

Delaware Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* Pre-Show Guide

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DELAWARE
SHAKESPEARE
COMMUNITY TOUR 2018

**THE
MERCHANT
OF VENICE**

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PLAY SYNOPSIS:

Portia, the heiress of Belmont, has attracted the attention of many would-be suitors. Among these is the noble but penniless Bassanio, a Venetian gentleman. Believing he would have no hope of winning Portia's hand without adequate funds for wooing, he borrows 3,000 ducats from his merchant friend Antonio. Unfortunately, Antonio's money is tied up in shipping, and so Bassanio seeks out Shylock, a Jewish moneylender in Venice, for a loan.

Shylock and Antonio are not on friendly terms, because Antonio has publicly shamed Shylock for his moneylending—a business Antonio detests (it is against Christian law to charge interest for money loaned, but the same stipulation is not found in Jewish law). However, Shylock suspects it is his Jewishness that is the real cause of Antonio's hatred. To Antonio's surprise, Shylock agrees to the loan interest-free, but suggests "in merry sport" that Antonio sign a bond that will permit Shylock to slice a pound of flesh from Antonio's body if the loan is not repaid within three months. Certain that at least one of his merchant vessels will return before that time, Antonio signs the bond and turns the needed funds over to Bassanio, who leaves at once for Belmont with his friend Gratiano.

The matter of wooing Portia is more complicated than he knew, Bassanio soon learns. Her deceased father has decreed that all suitors must choose from a gold, a silver, or a lead casket (chest). If the suitor unlocks the casket containing Portia's portrait, she becomes his bride.

Bassanio is the lucky suitor, to Portia's delight, and so she gives him a ring as a token of her love which he vows to wear forever. Likewise, her maid Nerissa gives a ring to Gratiano, who has successfully wooed her. Soon after, Lorenzo, another friend of Bassanio's, arrives with Jessica, Shylock's daughter, who has deserted her father (to his dismay and sorrow) and eloped with Lorenzo, a Christian.

Word soon comes that none of Antonio's ships has arrived, and that Shylock is appealing to the Venetian courts for his pound of flesh. Bassanio and Gratiano return immediately to Venice to help Antonio.

Portia devises a plan of her own, and, disguising herself as a young male lawyer with Nerissa as her clerk, arrives at court to judge Antonio and Shylock's case. At first, she attempts to soften Shylock's heart with her famous speech on mercy. When Shylock is not convinced, Portia changes her approach and instructs Antonio to bare his bosom in order that the agreed upon pound of flesh may be extracted. Shylock may take his pound of flesh, she agrees, but he is forbidden to spill even one drop of blood, upon pain of death. Shylock relents, but Portia then points out that he is liable to have his property confiscated and be executed by Venetian law, because, as a Jewish person, he is considered an alien who plotted the death of a Venetian citizen. The Duke allows him to live, but decrees that Antonio is to have half of Shylock's wealth and the other half shall go to the city.

Antonio counters with the deal that Shylock might keep half of his estate, but the other half shall go to Lorenzo and Jessica upon Shylock's death. For added measure, Antonio insists that Shylock must also become a Christian. Shylock leaves the courtroom disgraced and facing impending baptism.

As a test of the devotion of their husbands, Portia and Nerissa, still disguised, insist upon the rings Bassanio and Gratiano were given as tokens of gratitude for their legal services. The two suitors reluctantly agree, and the two young women hurry back to Belmont where they await the return of their husbands. The two young wives demand proof that the rings were not given to rivals, but soon relent as they relate the story of the disguises and the trial and return the rings to their husbands.

The play concludes as word arrives that Antonio's rich cargo vessels have actually landed safely.

