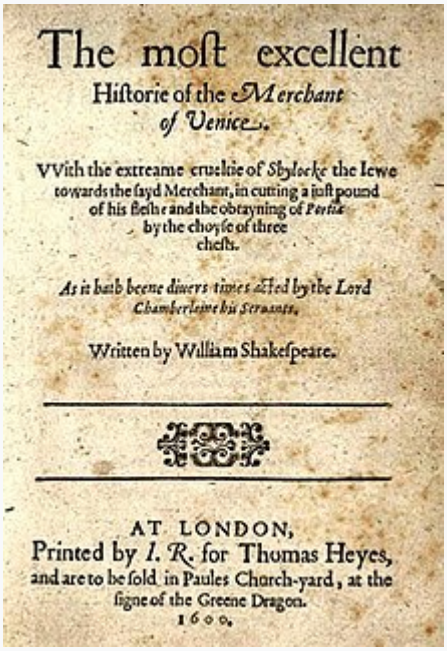
The Merchant of Venice [UNIT-II]


The most excellent
Historie of the Merchant
of Venice.
VVith the extreame cruelitie of Shylocke the Iewe
towards the sayd Merchant, in cutting a iuſt pound
of his flesh: and the obtayning of Portia
by the choyſe of three
cheſts.
As it hath beene diuers times acted by the Lord
Chamberlaine his Seruants.
Written by William Shakeſpeare.
AT LONDON,
Printed by I. R. for Thomas Heyes,
and are to be ſold in Paules Church-yard, at the
ſigne of the Greene Dragon.
1600.

Title page of the first quarto (1600)

Written by	William Shakespeare
Characters	Antonio Shylock Portia Bassanio Jessica
Original language	English
Series	First Folio
Subject	Debt
Genre	Shakespearean comedy
Setting	Venice, 16th century

The Merchant of Venice is a play by William Shakespeare, believed to have been written between 1596 and 1598. A merchant in Venice named Antonio defaults on a large loan taken out on behalf of his dear friend, Bassanio, and provided by a Jewish moneylender, Shylock, with seemingly inevitable fatal consequences.

Although classified as a comedy in the First Folio and sharing certain aspects with Shakespeare's other romantic comedies, the play is most remembered for its dramatic scenes, and it is best known for the character Shylock and his famous demand for a "pound of flesh".

The play contains two famous speeches, that of Shylock, "Hath not a Jew eyes?" on the subject of humanity, and that of Portia on "the quality of mercy". Debate exists on whether the play is anti-Semitic, with Shylock's insistence on his legal right to the pound of flesh being in opposition to his seemingly universal plea for the rights of all people suffering discrimination.

Characters

- Antonio – a prominent merchant of Venice in a melancholic mood
- Bassanio – Antonio's close friend; suitor to Portia; later the husband of Portia
- Gratiano – friend of Antonio and Bassanio; in love with Nerissa; later the husband of Nerissa
- Lorenzo – friend of Antonio and Bassanio; in love with Jessica; later the husband of Jessica
- Portia – a rich heiress; later the wife of Bassanio
- Nerissa – Portia's waiting maid – in love with Gratiano; later the wife of Gratiano; disguises herself as Portia's clerk
- Balthazar – Portia's servant
- Stephano – Portia's servant
- Shylock – a miserly Jew; moneylender; father of Jessica
- Jessica – daughter of Shylock, later the wife of Lorenzo
- Tubal – a Jew; friend of Shylock
- Launcelot Gobbo – servant of Shylock; later a servant of Bassanio; son of Old Gobbo
- Old Gobbo – blind father of Launcelot
- Leonardo – servant to Bassanio
- Duke of Venice – authority who presides over the case of Shylock's bond
- Prince of Morocco – suitor to Portia
- Prince of Arragon – suitor to Portia
- Salarino and Salanio – friends of Antonio and Bassanio
- Salerio – a messenger from Venice; friend of Antonio, Bassanio and others
- Magnificoes of Venice, officers of the Court of Justice, gaolers, servants to Portia, and other attendants
- Doctor Bellario, cousin of Portia, a character by reference who does not appear onstage

