

*William Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice":
When Mercy Seasons Justice*

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READING SHAKESPEARE WITH FILM
OCTOBER 3, 2023 – NOVEMBER 7, 2023
10:00 a.m. to 11:15 a.m. (CDT)

Russ Heldman

(The Complete Pelican Shakespeare, Eds. 2002; 1997)

October 3, 2023 (“When Mercy Seasons Justice”)

The Merchant of Venice By William Shakespeare (*circa* 1596 – 1598)

1. Introduction to Class
2. Notes on historical background/context of the play
3. Plot discussion/summary
4. Film: Michael Radford – Al Pacino/Jeremy Irons/Lynn Collins (2004)

Clips from:

PowerPoint Pages:

Act I, Scene 3	4-11
Act III, Scene I, lines 21 – 67	12
Act III, Scene 2, lines 291 – end	13-14
Act III, Scene 3, lines 1 – end	15-16
Act IV, Scene 1, lines 70 – 395	17-29

5. Questions and Class Discussion

MONARCHS OF ENGLAND

Edward the Confessor (1042-66)
Harold II (1066)

William I the Conqueror (1066-87)
William II Rufus (1087-1100)
Henry I Beauclerc (1100-35)
Stephen (1135-54)
Empress Matilda (1141)

Henry II Curtmantle (1154-89)
Richard I the Lionheart (1189-99)
John Lackland (1199-1216)
Henry III (1216-72)
Edward I Longshanks (1272-1307)
Edward II (1307-27)
Edward III (1327-77)
Richard II (1377-99)

Henry IV Bolingbroke (1399-1413)
Henry V (1413-22)
Henry VI (1422-61, 1471-1)

Edward IV (1461-70, 1471-83)
Edward V (1483)
Richard III Crookback (1483-5)

Henry VII Tudor (1485-1509)
Henry VIII (1509-47)
Edward VI (1547-53)
Lady Jane Grey (1553)

Mary I Tudor (1553-58)
Elizabeth I (1558-1603)

James I (1603-25)

MERCHANT OF VENICE

Act I.III

SHYLOCK: Three thousand ducats – well. 1
BASSANIO: Ay, sir, for three months.
SHYLOCK: For three month – well.
BASSANIO: For the which, as I told you, Antonio shall be bound. 5
SHYLOCK: Antonio shall become bound – well.
BASSANIO: May you stead me? Will you pleasure me?
Shall I know your answer? 7
SHYLOCK: Three thousand ducats for three months, and
Antonio bound. 10
BASSANIO: Your answer to that.
SHYLOCK: Antonio is a good man. 12
BASSANIO: Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?
SHYLOCK: Ho no, no, no, no! My meaning in saying he
Is a good man is to have you understand me that he is of good credit
[Sufficient]. Yet his means are in supposition. He hath an 17
Argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies; I
Understand, moreover, upon the Rialto, he hath a third at 19
Mexico, a fourth for England, and other ventures he 20
Hath squandered abroad. But ships are but boards, 21
Sailors but men, there be land rats and water rats, water
Thieves and land thieves – I mean pirates; and then
There is the peril of waters, winds, and rocks. The man
Is, notwithstanding, of good credit [sufficient]. Three thousand ducats –
I think I may take his bond.

BASSANIO: Be assured you may.

SHYLOCK: May I speak with Antonio?

BASSANIO: If it please you to dine with us. 30

SHYLOCK: Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation 31

which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil 32

into! I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you,
walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with
you, nor drink with you, nor pray with you.

Who is he comes here?

Enter Antonio.

BASSANIO: This is Signor Antonio.

SHYLOCK: How like a fawning publican he looks. 38

[I hate him for he is a Christian: 39

But more, for that in low simplicity 40

He lends out money gratis and brings down

The rate of usance here with us in Venice. 42

If I can catch him once upon the hip, 43

I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.

He hates our sacred nation, and he rails,

Even there where merchants most do congregate,

On my, my bargain, and my well-won thrift,

Which he call interest. Cursed be my tribe

If I forgive him.]

BASSANIO: Shylock, do you hear?