(Edited version of Utah Shakespeare's synopsis of The Merchant of Venice)

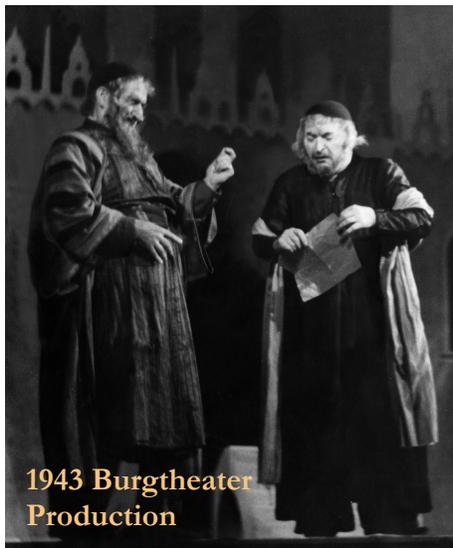
PRODUCTION HISTORY

It is no secret that Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is one of Shakespeare's most divisive plays. Depending upon who has their hands on the text, *Merchant* has been used both as a treatise against antisemitism and as propaganda to disparage Jewish people and further cement them as outcasts. But the tactics employed by theatre companies to espouse their ideologies is important to note while we consider the product of their efforts.

***The Merchant of Venice* in Nazi Germany and the 1943 Production at the Burgtheater in Vienna**

Shakespeare was a beloved playwright in Germany, even throughout World War II. But when the war began in earnest, Shakespeare's place on the stage was on shaky ground, and a case had to be made for *The Merchant of Venice* to be staged at all as a tool for anti-Semitic propaganda. Nazis saw the stage as a distasteful place to display political agendas, even if those agendas aligned with Nazi ideology; the government preferred film for these purposes. After March 1941, all of productions of Shakespeare's works had to be approved by the Reichsdramaturgie, an office that served as the chief theatre censor during the Third Reich; the playwright's entire canon was even banned for nearly a year. While many tragedies like *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Troilus and Cressida* remained either banned or left untouched by theatre companies, the comedies began to make a reappearance, because they were considered politically harmless.

As for *The Merchant of Venice*, it does make sense to assume that it would be a favorite in Nazi Germany due to the explorations of anti-Semitism in the text. But aspects of *Merchant* clashed with



**1943 Burgtheater
Production**

Nazi principles, even as the anti-Semitic nature of it seemed to uphold them. One of the biggest “problems” of the plot was Jessica and Lorenzo’s love story, because it was decreed illegal in Nazi-occupied countries for Jewish people to have relations with non-Jews, and to display that relationship on stage would have been politically disastrous. But the Reichsdramaturgie made an adaptation of *Merchant* in 1939 to make it “appropriate” for staging, with the biggest changes as follows:

- Jessica became Shylock’s foster daughter instead of a daughter by blood, and all mentions of her Jewishness are erased.
- Any text that could garner sympathy for Shylock were removed, including the famous “Hath not a Jew eyes” speech in Act 3, scene 1.

What seems like minor alterations actually led to significant changes to the text (a total of eighteen textual manipulations), which flew in the face of the Nazi’s creed of “werktrue” or “faithfulness to the text.” Therefore, the Reichsdramaturgie did not promote their adaptation nor particularly encourage theatre companies to take on *Merchant* as part of their seasons. So, when companies did decide to produce *Merchant* with the intent of spreading anti-Semitic propaganda, they did it from a place of self-interest rather than government pressure.

This is true of the most notorious Third Reich production of *The Merchant of Venice*, performed at the Burgtheater in Vienna in 1943. Lothar Müthel, a well-known director, and Werner Krauss, an actor known for his work in the anti-Semitic propaganda film *Jew Süß*, were vocal

supporters of the Nazi party, and the two teamed up to produce their infamous production under the supposed behest of the Nazi-governor of Vienna. Müthel borrowed from the Reichsdramaturgie adaptation, but the lion's share of the offensiveness was taken up by Krauss, who had made a career out playing Jewish men during the rise of the Nazi regime. He played the role of Shylock, emphasizing with ruthless zeal the most harmful and base stereotypes heaped onto Jewish people. When writing of Krauss's Shylock, one reviewer described his performance as follows: "With a crash and a weird train of shadows, something revoltingly alien and startingly repulsive crawled across the stage." Though a fearful description, Krauss's Shylock was largely received as a buffoon, suggesting that Müthel and Krauss were aiming to have the character be a mockery rather than a cautionary tale warning their countryman of the monstrous Jewish people. By the time their production was staged, the Jews of Germany, Vienna, and other Nazi-occupied territories had mostly been eradicated, so the "threat" of Jewish people had already been neutralized. This production was a celebration of triumphs against Jewish people, and Nazis could now sit back and enjoy a dramatized defeat of a man they could relish mocking.