Plot summary

Gilbert's *Shylock After the Trial*, an illustration to *The Merchant of Venice*

Bassanio, a young Venetian of noble rank, wishes to woo the beautiful and wealthy heiress Portia of Belmont. Having squandered his estate, he needs 3,000 ducats to subsidise his expenditures as a suitor. Bassanio approaches his friend Antonio, a wealthy merchant of Venice, who has previously and repeatedly bailed him out. Antonio agrees, but since he is cash-poor – his ships and merchandise are busy at sea to Tripolis, the Indies, Mexico and England – he promises to cover a bond if Bassanio can find a lender, so Bassanio turns to the Jewish moneylender Shylock and names Antonio as the loan's guarantor.

Antonio has already antagonized Shylock through his outspoken antisemitism and because Antonio's habit of lending money without interest forces Shylock to charge lower rates. Shylock is at first reluctant to grant the loan, citing abuse he has suffered at Antonio's hand. He finally agrees to lend the sum to Bassanio without interest upon one condition: if Antonio were unable to repay it at the specified date, Shylock may take a pound of Antonio's flesh. Bassanio does not want Antonio to accept such a risky condition; Antonio is surprised by what he sees as the moneylender's generosity (no "usance" – interest – is asked for), and he signs the contract. With money in hand, Bassanio leaves for Belmont with his friend Gratiano, who has asked to accompany him. Gratiano is a likeable young man, but he is often flippant, overly talkative, and tactless. Bassanio warns his companion to exercise self-control, and the two leave for Belmont.

Meanwhile, in Belmont, Portia is awash with suitors. Her father left a will stipulating that each of her suitors must choose correctly from one of three caskets, made of gold, silver and lead respectively. Whoever picks the right casket wins Portia's hand. The first suitor, the Prince of Morocco, chooses the gold casket, interpreting its slogan, "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire",[1] as referring to Portia. The second suitor, the conceited Prince of Aragon, chooses the silver casket, which proclaims, "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves",[2] as he believes he is full of merit. Both suitors leave empty-handed, having rejected the lead casket because of the baseness of its material and the uninviting nature of its slogan, "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath".[3] The last suitor is Bassanio, whom Portia wishes to succeed, having met him before. As Bassanio ponders his choice, members of Portia's household sing a song that says that "fancy" (not true love) is "It is engendered in the eye, / With gazing fed";[4] Bassanio chooses the lead casket and wins Portia's hand.

 A depiction of Jessica, from *The Graphic Gallery of Shakespeare's Heroines*

At Venice, Antonio's ships are reported lost at sea, so the merchant cannot repay the bond. Shylock has become more determined to exact revenge from Christians because his daughter Jessica eloped with the Christian Lorenzo and converted. She took a substantial amount of Shylock's wealth with her, as well as a turquoise ring which Shylock had been given by his late wife, Leah. Shylock has Antonio brought before court.

At Belmont, Bassanio receives a letter telling him that Antonio has been unable to repay the loan from Shylock. Portia and Bassanio marry, as do Gratiano and Portia's handmaid Nerissa. Bassanio and Gratiano leave for Venice, with money from Portia, to save Antonio's life by offering the money to Shylock. Unknown to Bassanio and Gratiano, Portia sent her servant, Balthazar, to seek the counsel of Portia's cousin, Bellario, a lawyer, at Padua.