SHYLOCK:

I am debating of my present store, 50

And by the near guess of my memory

I cannot instantly raise up the gross 52

Of full three thousand ducats. What of that?

Tubal, a wealthy Hebrew of my tribe,

Will furnish me, But soft how many months

Do you desire: [to Antonio] Rest you fair, good signor!

Your worship was the last man in our mouths.

ANTONIO:

How much ye would?

SHYLOCK: Ay, ay, three thousand ducats.

ANTONIO: And for three months.

SHYLOCK:

I had forgot – three months, you told me so.

[Well then, your bond. And let me see – but hear you,] 65

Methoughts you said you neither lend nor borrow 66

with interest.

ANTONIO: I do never use it.

[ANTONIO:
Mark you this, Bassanio,
The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.
An evil soul producing holy witness
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek;
A goodly apple rotten at the heart;
O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!]

SHYLOCK:

Three thousand ducats; —'tis a good round sum.

100

ANTONIO:

Well, Shylock, shall we be beholden to you?

102

SHYLOCK:

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft,
In the Rialto you have rated me 104

About my moneys, and my usances:
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
For suff'rance is the badge of all our tribe: 107

You call me, — misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine, 109

And all for use of that which is mine own. 110

Well then, it now appears you need my help:
Go to then: you come to me, and you say, 112

Shylock, we would have money; you say so;
You, that did void your rheum upon my beard, 114

And foot me, as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold; monies is your suit.

What should I say to you? Should I not say,
Hath a dog money? is it possible

A cur can lend three thousand ducats? or
Shall I bend low, and in a slavish voice 120

With 'bated breath, and whispering humbleness,
Say this,—

'Fair sir, you spat on me on Wednesday last;
You spurn'd me such a day; another time

You call'd me—dog; and for these courtesies
I'll lend you thus much moneys?'

ANTONIO:

I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.

If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not

As to thy friends; for when did friendship take 130

A breed for barren metal of his friend? 131

But lend it rather to thine enemy;

Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face 133

Exact the penalty.

SHYLOCK:

Why, look you, how you storm!

I would be friends with you, and have your love,

Forget the shames that you have stain'd me with,

Supply your present wants, and take no 137

drop of interest for my monies, and you'll not hear me:

This is kind I offer. 139

BASSANIO:

This were kindness.

SHYLOCK:

This kindness will I show:

Go with me to a notary, seal me there

Your single bond; and, in a merry sport,

If you repay me not on such a day,

In such a place, such sum, or sums, as are

Express'd in the condition, let the forfeit

Be nominated for an equal pound

147

Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken

In what part of your body pleaseth me.

ANTONIO:

Content, in faith; I'll seal to such a bond,

150

And say there is much kindness in the Jew.

BASSANIO:

You shall not seal to such a bond for me;

I'll rather dwell in my necessity.

153

ANTONIO:

Why, fear not, man, I will not forfeit it;

Within these two months,— that's a month before

This bond expires,— I do expect return

Of thrice three times the value of this bond.

SHYLOCK:

O father Abram, what these Christians are,
Whose own hard dealings teaches them suspect
The thoughts of others! Pray you, tell me this;
If he should break his day, what should I gain
By the exaction of the forfeiture?

160

161

A pound of man's flesh, taken from a man,
Is not so estimable, profitable neither,
As flesh of muttens, beefs, or goats. I say,
To buy his favour, I extend this friendship;
If he will take it, so; if not, adieu;
And, for my love, I pray you wrong me not.

ANTONIO:

Yes, Shylock, I will seal unto this bond.

169

The Merchant of Venice - Act III.I

SOLANIO: Tell us, do you hear whether Antonio have had
Any loss at sea or no?

SHYLOCK:

Let him look to his bond. He was wont to call me usurer.

Let him look to his bond. He was wont to lend
money for Christian courtesy. Let him look to his bond.

