is not the answer to it either, though it is part of the ultimate verdict and reprisal. **We end in Belmont among friends.**

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## Bonds and Trials

- **The bond** is financial and legal and potentially deadly in Venice; the bond in Belmont is romantic and marital (and perhaps financial and sexual). Let's check the meanings of the word:
  - an emotional and relationship commitment such as friendship or marriage
  - an agreement uniting people
  - an assurance
  - a legal document
  - a financial arrangement
  - something that ties, such as restraints, bondage
  - a means of joining or holding together

Antonio and Bassanio have a bond. Antonio and Shylock have a bond. Portia and her father have a bond. Bassanio and Portia have a bond. Each is different in basis, emotion or reason, maintenance or dissolution, and effect. Bonds—and the trials that follow—are the story.

- **“Trial”** is likewise a multivalent entity for the play—challenges, obstacles, what must be endured, legal proceedings. There is a trial-by-locked-box, a judicial trial (an entire crucial scene), and a trial-by-ring.

Here, all the bonds lead everyone to the judicial trial. And the issues emerge:

- the legal bond was agreed on freely.
- do we understand Shylock? is he tormented until he snaps; is he inherently vengeful for no reason? He relies on justice; does he get it?
- does Shylock have “a right” to “justice”? is the judge impartial?

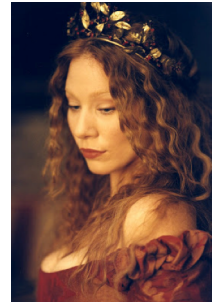
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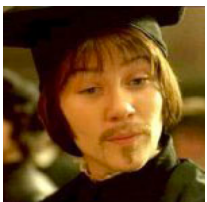
## How Shakespeare Shapes the Play

- The first three scenes introduce the four major characters—**Antonio and Bassanio, Portia, and Shylock**—and both locales. Antonio lets Bassanio borrow money in his name to woo Portia. Bassanio goes to a Jewish moneylender Antonio hates and spurns, Shylock. The deal? Should Antonio forfeit, Shylock will get a pound of his flesh nearest his heart. **Love, money, prejudice, and hatred.**



*Lynn Collins as  
Portia (2004 film)*

- Act 2 presents **losses**—**Shylock's** loss of servant to Bassanio and of daughter, who elopes with Lorenzo, Bassanio's friend. We also meet **two of Portia's suitors**, and since neither passes her father's test, we now know the answer. **Losses for "foreigners"; gains for Venetians.**
- We hear of **Antonio's losses** at sea and watch **Bassanio's success**. When he learns Antonio's life is now forfeit to Shylock, he leaves for Venice, followed in secret by Portia. **Loss, gain, potential loss.**
- The trial scene shifts and turns suspensefully. **Thanks to disguised Portia, Shylock almost wins and then loses the case**, along with his money, his livelihood, and almost his life, but instead of that "only" loses his religion via an act of "mercy" from Antonio. How we feel about this judgment and this scene determines our view of the play at large. Then it's back to Belmont for a **smaller marital trial scene**. **Losses for Shylock; gains for others.**
- Love leads to marriage; blocking fathers and moneylender are overcome, but the system and its use can seem tyrannical and prejudicial. **How do we assess the action?** And if we know who is usually considered the antagonist, **who is the play's protagonist?**



*Portia as "Bellario"*

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## Then and Now: Considering Renaissance Contexts

- **Display and Debt:** Being an Elizabethan nobleman was an expensive proposition, and all courtiers were expected to display wealth when at court. As a result, almost all of Elizabeth I's courtiers were in debt; it was the only way to be positioned to get the next lucrative office. (Bassanio would have fit right in; his debt would have been the norm.) Does "show" matter now?
- **Renaissance Marriage:** Among the Renaissance upper class, marriage was a business deal, an alliance between families arranged by the fathers. The proposed spouses often had no say and might not have met. Love was not expected before or after the alliance; it was thought too unstable an emotion for so crucial a bond. Only Puritans had companionate marriages; only the lower classes could pick their mates. This is not to say love did not occur, but it was never part of the bargain. No one marries for money now, do they?

Does Portia want a "merger" or love? She has no say about which wooer wins unless she cheats, and she says she won't. There is an issue, however, about the fact that in the song she has sung while Bassanio chooses, "Tell me where is fancy bred,/ Or in the heart or in the head..." all the initial line endings rhyme with "lead." Accident?



Jeremy Irons and Joseph  
Fiennes in 2004 film

- **Renaissance Friendship:** Since anyone with title or money was unlikely to be able to choose a spouse in the Renaissance, the only way a man could have a soul mate was to choose a friend. Friendship was considered the highest personal bond, one of full trust, selfless and pure. Our buddy films—soldiers, cops, cowboys—all suggest a similar bond. And *our* friends?

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## Venice and Its Jews in the Renaissance

- “A name for sharp dealing, for ‘sticking together,’ artful diplomacy, business ‘push,’ and godless secularism”—this is the Renaissance definition of Venetians, since Venice was for hundreds of years the capitalistic center of the world, the link between East and West (only new trade routes around Africa and to the New World stemmed Venice’s dominance). Those terms were also ascribed to the Jews during the Renaissance. Venice needed its Jews (though it did not allow them to be citizens) because they were traders and also moneylenders—one of the few trades allowed to them and denied Christians, though that subsequently changed.
- The medieval antipathy to the Jews is often traced to a hatred of capitalism. They were subsequently driven out of country after country (from England in 1290), defined as “other,” limited in occupations. The same hatred of capitalism, even as Europe embraced it, was focused on Venetians, so the play to an Elizabethan eye might be an internal mirror-image. As Mary McCarthy notes, “certainly the hatred excited by Venice ... had an irrational, supercharged quality that was like modern anti-Semitism....” Would an Elizabethan audience see the characters as “us” or “them”?