The climax of the play is set in the court of the Duke of Venice. Shylock refuses Bassanio's offer of 6,000 ducats, twice the amount of the loan. He demands his pound of flesh from Antonio. The Duke, wishing to save Antonio but unable to nullify a contract, refers the case to a visitor. He identifies himself as Balthazar, a young male "doctor of the law", bearing a letter of recommendation to the Duke from the learned lawyer Bellario. The doctor is Portia in disguise, and the law clerk who accompanies her is Nerissa, also disguised as a man. As Balthazar, Portia in a famous speech repeatedly asks Shylock to show mercy, advising him that mercy "is twice blest: / It blesseth him that gives and him that takes."[5] However, Shylock adamantly refuses any compensations and insists on the pound of flesh.

As the court grants Shylock his bond and Antonio prepares for Shylock's knife, Portia deftly appropriates Shylock's argument for "specific performance". She says that the contract allows Shylock to remove only the *flesh*, not the blood, of Antonio.*(see quibble)* Thus, if Shylock were to shed any drop of Antonio's blood, his

"lands and goods" would be forfeited under Venetian laws. She tells him that he must cut precisely one pound of flesh, no more, no less; she advises him that "if the scale do turn / But in the estimation of a hair, / Thou diest, and all thy goods are confiscate."[6]

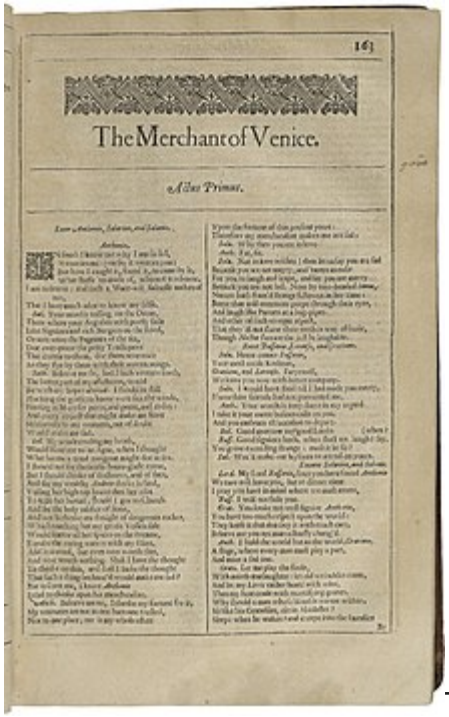
Defeated, Shylock consents to accept Bassanio's offer of money for the defaulted bond: first his offer to pay "the bond thrice", which Portia rebuffs, telling him to take his bond, and then merely the principal; but Portia also prevents him from doing this, on the ground that he has already refused it "in the open court". She cites a law under which Shylock, as a Jew and therefore an "alien", having attempted to take the life of a citizen, has forfeited his property, half to the government and half to Antonio, leaving his life at the mercy of the Duke. The Duke spares Shylock's life and says he may remit the forfeiture. Portia says the Duke may waive the state's share, but not Antonio's. Antonio says he is content that the state waive its claim to half Shylock's wealth if he can have his one-half share "in use" until Shylock's death, when the principal would be given to Lorenzo and Jessica. Antonio also asks that "for this favour" Shylock convert to Christianity and bequeath his entire estate to Lorenzo and Jessica. The Duke then threatens to recant his pardon of Shylock's life unless he accepts these conditions. Shylock, re-threatened with death, accepts with the words, "I am content."[7]

Bassanio does not recognise his disguised wife, but offers to give a present to the supposed lawyer. First she declines, but after he insists, Portia requests his ring and Antonio's gloves. Antonio parts with his gloves without a second thought, but Bassanio gives the ring only after much persuasion from Antonio, as earlier in the play he promised his wife never to lose, sell or give it. Nerissa, as the lawyer's clerk, succeeds in likewise retrieving her ring from Gratiano, who does not see through her disguise.

At Belmont, Portia and Nerissa taunt and pretend to accuse their husbands before revealing they were really the lawyer and his clerk in disguise (V). After all the other characters make amends, Antonio learns from Portia that three of his ships were not stranded and have returned safely after all.