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

50

hindered me half a million, laugh 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

55

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

60

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

63

resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is
his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what
should be sufferance be by Christian example? Why

65

revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it
shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

Act III.2

JESSICA: When I was with him, I have heard him swear
To Tubal and to Chus, his countrymen,
That he would rather have Antonio's flesh
Than twenty times the value of the sum
That he did owe him; and I know, my lord,
If law authority, and power deny not,
It will go hard with poor Antonio.

PORTIA: Is it your dear friend that is thus in trouble?

BASSANIO: The dearest friend to me, the kindest man,

PORTIA: What sum owes he the Jew?

BASSANIO: For me, three thousand ducats.

PORTIA: What, no more?

Pay him six thousand, and deface the bond.

299

Double six thousand and then treble that,

300

Before a friend of this description

Shall lose a hair through Bassanio's default.

But let me hear that letter of your friend.

[BASSANIO Reads] "Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all

Miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very

Low, my bond to the Jew is forfeit. And since in paying

it, it is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared

between you and I if I might but see you at my death.

Notwithstanding, use your pleasure. If your love do not

320

Persuade you to come, let not my letter."

PORTIA:

First go with me to church and call me wife,

And then away to Venice to your friend!

For never shall you lie by Portia's side

With an unquiet soul. You shall have gold

To pay the petty debt twenty times over;

When it is paid, bring your true friend along.

My maid Nerissa and myself meantime

Will live as maids and widows. Come away,

For you shall hence upon your wedding day.

Act III.3

SHYLOCK:

Jailer, look to him. Tell not me of mercy.

This is the fool lent out money gratis.

Jailer, look to him.

ANTONIO: Hear me yet, good Shylock.

SHYLOCK:

I'll have my bond, speak not against my bond,

I have sworn an oath that I will have my bond.

Thou call'dst me dog before thou hadst a cause,

But since I am a dog, beware my fangs.

7

The duke shall grant me justice. I do wonder,

Thou naughty jailer, that thou are so fond

9

To come abroad with him at his request.

10

ANTONIO: I pray thee hear me speak

SHYLOCK: I'll have my bond. I will not hear thee speak,

I'll have my bond, and therefore speak no more.

I'll not be made a soft and dull-eyed fool,

14

To shake the head, relent, and sigh, and yield

To Christian intercessors. Follow not.

I'll have no speaking; I will have my bond.

SOLANIO:

It is the most impenetrable cur
That ever kept with men.

19

ANOTONIO: Let him alone;

I'll follow him no more with bootless prayers.

20

[I oft delivered from his forfeitures

22

Many that have at times made moan to me.
Therefore he hates me.]

SOLANIO: I am sure the duke

Will never grant this forfeiture to hold.

ANTONIO:

The duke cannot deny the course of law;

For the commodity that strangers have

27

With us in Venice, if it be denied,

Will much impeach the justice of the state,

[Since that the trade and profit of the city

30

Consisteth of all nations.] Therefore go.

These griefs and losses have so bated me

32

That I shall hardly find [spare] a pound of flesh

Tomorrow to my bloody creditor.

Well, jailer, on. Pray God Bassanio come

To see me pay his debt, and then I care not!

Act IV. I

ANOTONIO:

I pray you think you question with the Jew. 70

You may as well go stand upon the beach
And bid the main flood bate his usual height; 72

You may as well use question with the wolf
Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb;

[You may as well forbid the mountain pines
To wag their high tops and to make no noise 76

When they are fretten with the gusts of heaven]; 77

You may as well do anything most hard
As seek to soften that – then which what’s harder? –

His Jewish heart. Therefore I do beseech you 80

Make no more offers, use no farther means,
But with all brief and plain conveniency 82

Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will.

BASSANIO:

For thy three thousand ducats here is six.

SHYLOCK:

If every ducat in six thousand ducats,
I would not draw them. I would have my bond. 87

DUKE:
How shalt thou hope for mercy, rendering none?

SHYLOCK:

What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?

You have among you many a purchased slave, 90

Which like your asses and your dogs and mules

You use in abject and in slavish parts, 92

Because you bought them. Shall I say to you,

“Let them be free! Marry them to your heirs!

Why sweat they under burdens? Let their beds

Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates

Be season with such viands”? You will answer,

“The slaves are ours.” So do I answer you.

