

Shakespeare  
**Plays**  
On Tour

**Play Guide ~ *The Merchant of Venice***

**The Richmond Shakespeare Festival**

1-804-232-4000 [www.richmondshakespeare.com](http://www.richmondshakespeare.com)

**Pre-performance**

**Sources and history *The Merchant of Venice***

Written between 1594 – 1598, *The Merchant of Venice* is thought by some to have been written for the opening of The Blackfriars, the indoor venue for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare's troupe.. (A possible reference to a ship captured by Lord Essex, The St Andrew, might date it at 1596.) The lawyers who lived in the area would have particularly liked the courtroom scene.

Though technically *Merchant* is a comedy, it is considered a "problem play." It is one of the comedies written in the mid-90's infused with a moral or Christian overtone. Though Shylock is the character most identified with the play, he is only the "heavy", or antagonist of the play. The actual merchant is the good natured Antonio- who lends Bassanio money. The tale is designed to illustrate, at least overtly, the value of Christian morals.

As in many of his plays, Shakespeare's sources are multiple. He drew heavily upon Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il Peccorone*, which contains the tradition of the pound of flesh, also seen in stories of Persia, India and The Twelve Tables of Roman law. From this story he also used the bit about a wife dressing as a male lawyer and saving her husband, and the ring as payment for the lawyer. The casket choosing episode was a wide spread legend found in many tales- particularly the *Gesta Romanorum*. The relationship between Shylock and his daughter has a parallel in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*.

As in many morality tales, Shakespeare has 2 opposing worlds. The first is Belmont, meaning beautiful mountain, where Portia lives. The lad must be won (by choosing the proper casket) after a journey over water. Scenes at Belmont are usually at night and sensible women rule here. In contrast is the mercantile world of Venice, where the merchants and Shylock reside. This area is more worldly, seen in the heat of the day, and is low and flat. Men preside here.

In this play, friendship and love preside over hatred and faithlessness. Elizabethan Christians believed in a chain or ladder of love, with God at the top, then perfect friendship edging out spiritual union. This is seen in a number of plot points in Merchant-Bassanio giving up money to win Portia, Antonio giving up money for his friend, the lead casket being the winning choice rather than gold or silver, Jessica's elopement for love away from her father's riches, and finally- the giving up of the rings out of the obligation of gratitude.

Shylock is a denial of all this. He is the archetypal Renaissance Jew who wishes to kill a Christian. In Shakespeare's time, he would have been played with a red beard (like Judas) and a fake hooked nose. His God is the God of Moses- of wrath, not mercy. His "sin" is that his life is lived for money; usury (charging interest on a loan) was considered getting something for nothing.) He even equates his daughter with money- when she elopes, taking some money of his, he cries "My daughter! O my ducats!" We're not sure which is more valuable, Such oversimplification of the difference between Christianity and Judaism was common in the Elizabethan world.

Was Shakespeare anti-Semitic? Was he illustrating the mindset of Elizabethan England? Ironically, very few Jewish moneylenders were found in England at that time. Jews had been nominally excluded from England since Edward I's reign but had increased in small numbers, did not practice Judaism openly and followed other professions. Shakespeare's Shylock seems more based on the continental tradition- not everyday life in London. Usury and Judaism were linked in the mind of Renaissance Europe- both non-Christian and sinister.

Not all usurers were Jews. In England, the Privy Council allowed money to be lent at no more than 10% interest. (Shakespeare's own father was fined for exceeding that amount.) However, anti-Semitism could erupt at any time into hysteria. In June, 1594, Dr Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese Jew and the Queen's personal physician, was accused by the Earl of Essex (wanting to be her next favorite) of plotting to poison her. As this was a time of many plots on the Queen's life, Roderigo was tried and hanged. Shakespeare's play may have been written under this impetus. Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, was revived at that time.

However, as in all his plays, Shakespeare inserts elements that invite the audience to draw its own conclusions. Shakespeare learned a system of rhetoric in which, by arguing both sides of an issue, one may arrive at the truth. These elements include-

- portraying Judaism as a matter of faith (changeable) rather than inherent as a trait. A big step in the Elizabethan world.
- portraying Shylock as a victim of Christian bigotry. One of the most powerful speeches of the play is put into Shylock's mouth, Christians are invited to examine their own conduct.