Earlier sources

The title page from a 1565 printing of Giovanni Fiorentino's 14th-century tale *Il Pecorone*



The first page of *The Merchant of Venice*, printed in the Second Folio of 1632

The forfeit of a merchant's deadly bond after standing surety for a friend's loan was a common tale in England in the late 16th century.[8] In addition, the test of the suitors at Belmont, the merchant's rescue from the "pound of flesh" penalty by his friend's new wife disguised as a lawyer, and her demand for the betrothal ring in payment are all elements present in the 14th-century tale *Il Pecorone* by Giovanni Fiorentino, which was published in Milan in 1558.[9] Elements of the trial scene are also found in *The Orator* by Alexandre Sylvane, published in translation in 1596.[8] The story of the three caskets can be found in *Gesta Romanorum*, a collection of tales probably compiled at the end of the 13th century.[10]

Date and text

The date of composition of *The Merchant of Venice* is believed to be between 1596 and 1598. The play was mentioned by Francis Meres in 1598, so it must have been familiar on the stage by that date. The title page of the first edition in 1600 states that it had been performed "divers times" by that date. Salerino's reference to his ship the *Andrew* (I, i, 27) is thought to be an allusion to the Spanish ship *St. Andrew,* captured by the English at Cádiz in 1596. A date of 1596–97 is considered consistent with the play's style.[*citation needed*]

The play was entered in the Register of the Stationers Company, the method at that time of obtaining copyright for a new play, by James Roberts on 22 July 1598 under the title "the Marchaunt of Venyce or otherwise called the Jewe of Venyce."[11] On 28 October 1600 Roberts transferred his right to the play to the stationer Thomas Heyes; Heyes published the first quarto before the end of the year. It was printed again in 1619, as part of William Jaggard's so-called False Folio. (Later, Thomas Heyes' son and heir Laurence Heyes asked for and was granted a confirmation of his right to the play, on 8 July 1619.) The 1600 edition is generally regarded as being accurate and reliable. It is the basis of the text published in the 1623 First Folio, which adds a number of stage directions, mainly musical cues.[12]

Themes

Shylock and the antisemitism debate

The play is frequently staged, but is potentially troubling to modern audiences because of its central themes, which can easily appear antisemitic. Modern critics argue over the play's stance on the Jews and Judaism. American literary critic Harold Bloom argued in 1998 that "one would have to be blind, deaf and dumb not to recognise that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy The Merchant of Venice is nevertheless a profoundly anti-semitic work".[13]

Shylock and Jessica (1876) by Maurycy Gottlieb

Shylock as an antagonist

English society in the Elizabethan and Jacobean era has been described as "judeophobic".[14] English Jews had been expelled under Edward I in 1290 and were not permitted to return until 1656 under the rule of Oliver Cromwell. Poet John Donne, who was Dean of St Paul's Cathedral and a contemporary of Shakespeare, gave a sermon

in 1624 perpetuating the Blood Libel – the entirely unsubstantiated antisemitic lie that Jews ritually murdered Christians to drink their blood and achieve salvation.[15] In Venice and in some other places, Jews were required to wear a yellow or red hat at all times in public to make sure that they were easily identified, and had to live in a ghetto.[16]

Shakespeare's play may be seen as a continuation of this tradition.[17] The title page of the Quarto indicates that the play was sometimes known as *The Jew of Venice* in its day, which suggests that it was seen as similar to Marlowe's early 1590s work *The Jew of Malta*. One interpretation of the play's structure is that Shakespeare meant to contrast the mercy of the main Christian characters with the Old Testament vengefulness of a Jew, who lacks the religious grace to comprehend mercy. Similarly, it is possible that Shakespeare meant Shylock's forced conversion to Christianity to be a "happy ending" for the character, as, to some Christian audiences, it saves his soul and allows him to enter Heaven