The pound of flesh which I demand of him

Is dearly bought, ‘tis mine, and I will have it. 100

If you deny me, fie upon your law!

There is no force in the decrees of Venice.

I stand for judgment. Answer: shall I have it?

DUKE:

Upon my power I may dismiss this court 104

Unless Bellario, a learned doctor

Whom I have sent for to determine this, 106

Come here today. 107

SALERIO:

My lord, here stays without

A messenger with letters from the doctor,

New come from Padua.

DUKE:

Came you from Padua, from Bellario?

NERISSA: From both, my lord. Ballario greets your grace. 120

BASSANIO: Why dost thou whet thy knife so earnestly?

SHYLOCK: To cut the forfeiture from the bankrupt there.

GRATIANO: Can no prayers pierce there?

SHYLOCK: No, none that thou hast wit enough to make.

GRATIANO: O be thou damned, inexecrable dog, 128

And for thy life let justice be accused! 129

SHYLOCK:

Till thou canst rail the seal from off my bond,

Thou but offend'st thy lungs to speak too loud. 140

Repair thy wit, good youth, or it will fall

To cureless ruin. I stand here for law.

DUKE: This letter doth commend

A young and learned doctor to our court.

Where is he?

NERISSA: He attendeth here hard by

To know your answer whether you'll admit him.

DUKE: Go give him courteous conduct to this place.

Meantime the court shall hear Bellario's letter.

[reads]

“Your grace shall understand that at the receipt of your
Letter I am very sick; but in the instant that your
Messenger came, in loving visitation was with me a young
Doctor of Rome. His name is Balthasar. [I acquainted
Him with the cause in controversy between the Jew and
Antonio the merchant. We turned o’er many books
Together. He is furnished with my opinion which,
Bettered with his own learning, the greatness whereof I
Cannot enough commend, comes with him at my
Importunity to fill up your grace’s request in my stead].
I beseech you let his lack of years be no impediment,
For I never knew so
Young a body with so old a head. I leave him to your
Gracious acceptance.”
Enter *Portia* [dressed as a doctor of laws] *for Balthasar*.
You hear the learn’d Bellario, what he writes;
And here, I take it, is the doctor come.
You are welcome; take your place.
Are you acquainted with the difference
That holds this present question in the court?

150

158

160

163

169

170

PORTIA: I am informed thoroughly of the cause.	171
Which is the merchant here and which the Jew?	172
DUKE: Antonio and old Shylock, both stand forth.	
PORTIA: Is your name Shylock?	
SHYLOCK: Shylock is is my name.	
PORTIA: Of a strange nature is the suit you follow, Yet in such rule that the Venetian law Cannot impugn you as you do proceed.	176
[to Antonio]	
You stand within his danger, do you not?	178
ANTONIO: Ay, so he says.	
PORTIA: Do you confess the bond?	
ANTONIO: I do.	180
PORTIA: Then must the Jew be merciful?	

SHYLOCK: On what compulsion must I? Tell me that.

PORTIA: the quality of mercy is not strained; 182
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven 183
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
‘Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power;
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings; 190
But mercy is above this sceptered sway.
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God’s
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice by thy please, consider this:
That in the course of justice none of us 197
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much 200
To mitigate the justice of thy plea, 201
Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence ‘gainst the merchant there.

SHYLOCK: My deeds upon my head! I crave the law,
The penalty and forfeit of my bond.

PORTIA: Is he not able to discharge the money?

BASSANIO: Yes, here I tender it for him in the court.

Yea, thrice the sum. If that will not suffice,

I will be bound to pay it ten times o'er

On forfeit of my hands, my head, my heart. 210

If this will not suffice, it must appear

That malice bears down truth. And I beseech you, 212

Wrest once the law to your authority: 213

To do a great right, do a little wrong,

And curb this cruel devil of his will.

PORTIA: It must not be. There is no power in Venice

Can alter a decree established.

'Twill be recorded for a precedent,

And many an error by the same example 219

Will rush into the state: it cannot be. 220

SHYLOCK: A Daniel come to judgment! Yea, a Daniel! 221
O wise young judge, how I do honor thee!

