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# William Shakespeare

## The Merchant of Venice



Title: The Merchant of Venice

Author: William Shakespeare

Format: Kindle Edition

Language:

Pages: 0

Publisher: , 0

ISBN:

Format: PDF / Kindle / ePub

Size: 6 MB

Download: allowed

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## Description

The Merchant of Venice is a play by William Shakespeare, believed to have been written between 1596 and 1598. Though classified as a comedy in the First Folio and sharing certain aspects with Shakespeare's other romantic comedies, the play is perhaps most remembered for its dramatic scenes, and is best known for Shylock and the famous "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech. Also notable is Portia's speech about "the quality of mercy".

## Insightful reviews

Ahmed Ramadan: ??? ?? ??? ?????? ??? ????? ?????? ??? ??? ?????? ??????? ????? ?? ?????? .. ?  
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Joe Valdez: My game plan for revisiting Shakespeare was to stream video of a staging of the play, listening and watching, while reading along to as much of the original text as was incorporated by the staging. Later, I read the entire play in the modern English version.

The staging I found for *The Merchant of Venice* was the 2004 film adapted and directed by Michael Radford. The cast boasts Al Pacino as Shylock, Jeremy Irons as Antonio, Joseph Fiennes as Bassanio, Lynn Collins as Portia, Kris Marshall as Gratiano and Zuleikha Robinson as Jessica. The film uses a pre-title sequence in an attempt to put the anti-semitism of the play into historical context. Irons is the strongest force in the picture, easily besting Pacino, though the film never finds a way to squeeze around the elephant in the room, which is the unfortunate bigotry at the core of the play.

It's believed that Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* in 1596 and entered it in the Stationers' Register two years later. There's no indication of when the first public performance might have been, but there is evidence that cuts may have been made by the theater companies along the way. For example, the masque that Bassanio and Gratiano expend much effort preparing for is never staged in the printed version of the play and may have been cut.

Antonio, a merchant bored by his business enterprises, is visited by Bassanio, a Venetian scholar who's squandered an inheritance, exposing himself to creditors. Bassanio seeks a loan from Antonio so he may embark to Belmont and woo Portia, a heiress of magnificent beauty. The would-be lovers have met before, and upon the death of Portia's father, she's been betrothed to the first suitor who can correctly choose whether a box of gold, silver or lead contains her portrait. While Bassanio is motivated by love, he's not blind to the financial

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incentives of marrying up and paying his debts down.

Unable to raise cash while his investments are at sea, Antonio agrees to serve as guarantor to Bassanio as an act of friendship. For a loan of three thousand gold ducats, the men seek out the money changer Shylock. As a Jew, Shylock has drawn the contempt of Antonio and most of the Christians in Venice for practicing usury. Feeling profoundly disrespected, Shylock proposes that rather than pay an interest rate, Antonio surrender a pound of his flesh in the event that he cannot repay the loan in three months.

Shylock's daughter Jessica elopes to her Christian lover Lorenzo, fleeing Venice with her father's jewels and converting to Christianity. Shylock's servant Lancelot is equally displeased with the Jew's evil ways and offers his services to Bassanio. The Venetian sails to Belmont with his bawdy friend Gratiano, where they are reunited with Portia and her maid Nerissa. Penny wise but pound foolish, her previous suitors have selected poorly, but to Portia's delight, Bassanio correctly selects the lead box ("The world is still deceived with ornament"). Gratiano uses the occasion to propose marriage to Nerissa.

Before the weddings can commence, news arrives that Antonio's ships have been lost at sea. Shylock, consumed by his daughter's treachery, seeks justice and fully intends to have his pound of flesh from Antonio. A hearing is set before the Duke of Venice. Anticipating that Bassanio's offer to repay Antonio's debt by double will be rejected by Shylock, Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves as men and posing as a doctor of law and his clerk, give the court expert testimony that will free Antonio from sacrificing his flesh, while destroying Shylock in the process. But while under disguise, the women test how far their prospective husbands are willing to go to repay debts between men.

In Shakespeare's text, it's difficult to get around the bigotry at the core of *The Merchant of Venice*. In the 16th century, Jews had been banned from England for 200 years, so it's unlikely that Shakespeare had ever met one, only heard rumors about their tribe and as such, "Jew" is synonymous with "devil" as far as the play is concerned. Shylock's ill-treatment is addressed, but no more than Hannibal Lechter's harsh treatment by Dr. Chilton is acknowledged in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Shylock is evil incarnate based solely on his faith and his practice of usury. This casts a pallor over the play.