Left: *Renaissance Venice's over-crowded Jewish ghetto, where they were required to live and where the gates out were locked nightly from outside.*  
Right: *Ca d'Oro, one of the palaces on the Grand Canal.*



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## A Romantic Comedy? Depends on the Perspective

- Critics have confidently called this **a romantic comedy** since 1596, but from the 20<sup>th</sup> century on they have labeled it in other ways as well.
  - Yes, it has three sets of young lovers who have to overcome obstacles (one dead, one who would block if he knew) to achieve wedded bliss. Yes, there's a wise-cracking servant. Yes, the group reassembles at the end, and those who cannot join are excluded—quite literally and even after being legally “included.” Perhaps it's the virulent, in-your-face anti-Semitism of some characters and laws that dims the sunshine.
- Given the theatrical context of its genesis—appearing shortly after Marlowe's vicious comedy of ridicule *The Jew of Malta* (the title character profiteers against Christians and Turks, has his daughter's Christian beloved killed and then kills her plus a nunnery, and is finally dropped into a boiling cauldron at the end)—*Merchant* charts its own course.

If this play differs from Marlowe's, Shakespeare no doubt intended it to.

**The play's issues and treatment can make it seem a problem comedy** (strong social context, emphasis on social issues, how the system really works) **or a tragicomedy**. Some call it tragic.

- **Concerns that arise:**
  - the play abounds in verbal abuse of Shylock. Is anti-Semitism comic? Do we understand Shylock (3.1) or paste on a label?
  - Bassanio is in debt; is this the lover who should win Portia?
  - Portia may not trust her new hubby with the crisis in Venice. Is she a control freak, a showoff, or a prudent woman?
  - Bassanio has a deep friendship with Antonio; what is his commitment to the new marriage?

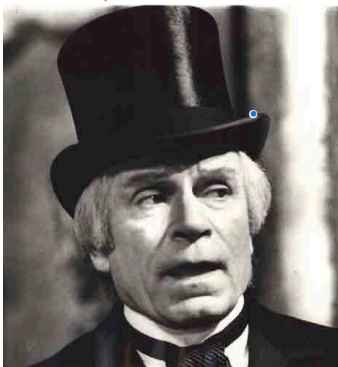


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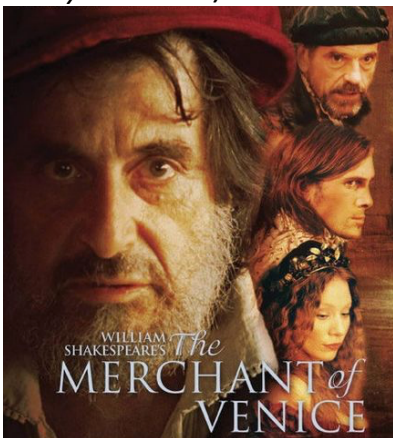
Macklin, 1741



Olivier/ National Theatre 1970



Henry Goodman/ National 1999



Al Pacino/ 2004 film

## MERCHANT on Stage

- Scholars say that, despite Shakespeare's care, stage tradition continued to play Jewish characters as exaggeratedly covetous and quickly violent. Macklin, in 1741, was the first to break with this tradition.
- Many 19<sup>th</sup> century productions began to add a scene just before the intermission—a wordless scene of Shylock returning to his now empty home to learn of Jessica's absence/elopement.
- More modern productions offer a range of contexts for Shylock. Laurence Olivier (left) in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century setting played him as indistinguishable from any other Victorian gentleman except at home, though other gents still reviled him. His one outcry after exiting the trial scene is rending.
- Henry Goodman played Shylock in a 1930s' setting, which increased the tensions even more in a powerful and thoughtful production.
- Al Pacino in the 2004 film of *Merchant* set in the Renaissance (hence the red hat all Jews in Venice were required to wear as "identity badges") was again a powerful presence, full of pain and indignation.

The last three productions are available on DVD and well worth the viewing.

**Southwest Shakespeare's *Merchant* will be set in the 1950s' McCarthy era**, and the play always has extra crackle when it's in a highly charged political setting.



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## Discussing Issues of Prejudice before or after the Show

- Prejudice did not fade away with the Renaissance, of course. Varieties of prejudice continue to work and be denied across the globe today. Though the very idea of prejudice has become a hot-button or undiscussable topic in our context (labels, yes; discussion, no), perhaps the “distant mirror” of Shakespeare’s Elizabethan world and Renaissance Venice can provide a laboratory for viewing issues, their roots, and their consequences and for pursuing the perspectives, contexts, and effects of these well-rounded characters.



*The climactic moment in the trial scene, 4.1 (Louis Rhead)*

- The play is full of face-offs:
  - Antonio with Shylock in 1.3,
  - Salerio and Solanio with Shylock in 3.1 (with his “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech)
  - the entire trial scene of 4.1:
    - Bassanio and Antonio with Shylock,
    - “Bellario”/Portia with Shylock in two sections,
    - then Bassanio/Antonio with “Bellario,” where the trial shifts to a new one they don’t yet realize—

in addition to each side discussing the other among friends. There is a fervor and forthrightness in all the face-offs and discussions here; everyone assumes personal moral right.

Analyzing any of these for characters’ assumptions, triggers, values, rhetorical strategies, outcomes, and how the “system” works through them may be valuable without ever touching the 21<sup>st</sup> century.