Regardless of what Shakespeare's authorial intent may have been, the play has been made use of by antisemites throughout the play's history. The Nazis used the usurious Shylock for their propaganda. Shortly after Kristallnacht in 1938, *The Merchant of Venice* was broadcast for propagandistic ends over the German airwaves. Productions of the play followed in Lübeck (1938), Berlin (1940), and elsewhere within the Nazi territory.[19][*page range too broad*]

In a series of articles called *Observer*, first published in 1785, British playwright Richard Cumberland created a character named Abraham Abrahams, who is quoted as saying, "I verily believe the odious character of Shylock has brought little less persecution upon us, poor scattered sons of Abraham, than the Inquisition itself."[20] Cumberland later wrote a successful play, *The Jew* (1794), in which his title character, Sheva, is portrayed sympathetically, as both a kindhearted and generous man. This was the first known attempt by a dramatist to reverse the negative stereotype that Shylock personified.[21]

The depiction of Jews in literature throughout the centuries bears the close imprint of Shylock. With slight variations much of English literature up until the 20th century depicts the Jew as "a monied, cruel, lecherous, avaricious outsider tolerated only because of his golden hoard".[22]

Shylock as a sympathetic character

 *Shylock and Portia* (1835) by Thomas Sully

Many modern readers and theatregoers have read the play as a plea for tolerance, noting that Shylock is a sympathetic character. They cite as evidence that Shylock's "trial" at the end of the play is a mockery of justice, with Portia acting as a judge when she has no right to do so. The characters who berated Shylock for dishonesty resort to trickery in order to win. In addition to this Shakespeare gives Shylock one of his most eloquent speeches:

SALARINO Why, I am sure if he forfeit, thou wilt not
take his flesh! What's that good for?

SHYLOCK To bait fish withal; if it will feed nothing else,
it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me and
hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses,
mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted
my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies—
and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not
a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions,
senses, affections, passions? Fed with the
same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to
the same diseases, healed by the same means,
warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer
as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not
bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you
poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall
we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will
resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian,
what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong
a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian
example? Why, revenge! The villainy you teach me I

will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

—Act III, scene I, l. 50–72[23]

It is difficult to know whether the sympathetic reading of Shylock is entirely due to changing sensibilities among readers – or whether Shakespeare, a writer who created complex, multi-faceted characters, deliberately intended this reading.

One of the reasons for this interpretation is that Shylock's painful status in Venetian society is emphasised. To some critics, Shylock's celebrated "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech redeems him and even makes him into something of a tragic figure; in the speech, Shylock argues that he is no different from the Christian characters.[24] Detractors note that Shylock ends the speech with a tone of revenge: "if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" Those who see the speech as sympathetic point out that Shylock says he learned the desire for revenge from the Christian characters: "If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction."

Even if Shakespeare did not intend the play to be read this way, the fact that it retains its power on stage for audiences who may perceive its central conflicts in radically different terms is an illustration of the subtlety of Shakespeare's characterisations.[25] In the trial Shylock represents what Elizabethan Christians believed to be the Jewish desire for "justice", contrasted with their obviously superior Christian value of mercy. The Christians in the courtroom urge Shylock to love his enemies, although they themselves have failed in the past. Jewish critic Harold Bloom suggests that, although the play gives merit to both cases, the portraits are not even-handed: "Shylock's shrewd indictment of Christian hypocrisy delights us, but ... Shakespeare's intimations do not alleviate the savagery of his portrait of the Jew..."[26]


Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree as Shylock, painted by Charles Buchel (1895–1935)

Antonio, Bassanio

Antonio's unexplained depression – "In sooth I know not why I am so sad" – and utter devotion to Bassanio has led some critics to theorise that he is suffering from unrequited love for Bassanio and is depressed because Bassanio is coming to an age where he will marry a woman. In his plays and poetry Shakespeare often depicted strong male bonds of varying homosociality, which has led some critics to infer that Bassanio returns Antonio's affections despite his obligation to marry:[27]

