



[The Merchant of Venice](#), by William Shakespeare

In A Nutshell

The Merchant of Venice is a comedy written by William Shakespeare around 1597. It tells the story of two Venetian merchants who loathe each other, Antonio and Shylock, and their business deal undertaken on behalf of Antonio's good friend, Bassanio. One of the merchants, Shylock, is a Jew living in the heavily Christian Venetian society; and religious prejudice and tension infuse the entire play.

For Shakespeare, writing to an English audience about a Jewish moneylender might have seemed unusual, as Jews had been banished from England in 1290 under The Edict of Expulsion. How was Shakespeare to explain the Jewish presence to Elizabethan audiences, who had little exposure to Jewish culture and religion? Shakespeare's literary rival, Christopher Marlowe had actually just written a play called *The Jew of Malta* in 1589. That play's title character was a Jew named Barabas, and as a greedy, cunning, and murderous stereotype, he fit the bill of "stock" Jewish characters that Elizabethan theatergoers of the time loved to hate. Of course, since there were no actual Jews publicly living in England, the worst kinds of stereotypes and legends about the entire group could prevail unchecked. The stories got more and more fantastic, including everything from sacrificing kidnapped Christian children on Easter to killing full-grown Christians for their blood to be used in Passover rituals. Christopher Marlowe's play, and his inexplicably evil Jewish protagonist, sparked English thinking about the long-absent English Jews.

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But what really made the Jewish tradition a popular topic of hatred was an assassination plot against Queen Elizabeth. Unfairly, all Jews were lumped into the same group and symbolized by one man, Roderigo Lopez.

Though Jews had been officially banned from England for nearly 300 years, small groups of Jews actually had come to Protestant England to escape the Catholic Spanish Inquisition. They lived in Elizabethan England and many made a cosmetic conversion from Judaism to Christianity. This meant that while they were Christians on paper, they still held onto their Jewish heritage and culture without openly practicing the religion. These people, called “Marranos” or “Conversos,” seemed to find some relative peace residing in a Protestant nation.

In 1593, Queen Elizabeth's physician, Roderigo Lopez, was accused of trying to poison her as part of a plot in alliance with the King of Spain. Lopez was soon convicted of treason, hanged, drawn, and quartered. While not much of his body remained, what he did leave behind was a new outbreak of anti-Jewish sentiment. Lopez, born in Portugal, was a Marrano, and the people were again hyped on hating Jews. Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* was revived.

Shakespeare, with his pulse on the popular interest, presented *The Merchant of Venice* around 1597, hot on the heels of the Lopez trial. What is interesting about Shakespeare's Jewish merchant, Shylock, is that depending on how you read the story, he is not a caricature of all-things-evil like Marlowe's Barabas. In fact, Shylock speaks the most famous lines of the play in Scene III when he defends Jews as humans deserving the same rights and respect as Christians.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 How does Shakespeare really feel about Jewish people, as reflected in this play?
Shakespeare seems to toss off a lot of hurtful anti-Semitic comments through his characters, but at points Shylock is painted as a sensible and suffering character. How can we reconcile Shakespeare's seeming sympathy (or at least his realistic portrayal of a person in Shylock) with all the anti-Semitism of the play? Is it anachronistic (Big money SAT word meaning "appearing to belong to a different era or time period") to worry about anti-Semitism, or is that just a reality of the play's time and place?
- 2 Are Portia and Bassanio really in love? Do they love each other equally? Since Bassanio was clearly after Portia's money when he started courting her, do we think he could ever genuinely fall in love with her, or is his quest for her – and his love for her – tainted by his original position as, let's face it, a gold-digger?
- 3 Do you believe Antonio is gay? Is the intense friendship between Bassanio and Antonio believable? When talking to Portia, Bassanio likens Antonio to an old true Roman, meaning the kind of guy that would kill himself over his friend (see Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*). Is Antonio's willingness to die for Bassanio just a throwback to old-school friendship, or is it romantic love?

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