The other side of the coin: A History *The Merchant of Venice* and Jewish Theatre Companies

Just as it is possible to turn *The Merchant of Venice* into anti-Semitic propaganda, one can flip the narrative and highlight the ills done to Shylock and to outsiders in general. Many Western theatre companies have interpreted the play in this way, and Jewish theatre companies have even taken on *Merchant* as a way of reclaiming it

Not long after *Julius Caesar* became the first Shakespeare play translated into Yiddish, a language spoken by many Jews at the time in Europe and America, Joseph Bovshover translated *The Merchant of Venice* into a Yiddish prose version in 1899. Another successful Yiddish adaptation was staged in New York in 1901 and 1903, starring Joseph Adler as a Shylock. Adler saw Shylock as a man of 'high intellect and proud convictions', with a grandeur derived from suffering.



In 1946 the New Yiddish Theatre Company staged *The Merchant of Venice* at the Adler Hall, Whitechapel in the heart of London's East End – a brave decision considering WWII had just concluded in 1945 and the horror of the Nazis' treatment of the Jews was in the forefront of people's minds. As John Gross writes in *Shylock* (1992), it was as if the company was saying, 'We are still here. And we are not afraid to confront *The Merchant of Venice*, with all its problems' (p. 258).

In spite of this reclamation, the New Yiddish Theatre's production of 1946 was the last Yiddish *Merchant of Venice* to be performed in Britain.

*(Compiled from Dr. Aviva Dautch's article "A Jewish Reading of the *The Merchant of Venice*")*

SHAKESPEARE'S VENICE, HIS ENGLAND, AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE THAT LIVED IN BOTH

Venice loomed large for the Elizabethans – it was basically the New York City of its day. It was considered to be a place of commerce, sensuality, and festivity, making it for English imaginations. And with the amount of business going on between Venice and London at the time, most of its citizens would have some knowledge of what Venice might be like, even if they didn't have first-hand experience with visiting it; word of mouth and written texts about Venice were powerful tools.

Realities for Jewish people in Venice

Jewish people have a long history with Venice. At times Venice was one of the few places where Jewish people were allowed to live and work, but officials of the city also ostracized and expelled them at different points throughout the centuries.

While Jews did not settle in Venice until the 13th century, many Jewish merchants and moneylenders visited and worked in the city beginning with the 10th century. In 1252, Jews were not allowed to settle in the main part of the city, so they settled on the island of Spinaulunga.

In 1290, Jewish merchants and moneylenders were allowed to work in Venice but were forced to pay a special tax of five percent on all their import and export transactions. The Jewish moneylenders received permission to settle in the city in 1385.



Venetian Jews and the badges they were forced to wear

The Senate decided to expel the Jews from the city in 1394 due to fears of Jewish encroachment in certain economic spheres, but they were allowed to work in the city for limited two-week intervals. Those who were not moneylenders were allowed to remain in the city, albeit with certain restrictions. Jews were forced to wear various markings on their clothing to identify themselves as Jews. In 1394 they had to wear a yellow badge, it was changed to a yellow hat in 1496 and to a red hat in 1500. Other anti-Jewish laws including the prohibition against owning land (enacted in 1423) and from building a synagogue (enacted in 1426). On occasion, Jews were forced to attend Christian services or become baptized. Anti-Jewish feelings were prevalent, and three Jews died in a blood libel in 1480 and more died after another libel in 1506.

In 1516 Venice's ruling council debated whether Jews should be allowed to remain in the city. They decided to let the Jews remain, but their residence would be confined to Ghetto Nuova, a small, dirty island; it became the world's first ghetto.

Further restrictions were placed on Jews living in the ghetto. They were only allowed to leave during the day and were locked inside at night. Jews were only permitted to work at pawn shops, act as money lenders, work the Hebrew printing press, trade in textiles or practice medicine.

What is moneylending?