In spite of its Old World anti-semitism, and maybe because of it, the play retains power. It's filled with some of the best dialogue Shakespeare ever wrote and features one of his strongest female characters, Portia. It's very much a feminist work. Relegating Shylock to a stock villain role and imagining the play as a courtroom drama, with the noble and guile heiress in the lead role, *The Merchant of Venice* improves dramatically. The questions posed by Shakespeare are timeless. Is wealth a matter of good fortune, or cleverness? Is a prosperous marriage a matter of luck, or deviousness? Is a promise a promise, or does the context come into play?

These are moral questions that artists have been posing for ages and continue to pose. There's a great scene in *The Wild Bunch* where William Holden and Ernest Borgnine debate the treachery of their former comrade played by Robert Ryan, who's hired himself out to the railroad to help hunt them down. Holden stands up for Ryan, maintaining that he gave his word to his

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new employer. A man's word is his word, even if it's to the thieving railroad corporation. Borgnine contends, "It's not that you give your word! It's who you give it TO that counts!" Context matters. Or is a bond a bond?

Reading the play in modern English, with Portia's intelligence and Shakespeare's moral questions coming into much sharper focus, I'd rate this at four and a half stars, rounding up to five stars. It's an incendiary work that makes some great calls to go along with a couple of blown ones, but lines like "All that glitters is not gold" have survived the centuries for a reason.

Vane J.: Most of the books I read before 2012 live in a part of my brain that I'm going to call my "dead zone," just as Johnny, in Stephen King's *The Dead Zone*, did for the things he knows happened but cannot remember. Continuing with the allegory, the books in my "dead zone" are books that I know I read but which I cannot remember what happened in them, what message they carried, etc. The point is, *The Merchant of Venice* lives in my "dead zone."

I read *The Merchant of Venice* in 2011. The only things I remembered before this re-read was that there was a Jew named Shylock and that he lost everything he had in the end. And well, I was not wrong about that: There was indeed a Jew named Shylock. What I didn't remember is that this play is one of Shakespeare's most controversial ones.

I say this play is controversial, but why do I affirm it? Well, Shylock is presented as two kinds of people. One, he's just an usurer who hates everything that has the word "Christian" imprinted upon it; and two, he's just a man suffering the consequences of living in a society in which he's not treated equally:

*"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 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."*

In the end, he's the "villain" and Antonio and the other ones continue their lives happily ... and this is supposed to be comical. In my opinion, it is tragic. Just as what happened with *The Taming of the Shrew*, I am not able to see what Shakespeare meant with this play—and unfortunately, he's not anymore alive for us to ask him his purpose. To be honest, I'm still not sure if I completely understand this play.



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Lola : three 0.5 stars.This overview includes large spoilers.Well... I definitely didn't anticipate that ending. i did not think Portia to be one to provide moment chances, particularly after seeing her scheming to find who's extra vital to Bassanio, herself or Antonio. It troubled me to work out her tricking Bassanio with out repent. Incidentally, i think unhappy for Antonio. In my opinion, he did need to turn out wealthy... yet now not alone. comparable for Shylock, even supposing i will not forget about his exhibiting cruelty rather than mercy. Redemption was once hardly ever an alternative he considered, yet still, he was once left with nothing... They took clear of him one of many issues that used to be most vital to him: his religion. He wasn't a immense villain to me, only a very vindictive and avaricious man. His priorities were not ones I agreed with.A solid play, in sum. Antonio + Bassanio = ?

Karim Mohamed: ????? ?? ?????? ??? ??? ?? ????? ?????? ?????????? ? ??? ?? ??? ??? ??? ??? "?????" ? "???? ??????????" ? ?????? ?????????? ?????????? .. ????? ??? ??????.??? "?????" ?? ????? ?????? ? ?? ????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????????? ?????????? ?????? ??? .. ?? ??? ????? ?????? ?? ??? "????? ??????????"..?? ?????? ?????????? ?????? ?????????? ??? three ?????? ?? ??????? ??? ? ??? ?? ?????? ?????? ?????????? ?????? ?????????? ??????? "?????????" ?????? ?? ??? ?? ?????? ??? ?????????? ?????????? ?????? ?????? ?????????? ..???? ??? ?????? ??? ?????? ??? ??? ?????????? ?? ??? three ?????????? ?????????? "?????" ? "?????" ? ?????? ??????????" .. ?????? ?? ?????????? ? ?????? ??? ??? ?????? ?? ?????? ??????????..?? ?????? ?????????? ?? ??? ??? "?????"..?? ?? ??? ?????????? ? ??? ??? ?? ?????? ?? ??? ?????????? ?????????? ???!!

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