PORTIA: I pray you let me look upon the bond.

SHYLOCK: Here 'tis, most revered doctor, here it is.

PORTIA: Shylock, there's thrice thy money offered thee.

SHYLOCK: An oath, an oath! I have an oath in heaven!
Shall I lay perjury upon my soul?
No, not for Venice!

PORTIA: Why, this bond is forfeit,
And lawfully by this the Jew may claim 230
A pound of flesh, to be by him cut off
Nearest the merchant's heart. Be merciful.
Take thrice thy money; bid me tear the bond.

SHYLOCK: When it is paid, according to the terms. 233

ANTONIO: Most heartily I do beseech the court
To give the judgment.

PORTIA: A pound of that same merchant's flesh is thine.

The court awards it, and the law doth give it

SHYLOCK: Most rightful judge!

PORTIA: And you must cut this flesh from off his breast.

300

The law allows it, and the court awards it.

SHYLOCK: Most learned judge! A sentence: come prepare!

PORTIA:

Tarry a little, there is something else.

This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood;

The words expressly are "a pound of flesh."

Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh;

But in the cutting it if thou dost shed

One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods

Are by the laws of Venice confiscate

Unto the state of Venice.

310

GRATIANO:

O upright judge! Mark, Jew – O learned judge!

SHYLOCK:

Is that the law?

PORTIA:

Thyself shalt see the act;

For, as thou urgest justice, be assured

Thou shalt have justice more than thou desirest.

GRATIANO:

O learned judge! Mark, Jew. A learned judge

SHYLOCK: I take this offer then. Pay the bond thrice

And let the Christian go.

BASSIANO: Here is the money.

PORTIA: Soft!

318

The Jew shall have all justice. Haste.

He shall have nothing but the penalty.

320

GRATIANO: O Jew! An upright judge, a learned judge!

PORTIA: Therefore prepare thee to cut off the flesh.

Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less not more

But just a pound of flesh. If thou tak'st more

324

Or less than a just pound, be it but so much

As makes it light or heavy in the substance

326

Or in the division of the twentieth part

Of one poor scruple – nay, if the scale do turn

328

But in the estimation of a hair –

329

Thou diest, and all thy goods are confiscate.

330

GRATIANO: A second Daniel.	
Now, infidel, I have you on the hip!	332
PORTIA: Why doth the Jew pause?	
SHYLOCK:	
Shall I not have barely my principal?	340
PORTIA: Thou shalt have nothing but the forfeiture, To be so taken at the peril, Jew.	
SHYLOCK:	
Why, then the devil give him good of it! I'll stay no longer question.	344
PORTIA: Tarry, Jew! The law hath yet another hold on you. It is enacted in the laws of Venice, If it be proved against an alien That by direct or indirect attempts He seeks the life of any citizen, The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive Shall seize one half his goods; the other half Comes to the privy coffer of the state;	350

And the offender's life lies in the mercy
Of the duke only, 'gainst all other voice. 353
In which predicament I say thou stand'st,
[For it appears by manifest proceeding
That indirectly, and directly too,
Thou hast contrived against the very life
Of the defendant, and thou has incurred
The danger formerly by me rehearsed.] 360
Down therefore, and beg mercy of the duke.
GRATIANO: Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself!
DUKE: That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit,
I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it.
For half thy wealth, it is Antonio's; 368
The other half comes to the general state.
SHYLOCK: Nay, take my life and all! Pardon not that!
You take my house when you do take the prop 373
That doth sustain my house, you take my life
When you do take the means whereby I live.

PORTIA: What mercy can you render him, Antonio?
GRATIANO: A halter gratis, nothing else, for God's sake! 377
ANTONIO: So please my lord the Duke and all the court
To quit the fine for one half of his goods, 379
I am content; so he will let me have 380
The other half trust [in use], to render it 381
Upon his death unto the gentleman
That lately stole his daughter.
One thing provided more: That for this favor
He presently become a Christian. 385
DUKE: He shall do this, or else I do recant 389
The pardon that I late pronounced here. 390
PORTIA: Art thou contented, Jew? What dost thou say? 391
SHYLOCK: I am content.
PORTIA: Clerk, draw a deed of gift.
SHYLOCK: I pray you give me leave to go from hence;
I am not well. Send the deed after me,
And I will sign it.
DUKE: Get thee gone, but do it.