ANTONIO […]
Commend me to your honorable wife,
Tell her the process of Antonio's end,
Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death,
And when the tale is told, bid her be judge
Whether Bassanio had not once a love.
[…]

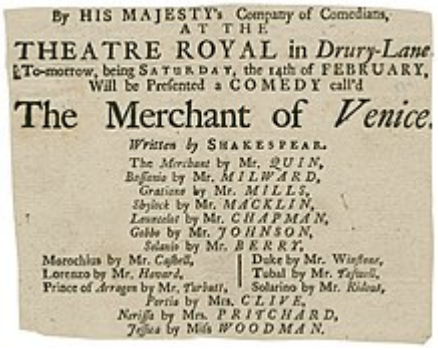
BASSANIO […]
But life itself, my wife, and all the world
Are not with me esteemed above thy life.
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.

—*The Merchant of Venice. Act 4, scene 1, ll. 285–298*[28]

In his essay "Brothers and Others", published in *The Dyer's Hand,* W. H. Auden describes Antonio as "a man whose emotional life, though his conduct may be chaste, is concentrated upon a member of his own sex." Antonio's feelings for Bassanio are likened to a couplet from Shakespeare's *Sonnets*: "But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,/ Mine be thy love, and my love's use their treasure." Antonio,

says Auden, embodies the words on Portia's leaden casket: "Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath." Antonio has taken this potentially fatal turn because he despairs, not only over the loss of Bassanio in marriage but also because Bassanio cannot requite what Antonio feels for him. Antonio's frustrated devotion is a form of idolatry: the right to live is yielded for the sake of the loved one. There is one other such idolator in the play: Shylock himself. "Shylock, however unintentionally, did, in fact, hazard all for the sake of destroying the enemy he hated, and Antonio, however unthinkingly he signed the bond, hazarded all to secure the happiness of the man he loved." Both Antonio and Shylock, agreeing to put Antonio's life at a forfeit, stand outside the normal bounds of society. There was, states Auden, a traditional "association of sodomy with usury", reaching back at least as far as Dante, with which Shakespeare was likely familiar. (Auden sees the theme of usury in the play as a comment on human relations in a mercantile society.)

Other interpreters of the play regard Auden's conception of Antonio's sexual desire for Bassanio as questionable. Michael Radford, director of the 2004 film version starring Al Pacino, explained that, although the film contains a scene where Antonio and Bassanio actually kiss, the friendship between the two is platonic, in line with the prevailing view of male friendship at the time. Jeremy Irons, in an interview, concurs with the director's view and states that he did not "play Antonio as gay". Joseph Fiennes, however, who plays Bassanio, encouraged a homoerotic interpretation and, in fact, surprised Irons with the kiss on set, which was filmed in one take. Fiennes defended his choice, saying "I would never invent something before doing my detective work in the text. If you look at the choice of language ... you'll read very sensuous language. That's the key for me in the relationship. The great thing about Shakespeare and why he's so difficult to pin down is his ambiguity. He's not saying they're gay or they're straight, he's leaving it up to his actors. I feel there has to be a great love between the two characters ... there's great attraction. I don't think they have slept together but that's for the audience to decide."[29]


By HIS MAJESTY's Company of Comedians,
AT THE
THEATRE ROYAL in *Drury-Lane*.
To-morrow, being SATURDAY, the 14th of FEBRUARY,
Will be Presented a COMEDY call'd
The Merchant of *Venice*.
Written by SHAKESPEAR.
The Merchant by Mr. QUIN,
Baſſanio by Mr. MILWARD,
Gratiano by Mr. MILLS,
Shylock by Mr. MACKLIN,
Launcelot by Mr. CHAPMAN,
Gobbo by Mr. JOHNSON,
Solanio by Mr. BERRY,
Morochius by Mr. Cafbell, | Duke by Mr. Winſour,
Lorenzo by Mr. Howard, | Tubal by Mr. Taſwell,
Prince of Arragon by Mr. Turbutt, | Salarino by Mr. Ridout,
Portia by Mrs. CLIVE,
Neriſſa by Mrs. PRITCHARD,
Jeſſica by Miſs WOODMAN.

