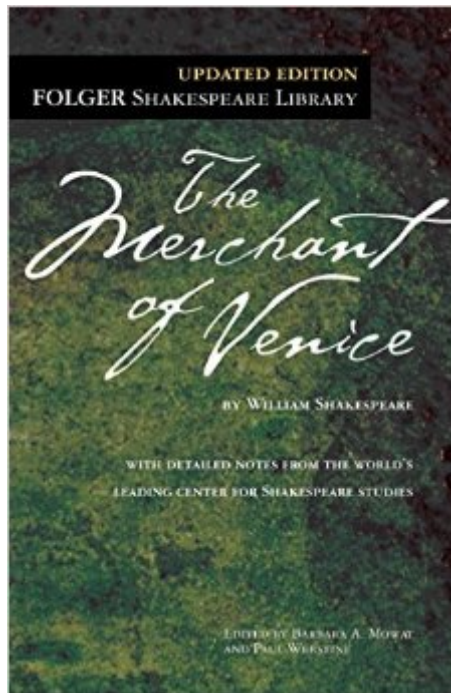


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The Merchant Of Venice (Folger Shakespeare Library)



Synopsis

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the path to marriage is hazardous. To win Portia, Bassanio must pass a test prescribed by her father's will, choosing correctly among three caskets or chests. If he fails, he may never marry at all. Bassanio and Portia also face a magnificent villain, the moneylender Shylock. In creating Shylock, Shakespeare seems to have shared in a widespread prejudice against Jews. Shylock would have been regarded as a villain because he was a Jew. Yet he gives such powerful expression to his alienation due to the hatred around him that, in many productions, he emerges as the hero. Portia is most remembered for her disguise as a lawyer, Balthazar, especially the speech in which she urges Shylock to show mercy that "œdroppeth as the gentle rain from heaven." • The authoritative edition of *The Merchant of Venice* from The Folger Shakespeare Library, the trusted and widely used Shakespeare series for students and general readers, includes:

- Freshly edited text based on the best early printed version of the play
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- An essay by a leading Shakespeare scholar providing a modern perspective on the play
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- An up-to-date annotated guide to further reading

Essay by Alexander Leggatt

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Customer Reviews

I'm not entirely sure how one should set about reviewing a Shakespeare play. I recently reread "The Merchant of Venice" in order to reacquaint myself with the story so that I could read a related book. Despite many critics' beliefs that the play is anti-semitic, "The Merchant of Venice" is a timeless look at the role that material desires can play in our lives. As one of Shakespeare's comedies, there is sure to be the sub-plots that include romantic intrigue and women in disguise. The play begins with the title merchant Antonio and his friend Bassiano making a deal with Shylock, a rich Jew. The deal is that Shylock will sponsor their merchant ships; if their ships should fail, Shylock can enact his revenge on Antonio by procuring one pound of his flesh. Meanwhile, Bassiano has fallen in love with Portia, a rich heiress, and tries to win her hand, while ultimately making sure that his friend Antonio doesn't lose his to Shylock. Granted there is mistreatment of Shylock that is rooted in his Jewishness; but the jibes that are directed toward him deal more so with his attitude toward money than to his heritage. For Shylock is more concerned with his money than he is with his daughter; and when she runs away to marry a Christian, his sole concern is the jewels and money she stole from him. Shylock is a hateful man, not because he is a Jew, but because of his actions (and many seem to miss that). When Bassiano and Antonio's venture fails, Antonio is doomed to die at the hand of Shylock. But in typical Shakespearean comedy fashion, a woman in disguise wins the day and defeats Shylock's supposedly ingenious scheme.

Shylock is the only sympathetic character in the play. Modernity has altered the villain in "The Merchant of Venice" from Shylock to the entire cast of characters EXCEPT for Shylock. Any sense of comedy in the play died for those with a sense of religious tolerance, and Shylock comes off as merely oppressed. I found Act 5 almost nauseating after the forced conversion. That, coupled with the happy racism makes a perversion of decency and happy endings. This play is a tragedy. The recent movie version done starring Al Pacino turned it into a tragedy, and amazingly, a play written as a comedy seems to work very well as a tragedy. Antonio gladly spits upon Shylock and calls him a dog, but stunningly, when Antonio finds himself in a financial pinch he goes to Shylock for money. More brash is Antonio's promise to act the same in the future: "I am as like to call thee so again, / To spet on thee again, to spurn thee, too." (1.3.127-28) From this point on, sympathy for Antonio is paralyzed in a modern reader's mind, from reminders of past images, from slavery and

anti-Semitism, where the dehumanizing of a group of people is accepted by a society. The entire text afterward reads like an indictment of humanity, as if Shakespeare is making the Elizabethans laugh at their own behavior. In perhaps the best argument in Shylock's defense in the trial, he points out the fact that those who speak of mercy own slaves. "What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong? / You have among you many a purchased slave." (4.1.89-90) Shylock, as fanatical as he is over the pound of flesh, is asking for only a pound of a man, when the slaveholders own the entire person. The play is littered with prejudiced remarks that clearly show how animalistic Shylock was to them.

William Shakespeare in the Merchant of Venice, explores again, like so many of his other plays, the difference between vice and virtue, the noble and ignoble. This time out he compares the hero Antonio's acts of mercy with the villain Shylock's desire for justice, the spirit of the law versus the letter of the law. Shakespeare shows throughout the play that he is very confident that Christianity and its followers are superior to Judaism and its followers and quite frankly, his portrayal of the Jewish moneylender Shylock is anti-Semitic and leaves out none of the negative stereotypes. The play seems to be a Christian polemic with its theological interest in Christianity's mercy versus Judaism's justice, as Shakespeare sees it. It may have also been a warning to its audience about the moneylenders of Shakespeare's time. The story is one in which Antonio offers to go into debt for a loan so that his friend Bassanio can have enough money to impress Portia, a woman he wishes to court and marry. Antonio goes into debt to Shylock, a moneylender who demands a pound of his flesh if he cannot pay back the loan. Shylock hates Antonio because Antonio has paid off many loans of his indebted clients and also has badmouthed him as an unethical loan shark, trying to damage Shylock's business. It is the tension of hate between the two, which gives the play an intensity, especially at the climax when Shylock is about to take a pound of his flesh. Also the fear of losing flesh to the moneylender makes for good drama. The character Shylock has some juicy vitriolic lines during the scene. And there is a certain glee Shakespeare builds into the play to see Shylock's "justice" turned against him.

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