The linking of all the above elements into a central theme is perhaps Shakespeare's greatest contribution to his sources

### **The Elizabethan Playhouse**

The Globe, the theater most associated with Shakespeare, was not the only theater in London, but it is the most famous. Others include the Rose and the Curtain (both mentioned in *Shakespeare in Love*) and the Swan. The Blackfriars was an indoor theater used by Shakespeare's company (known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, then later as the King's Men.) The others were all open to the sky (the reason being the need for light- no electricity!).

All of the open theatres had arena type stages (seating on 3 sides), with the poorer audience members (the Groundlings) standing on the ground right up next to the stage, while the more wealthy sat in galleries in a circular fashion all around the yard (the open area where the

Groundlings stood). The atmosphere was fairly raucous (more like Nascar or WWF wrestling) , with people constantly moving around, throwing hazelnut shells on the ground and talking - UNLESS they were intrigued by what was going on onstage. We think that with Shakespeare's plays the audience was pretty attentive.

However- there were no intermissions, so they still had to move sometimes. With Shakespeare's plays, they would probably hurry back.

Because the plays took place in the early afternoon and the players (actors) could see the audience and vice versa, it is thought by many scholars that Shakespeare intended for the audience to be involved in the play itself. An actor might refer to an audience member to make some reference to a character not on stage- pretty funny then AND now.

Finally - how long WERE these plays? They seem pretty long on the page. In *Romeo and Juliet*, it mentions in the Prologue "the two hours traffic of our stage..". If the actors really meant that, there would be a very fast pace- no long pauses or slow exits and entrances. This makes sense if you consider that the normal Groundling had the attention span of today's normal 5 year old and liked to throw things.

## **Synopsis**

### Act I

Antonio, a Venetian merchant, complains to Solanio and Salerio of a melancholy he can't shake. Bassanio arrives with Lorenzo and Gratiano, Bassanio stays to talk with Antonio; Gratiano, Lorenzo, Salerio and Solanio leave. Bassanio asks Antonio for a loan in order to go woo Portia. Antonio agrees, but can't make the loan himself because all of his money is invested in trade ships that are still out at sea. Antonio suggest that Bassanio get a loan from one of the city's moneylenders and use the name of Antonio to secure it.

In Belmont, Portia is unhappy with the terms of her father's will, which say that she can only marry the man who chooses the correct casket out of a choice of three. Portia and Nerissa make fun of the suitors who have come already and remember fondly a visit awhile ago by a Venetian named Bassanio.

In Venice, Antonio and Bassanio ask Shylock, a moneylender for a loan. Even though, Shylock hates Antonio for being a Christian and insulting Shylock in the past, he agrees to the loan with no interest, but asks for a pound of flesh if the loan is late in being repaid.. Despite Bassanio's warnings, Antonio agrees.

### Act II

Portia welcomes The Prince of Morocco who has come to try to win. He hopes she won't dislike him because of his complexion. He is ready to choose, but Portia says they must dine first.

In Shylock's servant Launcelot decides to go work for Bassanio and his old blind father, whom he hasn't seen in awhile, walks by. Launcelot teases him then tells him who he is. Bassanio come by, Launcelot presents himself for Bassanio's service. Bassanio accepts. Gratiano comes in and says he must go to Belmont with Bassanio. Bassanio agrees but only if he behaves civilly.

Launcelot bids goodbye to Jessica, Shylock's daughter. She gives him a note to give to

Lorenzo because she, too, is planning to flee by marrying the Christian Lorenzo.

Launcelot delivers the note, and Lorenzo says he will be ready. He enlists his friends- Solanio and Salario to meet with him and Gratiano later.

Launcelot has come to bring Shylock to his new master, Bassanio for supper. Shylock feels uneasy about leaving the house and tells Jessica to make sure to lock up.

That night, while everyone is partying in the streets, Lorenzo comes by and gets Jessica, who is dressed as his torch-bearer-a boy, carrying a casket with some of Shylock's wealth.

Back at Belmont, The Prince of Morocco chooses the gold casket and is incorrect. He leaves. Salario and Solanio discuss how badly Shylock took Jessica's departure and the loss of his money. They both agree that Antonio should be careful.