ADENNDUM TO ACT IV.1, LINES 182-203

What is the definition of mercy?

Mercy is the compassionate treatment of those in distress, especially when it is within one's power to punish or harm them.

The word "mercy" derives from the medieval Latin *merced* or *merces*, which means "price paid." It has the connotation of forgiveness, benevolence and kindness. Mercy is often used in a religious context of giving alms, caring for the sick or the poor.

In the legal sense, mercy often refers to compassionate behavior from a person in power, such as when a judge shows clemency, leniency or mercy during sentencing.

Deuteronomy 32:1–2

1 Listen, you heavens, and I will speak; hear, you earth, the words of my mouth.

2 May my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distill as the dew, like gentle rain upon the tender grass, and like showers upon the herb.

Matthew 6:9-14

9. “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

10. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

11. Give us this day our daily bread,

12. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

13. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

14. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

Micah 7:18-19

18. Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance?

19. You will again have mercy on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.

Lamentations 3:22

22. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end.

Matthew 5: 25

25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you were going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison.

Matthew 7: 1-2

1 Judge not, that you be not judged.

2 For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

Shakespeare After all

(296-297)

But the principal excluded character in **Merchant**, the character who makes this play, for a modern audience, something other than a comedy, is of course Shylock. And the figure of Shylock rouses deep emotions, not only because his plight seems in some ways to mirror that of Jews in Europe from Shakespeare's time to the present, but also because of the desire on the part of many readers, editors, and actors to protect Shakespeare against the accusation of anti-Semitism. The term is anachronistic for Shakespeare's time (it was coined at the end of the nineteenth century; before that one might speak of anti-Judaic feeling), but the prejudice to which it gives a name is not.

Did Shakespeare scorn and dislike Jews, as do many characters in his play? Was it his intention – whatever he achieved – to caricature a despised race and the religion its members practiced? (Race, unlike “anti-Semite,” is a familiar term in early modern writing, describing a tribe, nation, or people regarded as of common stock.) And even if the author was not “anti-Semitic,” did he write, wittingly or unwittingly, an anti-Semitic play? These are not questions it is easy or appropriate to sidestep, but nor are they questions that can be answered directly or authoritatively. Writers do not control the interpretations of their works -- indeed, as we will see, one major theme of this play is the plenitude and “lewdness” of interpretation -- and works of literature and art are living things, which grow and change with time. Whatever **The Merchant of Venice** might be said to “mean,” or to connote, today, it is not the same thing as what it might have meant or connoted in the last decade of the sixteenth century, in an England ruled by Queen Elizabeth, and England that had officially banished all Jews for the previous three hundred years. Equally sobering, what **The Merchant of Venice** “meant” when it was produced, with villainous Shylock, the Nazi-held Weimar in 1944, is not the same as what it has “meant” in post-Holocaust productions in London, Jerusalem, New York, or indeed anywhere in the world.

It is possible that Shakespeare had never seen or known a Jew. Jews has been banned from England since the time of Edward I, who expelled them in 1290, after borrowing heavily from Jewish lenders in previously years to support his wars. There were some Jews in the London of Shakespeare's time, but these were likely to be Spanish or Portuguese Jews who presented themselves in public as Christian converts, attending church service, and practicing their own religion only in secret. In 1594 an unfortunate incident occurred in which a Portuguese Jewish physician, Roderigo Lopez, was accused of having plotted against the life of Queen Elizabeth. Lopez had been the Queen's doctor, and he was tried and executed for supposedly plotting to poison her. A popular society physician -- he was known to, and by, Sir Francis Walsingham, the Earl of Leicester (Roberts Dudley), the Earl of Essex (Robert Devereux) and the Cecils -- Lopez was involved in espionage for the government, and ran afoul of Essex, whose intentions for war against the Spanish Lopez opposed. Feeling against Lopez escalated; we may indeed see him as a scapegoat, both an Iberian and a Jew. He was taken to Tyburn and hanged without a warrant signed by the Queen. In the years following his death characters based on Dr. Lopez appeared in plays by Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, and a revival of Christopher Marlowe's 1589 play *The Jew of Malta* written well before the Lopez affair, enjoyed a surprisingly long run of fifteen performances. Shakespeare seems to have written his play in the wake of this popular and topical success.