Money lending is the practice of giving cash loans or supplying goods or services that are then repaid at a level of interest over a short period of time. Historically, Jewish people engaged in moneylending due to the high demand for lenders and the potential steady profits the career could yield. At times, however, they were forced into the practice by others or condemned for it, even as their accusers would come to them seeking their services.

Detailed banking laws kept their interest rates low and made life difficult for many of the poor pawnbrokers and moneylenders.

Once they left the ghetto they still had to wear distinguishing clothing, such as a yellow circle or scarf. Jews were faced with high taxes and the Talmud, the source of Jewish religious law and theology, was burned in 1553, due to arguments between two Venetian printing companies. Hebrew books were not allowed to be printed for the next thirteen years, however, the Jewish printing press and publishing companies continued to thrive until the early 19th century. One period that was particularly difficult for Venetian Jews was during the 1570's, after the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 (only 25 years before Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*). Jews were blamed for the war, and expulsion threats were made.

Despite the poor living conditions, Jewish community life continued to grow inside the ghetto. Life centered around Jewish ritual and customs and the celebration of the Sabbath. The Ashkenazic Jews built two synagogues on the top floors of the ghetto building, the Scola Grande Tedesca in 1528-29 and the Scola Canton in 1531. Christians came to the ghetto to visit Jewish banks, doctors or shop for spices, jewelry and fabrics.

(Compiled from the Jewish Virtual Library website)

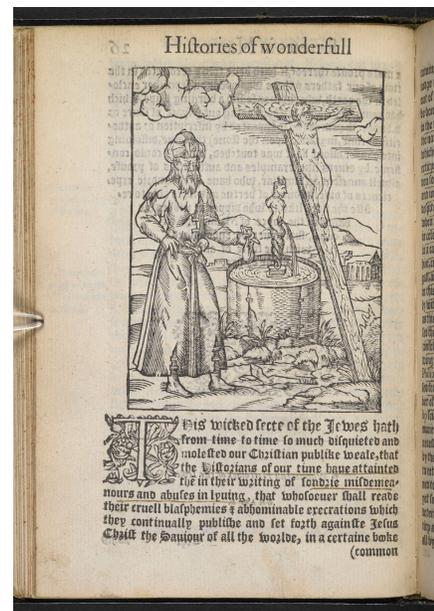
Realities for Jewish people in England

There weren't many Jews in Elizabethan England. At most a couple of hundred could be counted among the thousands of strangers living in late 16th-century London. Virtually all of them practiced their faith in secret: most were of Spanish or Portuguese descent, *Marranos* who had survived the Inquisition and were adept at disguising their beliefs.

Perhaps the most notorious of these Jews was Roderigo Lopez, Elizabeth's personal physician, violently executed in 1594 for allegedly conspiring to poison the Queen. The historian William Camden reports that Lopez went to his death strenuously 'affirming that he loved the Queen as well as he loved Jesus Christ; which, coming from a man of the Jewish profession, moved no small laughter in the standers-by'. Other Jews had probably been assimilated, including members of a small group of court musicians of Italian descent, brought over by King Henry VIII around 1540. Jews, usually converted ones, could also be found teaching Hebrew at Oxford and Cambridge, or helping with the Hebrew catalogue at the University Library.

Had Shakespeare wished to speak with someone raised in the Jewish faith, he could have done so easily enough. There was a converts' house in London, the *Domus Conversorum*, founded by King Henry III in 1232 as a home for poor Jewish converts to Christianity. Throughout the 16th century (with the exception of the years 1551-78), a handful of poor Jewish converts resided there.

Elizabethans held disturbing beliefs about Jewish people, due in part to the chronicles and histories published at the time, which were full of stories of Jewish criminality and dangerous stereotypes. Jews were described not only as circumcisers and emasculators of Christian men (and as seducers of Christian women) but as poisoners, usurers, and host desecrators.



Drawing of a Jewish man poisoning a well from a popular Elizabethan book

While the overwhelming majority of Elizabethans had never knowingly met a Jew, which led to the incredulous stereotypes they believed, by the end of the 16th century, interactions between Jews and English were becoming more frequent, especially abroad, in Morocco and Turkey as well as in Antwerp, Amsterdam and Venice, where Jewish communities were flourishing. These encounters gradually called into question many of the stereotypes that had prevailed in an England largely free of Jews for 300 years.