Back at Belmont, The Prince of Arragon comes to choose. He chooses the silver casket and is wrong. Nerissa and Portia celebrate; a messenger comes in to say that a Venetian named Bassanio has arrived.

### Act III

Solario and Solanio discuss the bad news about Antonio's ships when Shylock comes by. They needle him about Jessica's elopement. A messenger from Antonio takes them away, as Shylock's friend, Tubal comes in. He informs him about Antonio's misfortune, then about a ring that Jessica sold.

Bassanio has come to choose. They reveal their love, the he chooses. He chooses the lead casket - and is correct. Portia gives him a ring. Gratiano and Nerissa reveal that they will be married too. Lorenzo arrives with Jessica and Salerio. Salerio gives Bassanio a letter from Antonio detailing the bad news and that Shylock is demanding his bond. Portia says no problem- but let's get married first, then you and Gratiano can take the money to Antonio. Antonio and Solanio are asking Shylock for mercy; Shylock refuses.

Lorenzo commends Portia for being so good. She tells him that he and Jessica need to watch over Belmont while she and Jessica go away to a monastery until their husbands return. After they leave Portia send a letter to a lawyer friend and tells Nerissa they're going to dress as boys and go to their husbands.

Launcelot is quibbling with Jessica about getting into heaven, when Lorenzo walks in and tells him to go set the table. He gets more puns, Launcelot finally goes. Jessica says she likes Portia.

### Act IV

At the court, in front of the Duke, Shylock refuses to be swayed. Portia and Nerissa arrive, disguised as a judge and his clerk and recommended to the Duke. Portia hears the argument and says Shylock is right. Shylock rejoices They prepare to cut Antonio, when Portia reminds Shylock that the document says only a pound of flesh- no blood. Gratiano rejoices. Shylock realizes he is trapped and offers to take the money. Portia says it's too late. Portia then informs Shylock that he is now guilty of conspiring to take the life of a Venetian citizen which means he must turn over half his property to the state and the other half to Antonio. His life is at the mercy of the duke. The duke spares his life and takes a fine instead of Hsylock's property. Antonio also forgives the debt , under 2 conditions: Shylock must convert to Christianity and then will all his estate to Lorenzo and Jessica. Shylock agrees and asks to leave.

Gratiano and Bassanio want to pay the judge, but Portia refuses. Then she says she will have the ring he wears (the one that she herself gave him). He protests , but after Antonio steps in,

he gives it. Gratiano similarly gives his to the disguised Nerissa,  
Act V

Lorenzo and Jessica are outside enjoying the night at Belmont, when Stephano, a servant of Portia's, arrives to tell them to make the house ready.

Launcelot arrives and says that Bassanio is on his way too.

Portia and Nerissa arrive and swear the servants, Lorenzo and Jessica to secrecy about their being gone.

Bassanio, Antonio and Gratiano arrive and Portia welcomes them. Nerissa berates Gratiano for having given away the ring she gave them. Portia "discovers" that Bassanio also gave his away. The guys try to explain. Antonio, being the origin of the whole matter, steps in and swears it will never happen again with himself as bond.. The girls produce the rings, explain what happened and give Antonio a letter saying that 3 of his ships have safely returned with much wealth. Finally Nerissa gives Lorenzo and Jessica the deed that says Shylock will all of his fortune to them at his death.

## **Post-performance**

### **People/Happenings in the play**

#### **Multiple choice**

1. Usury is:
  - a) a robe worn in Jewish ceremonies
  - b) lying under oath
  - c) charging interest on a loan
  - d) spying
  
2. The "merchant" in *The Merchant of Venice* is:
  - a) Bassanio
  - b) Antonio
  - c) Shylock
  - d) Launcelot Gobbo
  
3. The method of selecting a husband for Portia was selected by:
  - a) her dead father
  - b) her mother
  - c) Portia
  - d) the leaders of Venice
  
4. If one of Portia's suitors chooses the wrong casket he must:
  - a) leave and never come back
  - b) leave and never speak to her
  - c) never speak again
  - d) leave and never marry.
  
