

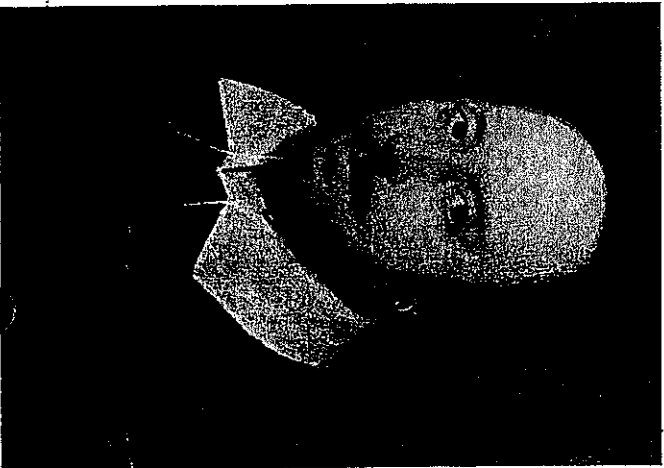
INTRODUCTION

By 1596 or 1597, when *The Merchant of Venice* was probably written and first performed, William Shakespeare was an experienced man of the theatre and a famous and skilful writer. He had already written *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Richard III*, for example, and had published the long poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, which brought him to the attention of possible wealthy patrons. On 22 July 1598 a book of *The Merchant of Venice* or otherwise called *The Jew of Venice* was entered in the Stationer's Register (an official list of all printed books), probably in an attempt by Shakespeare's acting company, The Lord Chamberlain's Men, to stop it from being printed by anyone else.

SOURCES

Just as with so many of his plays, Shakespeare took ideas from a lot of different places to make a new and fascinating story. There is a tale in a book called *Il Pecorone* by the Italian writer Ser Giovanni, which gave Shakespeare some basic ideas for his play.

William Shakespeare, an oil painting, probably by John Taylor and dated 1610. It hangs in the National Portrait Gallery.



Il Pecorone - which means 'the big sheep' or 'the fool' - was published in 1558. As it wasn't translated into English, Shakespeare quite possibly read it in Italian. But the idea of the three caskets, which Portia's suitors must choose between, doesn't come from this story. It appears in a lot of tales, and Shakespeare probably found it in Italian or English collections of stories such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* or John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*.

In writing a play about a Jew, Shakespeare was following a trend.



Christopher Marlowe had had a great success in 1589 with *The Jew of Malta*, and Shakespeare may well have got the idea of a Jewish girl marrying a Christian (as *Jessica* marries *Lorenzo*) from that play. There were other plays about Jews at this time too.

PREJUDICE

Most Londoners would never have seen a Jew. People in the once thriving Jewish community had been expelled as long ago as 1290, after many years of being forced to wear a yellow badge to mark them out. Prejudice grew out of ignorance. Although a few had returned, including a pocket of Portuguese Jews, on the whole they were seen as strange and different, and hated as the people held responsible for the death of Jesus.

Shakespeare's *Shylock* is a much more complex character than Marlowe's Jew, Barabas.

Part of a woodcut said to be by Jacopo de' Barbari, 1500, showing a bird's-eye view of Venice.

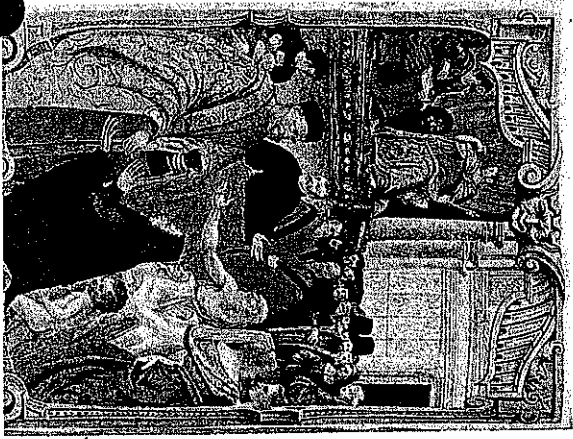
But some people believe the play is deeply anti-Semitic. They feel it is a play which should no longer be performed because it repeats and reinforces prejudices about Jews. Others see *Shylock* as a tragic figure, trapped by prejudice and driven to revenge by the treatment he gets.

The Merchant of Venice is one of Shakespeare's most disturbing creations. The playwright's insight into human nature never fails to surprise and puzzle his audience. The play is full of joy and energy but it is never far away from darkness and pain. It deals with serious matters, and yet can be wonderfully funny. Above all it asks questions about trust and tolerance which remain as fresh and as challenging now as when it was written.

Read

MERCHANTS AND MONEYLENDERS

In 1598 the play was described as '... *The Merchant of Venice* or otherwise called *The Jew of Venice*'. It was printed in 1600 as *The Comical History of the Merchant of Venice*. The various titles give an indication of the range of ideas in the play. Is the central character Antonio, the merchant, or Shylock, the Jew, who is a moneylender? Is it right to call the play a comedy? While some characters find love and happiness, others go off to loneliness and despair. Even those who do live happily ever after have had painful experiences which make them sadder and wiser. Above all the play is about trade, making deals and taking chances, honesty and trust, and justice and mercy.



THE MERCHANTS AND THE JEWS OF VENICE

For hundreds of years the harbours of Venice on the east coast of Italy had been at the centre of trade between Europe and the Orient. Venetian merchants bought silks and spices (especially pepper), jewellery, fine pottery, silver, dyes and medicines from Turkey, the Middle East, and even China. They sold them at a great profit to the countries of northern Europe. Christian merchants like Antonio needed to borrow money to set up the trading expeditions that would make them rich.

Although the Jews of Europe were barred from many ways of earning a living, they were allowed to lend money for profit (called usury), and merchants turned to Jews when they needed loans. The moneylenders charged interest on the loan so merchants had to pay back more than they originally borrowed, but this would easily have been covered by the profits they made from their trade.

An illustration of a Venetian nobleman promising to keep the laws of Venice, from a book called *Giuramento of the Procurator Girolamo Zane*. The artist is unknown, but the picture is dated about 1570. It is illuminated on vellum.

THE MERCHANT OF STRATFORD

William Shakespeare's father, John, was a merchant in Stratford. Not only did he make high quality white leather goods, he also traded in other things - buying cheaply and selling at a profit. John Shakespeare was a moneylender as well, at a time when usury was still illegal, although essential for trading. In the early 1590s, John's fortunes declined and he was afraid of being arrested for debt. When Shakespeare wrote about trade and moneylending in *The Merchant of Venice*, he was exploring a world he knew from the inside, and was aware of its risks as well as its glamour.

Christians relied on Jews for a supply of money, but could Jews rely on Christians? Jews were tolerated as moneylenders but they were quickly blamed when things went wrong. They had little protection in law, and public opinion was against them. Does Shylock feel he must drive a hard bargain because he can't trust the merchant to keep the deal? And why does Antonio accept 'a pound of flesh' as the terms of the loan? Perhaps he so much wants to help Bassanio, is so sure of the return of his fleet of ships, and is so scornful of Shylock, that he doesn't take it seriously.

The play is about a Christian and a Jew, a merchant and a moneylender. Shakespeare shows us two men each of whom has something the other wants. Shylock has the money Antonio needs; Antonio has the respect and social standing that Shylock, as a Jew, cannot have.

Portia (Penny Downie) and Bassanio (Owen Teale) in David Thacker's production for the RSC, 1993.



Read