By: Marjorie Garber

Shakespeare and the Jews

(134-136)

England's fascination with the conversion of the Jews had begun in earnest in the late 1570s and early 1580s and was quite well established by the time that Shakespeare wrote **The Merchant of Venice**. In reconsidering this topic I'd like to work forward in time from the Reformation, or, to be more accurate, from the series of reformations England experienced beginning with the reign of Henry VIII. Reformist theology, coupled with the crisis of religious identity produced by England's break from Catholicism, brought into question what before this time had been one of the least troubled aspects of social identity: what it meant to be Christian. The rapid transformations in English religious beliefs in the sixteenth century generated a demand for something that could reground faith in a world filled with challenges and counterchallenges to what had once seemed infallible doctrine. This demand was met in part by the idea of the stubborn Jew whose conversion not only revealed the truths of Christianity in general but also, many sects hoped, the rightness of their own particular beliefs.

A brief overview of this historical context is in order. Henry VIII's decision in the early 1530s to replace papal authority over the Church of England with his own was motivated in large part by his desire to divorce Catherine of Aragon. His break with Rome led to further reforms, including ransacking the monasteries, translating the Bible into English and ending many Catholic ceremonies (though it must be pointed out that in his last years on the throne Henry slowed the pace of reform and edged back somewhat toward traditional Catholic practices). Upon Henry's death in 1547 his young son Edward VI came to the throne and greatly accelerated the pace of reform his father had set in motion. Revised prayer books were produced that rearranged the church calendar and transformed the popular experience of the mass, changes that helped provoke a Catholic uprising in 1549. Throughout England during Edward's reign parish churches sold off Catholic objects and replaced them with now mandated English Bibles and published homilies. But Edward's brief reign, though it had dampened traditional Catholic beliefs, had not extinguished them. Many objects that had been hidden away were brought back into churches after 1554 when Edward died and was succeeded by his Catholic sister, Mary I.

Even as it is a mistake to see Henry VIII's break with Roman Catholicism in absolute terms, it would be not less erroneous to see Mary's restoration of Catholicism as marking a complete reversal of the changes that had taken place in the previous decade. Nonetheless, Latin masses were heard again in England, and the publication of new religious primers replaced their reformist predecessors. There was also fairly severe punishment accorded to nonconformists: some three hundred Protestants were burned to death, and many others fled to the shelter of the continental Protestant communities in Geneva and Basel. Despite Mary's Catholic reforms, a complete transformation of belief could not be imposed in such a brief span of time. Moreover, the availability of Protestant evangelical books and of English Bibles, sixty editions of which had been published during Edward's short reign, enabled individuals to read and interpret God's word independently. Reformist ideas were not and could not be entirely suppressed.

When Queen Elizabeth I followed her half-sister to the throne in 1558, English Christians experienced their third religious upheaval in a little more than a decade. Elizabeth passed an Act of Uniformity and once again abolished the Catholic mass. Yet resistance to her reforms was not insignificant, and to “many folks.....the distinctions between their Catholic faith and the Queen’s church remained comfortably vague” until the end of the 1560s and perhaps longer. Once again, as under Edward VI, there was a large-scale appropriation as well as the destruction of altars and vestments. As Elizabeth’s reign stretched on into the 1570s and 1580s, the face of change became more permanent. Scholars are increasingly acknowledging that the real break with traditional Catholic practices did not occur until the late 1570s, midway through Elizabeth’s reign. By “the end of the 1570s, whatever the instincts and nostalgia of their seniors, a generation was growing up which had known nothing else, which believed the Pope to be Antichrist, the Mass a mummary, which did not look back to the Catholic past as their own, but another country, another world. The Elizabethan Settlements preserved the peace but stopped well short of resolving the differences that now separated English Christians across a broad spectrum that ranged from an adherence to an ancestral Catholicism at one extreme to radical Puritanism on the other. It was within such a climate that interest in the conversion of the Jew flourished.