The playbill from a 1741 production at the Theatre Royal of Drury Lane

Performance history

The earliest performance of which a record has survived was held at the court of King James in the spring of 1605, followed by a second performance a few days later, but there is no record of any further performances in the 17th century.[30] In 1701, George Granville staged a successful adaptation, titled *The Jew of Venice*, with Thomas

Betterton as Bassanio. This version (which featured a masque) was popular, and was acted for the next forty years. Granville cut the clownish Gobbos[31] in line with neoclassical decorum; he added a jail scene between Shylock and Antonio, and a more extended scene of toasting at a banquet scene. Thomas Doggett was Shylock, playing the role comically, perhaps even farcically. Rowe expressed doubts about this interpretation as early as 1709; Doggett's success in the role meant that later productions would feature the troupe clown as Shylock.

In 1741, Charles Macklin returned to the original text in a very successful production at Drury Lane, paving the way for Edmund Kean seventy years later (see below).[32]

Arthur Sullivan wrote incidental music for the play in 1871.[33] As part of the 500 year anniversary of the Venetian Ghetto, which converged with the 400 year anniversary of Shakespeare's death, *The Merchant of Venice* was performed in the ghetto main square in 2016 by the Compagnia de' Colombari.[34][35]:141–142


A print of Edmund Kean as Shylock in an early 19th-century performance

Shylock on stage

: Shylock

Jewish actor Jacob Adler and others report that the tradition of playing Shylock sympathetically began in the first half of the 19th century with Edmund Kean,[36] and that previously the role had been played "by a comedian as a repulsive clown or, alternatively, as a monster of unrelieved evil." Kean's Shylock established his reputation as an actor.[37]

From Kean's time forward, all of the actors who have famously played the role, with the exception of Edwin Booth, who played Shylock as a simple villain, have chosen a sympathetic approach to the character; even Booth's father, Junius Brutus Booth, played the role sympathetically. Henry Irving's portrayal of an aristocratic, proud Shylock (first seen at the Lyceum in 1879, with Portia played by Ellen Terry) has been called "the summit of his career".[38] Jacob Adler was the most notable of the early 20th

century: Adler played the role in Yiddish-language translation, first in Manhattan's Yiddish Theater District in the Lower East Side, and later on Broadway, where, to great acclaim, he performed the role in Yiddish in an otherwise English-language production.[39]

Kean and Irving presented a Shylock justified in wanting his revenge; Adler's Shylock evolved over the years he played the role, first as a stock Shakespearean villain, then as a man whose better nature was overcome by a desire for revenge, and finally as a man who operated not from revenge but from pride. In a 1902 interview with *Theater* magazine, Adler pointed out that Shylock is a wealthy man, "rich enough to forgo the interest on three thousand ducats" and that Antonio is "far from the chivalrous gentleman he is made to appear. He has insulted the Jew and spat on him, yet he comes with hypocritical politeness to borrow money of him." Shylock's fatal flaw is to depend on the law, but "would he not walk out of that courtroom head erect, the very apotheosis of defiant hatred and scorn?"[40]

Some modern productions take further pains to show the sources of Shylock's thirst for vengeance. For instance, in the 2004 film adaptation directed by Michael Radford and starring Al Pacino as Shylock, the film begins with text and a montage of how Venetian Jews are cruelly abused by bigoted Christians. One of the last shots of the film also brings attention to the fact that, as a convert, Shylock would have been cast out of the Jewish community in Venice, no longer allowed to live in the ghetto. Another interpretation of Shylock and a vision of how "must he be acted" appears at the conclusion of the autobiography[*clarification needed*] of Alexander Granach, a noted Jewish stage and film actor in Weimar Germany (and later in Hollywood and on Broadway).[41]