(Edited version of the James Shapiro's article "How were the Jews regarded in 16th Century England?")

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Take a look at the following questions to prompt a discussion with your group!

1. Have you ever felt discriminated against?
2. What does antisemitism mean to you?
3. When have you had to show mercy to someone else? When has mercy been shown to you?
4. How would rank each one by importance: A) Family bonds; B) Romantic relationships; C) Long-lasting friendships?
5. When Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* at the very end of the 1590s, Jews had officially been expelled from England for over 300 years. So, Shakespeare likely had little to no personal experience with Jewish people as he created Jewish characters. When we are ignorant of another people based on lack of first-hand knowledge and experience, it is very easy to see them through age-old stereotypes to or to treat them badly. This message is as true today as it was in the 1590s when Shakespeare first wrote this play. Who is "the other" in American society today? Which marginalized groups do you know very little about? What is the first thing you could do, personally, to get to know a marginalized group a little better?

ACTIVITIES

The following are a few activities that you can do with your group to help prepare them for attending the performance!

1. In *The Merchant of Venice*, a lot of rumors are spread, people hear news through word of mouth, and depictions of a person's character are created based on hearsay and assumption rather than face to face contact. With your group, play a round or two of either "Telephone" or "Exquisite Corpse." In "Telephone," one person whispers or word or a phrase, which is then repeated to the next person, and the next, until everyone has heard and whispered. Then the last person reveals what they believe the original one was, and then you can see how that word or phrase changed from person to person. In "Exquisite Corpse," one person begins to tell a story with one sentence, but then each person adds a sentence to the story until everyone has contributed. Afterwards, discuss how the story might have changed from how the original person intended it, and then have a larger dialogue about how this can have a similar effect on what we learn about someone else's culture.
2. Look at Shylock's famous "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech from Act 3, Scene 3. Read it out loud as a group, and then discuss. What are the different arguments Shylock is making? How has oppression molded who he has become?
3. Shylock, his Jewishness, and his character are talked about often by other characters in the play, and they often paint him in a negative way. Read the following excerpt from W.E.B DuBois' "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" and discuss "double-consciousness" and its effects on oppressed individuals.

"After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self."

4. The concept of status is important in *The Merchant of Venice*. The characters are strongly aware of who has money and who hasn't, who is the most respected in society and who is the least.
 1. In pairs, devise a short scene in which status is really important. Here are some examples: • A new pupil at school is being bullied by a much older pupil. • A customer at a restaurant is complaining about the food to the waiter. • The school headmaster is meeting a new student for the first time. • A policeman is questioning a suspect. Now look at the scenes and discuss who has the most, and the least status. How can you show this physically? Try the scenes with both actors standing, then again but with one person sitting, and the other standing, and swap over. What difference does it make?

2. Now look at the scene below from Act 1, Scene 3 of *The Merchant of Venice*. As a group, discuss what each line means and what each character is thinking.

Shylock: Three thousand ducats, well.

Bassanio: Ay, sir, for three months.

Shylock: For three months, well.

Bassanio: For the which, as I told you, Antonio shall be bound.

Shylock: Antonio shall be bound, well.

Bassanio: May you stead me? Will you pleasure me? Shall I know your answer?

Shylock: Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound.

Bassanio: Your answer to that.

3. In pairs, look at the section in detail and give each character a mark out of ten for status (1 being very low, 10 being high) for each line.

4. Now act out the scene in pairs, experimenting with different heights. Try to make the height of the character (e.g. standing, sitting on a chair, kneeling, even lying down) correspond to the status number you have given the character. Questions to consider: • How can you use your body to show a character's status? • What happens if you give a character with low status a physical advantage, e.g. by standing and leaning over somebody? • Look at people in your everyday life, such as your teachers, parents and friends. How do we know understand peoples' status in society?

5. What makes it possible for someone with prejudiced beliefs to have those beliefs changed? As a short research project, find real life examples of people who have had their prejudices challenged and changed their beliefs.