If these were the social and political conditions that helped generate this interest, the intellectual and theological seeds were planted back in the 1540s and 1550s by continental reformers influenced by the writing of Paul. They were particularly struck by Paul's explicit declaration in Romans that "all Israel shall be saved." The commentary accompanying this epistle in the Geneva Bible explains that "God appointed this casting off of the Jews that it might be an occasion to call the Gentiles; and again might turn this calling of the Gentiles to be an occasion to restore the Jews." The "blindness of the Jews" was neither universal nor for all time: "as the prophets have forewarned" there "shall be a time" when the Jews "shall effectually embrace that which they do now so stubbornly for the most part reject and refuse." The commentary to Romans is unambiguous on this point: Paul "beateth this into their heads that the nation of the Jews is not utterly cast off without hope of recovery." It was also a belief that evangelical preachers and writers continued to beat into the heads of Elizabethan parishioners.

By James Shapiro

From Romans 11
The Geneva Bible (1599 / 1560)

5 Even so then, at this present time is there a remnant
According to the election of grace.

6 And if it be of grace, it is no more of works: or else
Were grace no more grace: but if it be of words, it is no
More grace: or else were work no more work.

7 What then? Israel hath not obtained that he sought: but
The election hath obtained it, and the rest have been
Hardened,

8 According as it is written, God hath given them the
Spirit of slumber: eyes that they should not see, and
Ears that they should not hear unto this day.

9 And David saith, let their table be made a snare, and
a net, and a stumbling block, even for a recompense
unto them.

10. Let their eyes be darkened that they see not, and bow
Down their back always.

11. I demand then, have they stumbled, that they Should fall? God forbid: but through their fall, salvation Cometh unto the Gentiles, to provoke them to follow Them.

12 Wherefore if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles, how much more shall their abundance be?

13 For in that I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the Apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office,

14 To try if by any means I might provoke them of my Flesh to follow them, and might save some of them

15 For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of The world, what *shall* the receiving be, but life from the dead?

16 For if the firstfruits *be* holy, so is the whole lump: And if the root *be* holy, so are the branches

17 And though some of the branches be broken off,
And thou being a wild Olive tree, wast grafted in for
them, and made partaker of the root and fatness of
the Olive tree:

18 Boast not thyself against the branches: and if thou
Boast thyself, thou bearest not the root, but the root
Thee.

19 Thou wilt say then, the branches are broken off, that I
Might be grafted in.

20 Well: through unbelief they are broken off, and thou
Standest by faith: be not high-minded, but fear.

21 For if God spared not the natural branches, take
Heed, lest he also spare not thee.

22 Behold therefore the bountifulness, and severity
Of God: toward them which have fallen, severity: but
Toward thee, bountifulness, if thou continue in his
Bountifulness, or else thou shalt also be cut off.

23 And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief shall Be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again.

24 For if thou was cut out of the olive tree, which was Wild by nature, and was grafted contrary to nature in a right olive tree, how much more shall they that are by nature, be grafted in their own Olive tree?

25 For I would not, brethren, that ye should be Ignorant of this secret (lest ye should be arrogant in Yourselves) that partly obstinacy is come to Israel, Until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in.

26 And so all Israel shall be saved, as it is written, the Deliverer shall come out of Zion, and shall turn away the Ungodliness from Jacob.

27 And this is my covenant to them, when I shall take Away their sins.

28 As concerning the Gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the father's sakes.

29 For the gifts and calling of God are without Repentance.

30 For even as ye in times past have not believed God, Yet have not obtained mercy through their unbelief:

31 Even so not have they not believed by the mercy Showed unto you, that they also may obtain mercy.

32 For God hath shut up all in unbelief, that he might Have mercy on all.