5. Bassanio needs a loan from Shylock because:
  - a) he wants to woo Portia in style
  - b) Antonio has no free cash to lend him
  - c) he has spent more money than he had
  - d) all of the above
  
6. What reason does Antonio give for being sad in the beginning of the play?
  - a) He owes Shylock a lot of money
  - b) Bassanio has been stealing from him
  - c) He could lose a lot of money in his current business venture
  - d) He gives no reason.
  
7. The caskets that Portia's suitors must pick from are:
  - a) gold, silver and lead
  - b) teak, ebony and mahogany
  - c) marble, stone and brick
  - d) ivory,

bone and porcelain.

8. Which is NOT a reason that Shylock hates Antonio?  
a) Antonio dislikes Jews b) Antonio is in love with Shylock's daughter, Jessica c) Antonio has insulted Shylock in the past d) Antonio lend money with no interest, injuring Shylock's business.
9. Why does the Prince of Morocco fear that Portia will dislike him?  
a) he has little money b) he has a dark complexion c) he is shorter than she is d) he is an Arab.
10. How does Shylock describe the "pound of flesh" as surety for the bond, at first?  
a) a joke he is making b) an opportunity for revenge c) a way of being charitable d) a way of getting food.
11. How does Jessica escape from her father's house?  
a) She leaves while Shylock is asleep b) She fakes her own death c) She goes with her father to a public place, then slips away d) She disguises herself as Lorenzo's torch bearer and slips out while the streets are crowded.
12. How does Shylock react to losing Launcelot as a servant?  
a) he weeps in private b) he tells Launcelot that Bassanio will be a harder master c) he beats Launcelot with a stick d) he refuses to pay Launcelot's wages.
13. According to Tubal, for what did Jessica trade Shylock's most precious ring?  
a) a horse b) a monkey c) a boat ride d) new clothing
14. How is Shylock punished for seeking Antonio's life?  
a) he is banished b) he must work as Antonio's servant for the rest of his life c) he must convert to Christianity and will all his possessions to Lorenzo and Jessica after his death. d) he must give up all of his possessions to the state.
15. What news does Antonio get at the end of the play?  
a) Shylock has killed himself. b) some of his ships he thought were lost have come in with wealth. c) his long lost twin has returned d) the Duke has reversed himself and Antonio must give the pound of flesh.

**Matching (match the character with the description or line spoken by him/her/it)**

- |             |  |
|-------------|--|
| 1) Gratiano | a) The quality of mercy is not strain'd.                       |
| 2) Portia   | b) I am not well.  |
| 3) Shylock  | c) Though I am daughter to his blood, I am not in his manners. |
| 4) Jessica  | d) He is well paid that is well satisfied.                     |
| 5) Salerio  | e) Your mind is tossing on the ocean.                          |

- |                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| 6) Bassanio           | f) God made him and therefore let him pass for a man.                                    |
| 7) Nerissa            | g) Mislike me not for my complexion.   |
| 8) Antonio            | h) You have too much respect upon the world: They lose it that do buy it with much care. |
| 9) Launcelot Gobbo    | i) If you prick us, do we not bleed?   |
| 10) Prince of Morocco | j) The devil can cite scripture for his purpose.   |
|                       | k) I am never merry when I hear sweet music.   |
|                       | l) So shines a good deed in a naughty world.   |
|                       | m).I like not fair terms and a villain's mind.   |
|                       | n) Your father was ever virtuous; and holy men at their death have good inspirations.    |
|                       | o) I am famished in his service, you may tell every finger I have with my ribs.          |

### Final Question

**Many people believe *The Merchant of Venice* to be anti-Semitic. Discuss how different stagings of this play could enhance this or diminish this.**

### Special Encore! Trademarks

Shakespeare's primary company probably had about fifteen actors per show, but we know that in the evenings some of the company played on tour. Often playing for patrons in their homes, this smaller troupe of players often had only five or six actors.

Encore! is truly privileged to continue this tradition. Have a look at *Merchant's* cast of **characters**. How would you cast the show with just five people? How would you cast it with thirteen?

*For our summer Richmond Shakespeare Festival at Agecroft Hall, we play with thirteen. Why not come see us this summer? Call 804-232-4000 or visit [www.richmondshakespeare.com](http://www.richmondshakespeare.com) for more info.*