The central concern that students and scholars of *The Merchant of Venice* have grappled with for more than three centuries is anti-Semitism. England became the first country in Europe to expel its Jews when, in 1290, Edward I decided that he preferred banishing them to repaying them the money he owed. Jews would not legally return to the country until the 1650s, although Jewish refugees from the Iberian Peninsula settled in England. From 1581, Joachim Ganz, a Bohemian mining engineer, lived openly as a Jew in England for at least 17 years. Nathan Judah Menda practiced Judaism in the country for at least six years before converting in 1578. In 1592, Jewish services were conducted at the London home of Solomon Cormano and Ferdinand Alvares. Four years later, in the year that Shakespeare probably wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, the widow of Richard May, one of Alvares's partners, sued him and his business associates. The trial record states that Alvares and Bernard Leavis sailed to Portugal on business and there had been fined by the Inquisition because of their religion. In *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2nd ed. (1973), Salo Wittmayer Baron records that the court, "beinge moved with the losses and troubles which the poore straungers indured persuaded Mrs. May beinge present to deale charitably with Alvares in regarde thereof" (15:127). The Duke's address to Shylock in the trial scene seems to echo this decision:

Shylock, the world thinks, and I think so too, ...  
Thou wilt not only loose the forfeiture,  
But touched with humane gentleness and love,  
Forgive a moi'ty of the principal,  
Glancing an eye of pity on his [Antonio's] losses,  
That have of late so huddled on his back.

(4.1.17–28)

As the Alvares trial indicates, Elizabethan England was not necessarily hostile to Jews. In the early 17th century, Isaac Casaubon invited the Italian Jew Jacob Barnet to assist him in the study of Jewish texts. When authorities in Oxford arrested Barnet and planned to convert him by force, Casaubon appealed to King James, who ordered Barnet's release, though the king also expelled Barnet from the country.

In literature, as well, Jews could be portrayed sympathetically. In Robert Wilson's *Three Ladies of London* (1584), the Christian merchant Mercadore pursues Lady Lucre. When he is sued by his Jewish creditor Gerontus, Mercadore takes advantage of a Turkish law that exempts converts to Islam from repaying debts to infidels. Rather than be the cause of Mercadore's apostasy, Gerontus forgives him his debt. The judge remarks, "Jews seek to excel in Christianity and Christians in Jewishness." The year 1594 saw Rodrigo Lopez's execution and the revival of *The Jew of Malta*, as well as a revival of John Heywood's *An Enterlude of the Vertuous and Godly Queene Hester*, originally composed ca. 1522–27. In 1597, Joseph Wyburne of Cambridge University staged *Machiavelius*, in which the evil Machiavel figure opposes the Jew, who outwits the villain and gets the girl. The Jew thus appears as a typical romantic hero.

Such favorable portrayals of Jews were, however, in the minority. Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* (1584) presents the character Usury as Jewish. Abraham in Robert Greene's *Selimus* (1594) is a poisoner. Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) presents the Roman Jews Zadoch and Zachary as vicious. John Donne's "A Sermon Preached at Saint Dunstan's upon New Year's Day, 1624, claimed that Jews anointed their dead with the blood of Christians.

Shakespeare was writing in a milieu that was neither ignorant of nor necessarily hostile to Jews. His audiences would not necessarily expect Shylock to be villainous. In other plays, Shakespeare sympathizes with the outsider, portraying Othello as noble, for example. In *Sir Thomas More*, the section in Shakespeare's handwriting criticizes the antialien rioters and pleads for sympathy for the foreigners. His favorable treatment of Catholics in his work has also been noted (especially by those arguing that he was Catholic himself).
Still, critics remain divided over *The Merchant of Venice*’s attitude toward Jews. Salo Wittmayer Baron maintains that "the great poet disliked Jews, not only as men of different faith but as aliens" (15:134). Harold Bloom writes in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998): "One would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is ... a profoundly anti-Semitic work" (171). E. E. Stoll, in a 1911 article, and Derek Cohen (1988) also maintain that the play is anti-Semitic.

Others disagree. This camp includes George Lyman Kittredge (1945), Margaret Webster (1955), James Shapiro, and Jay Halio. In 1959, Tyrone Guthrie directed *The Merchant of Venice* on the Habimah stage in Israel. He, too, rejected the view that the play endorses anti-Semitism. John Barton in *Playing Shakespeare* (1984) claims that Shylock behaves as a bad Jew in seeking Antonio's life, but the play does not attack Jews or Judaism. Reviewing Jude Kelly's 1994 West Yorkshire Playhouse presentation of the play with Gary Waldhorn as Shylock, John Peter declared in the *Times* (London) for March 20, 1994: "I cannot believe that anyone who understands this production could think this an anti-Semitic play: it emerges, rather, as one of painful, hard-earned humanity." That same year, Peter Sellars staged the work with African Americans as Jews, Latinos playing the Venetians, and Asian Americans taking the roles of Portia and Nerissa to demonstrate that the play dealt with racism of any kind.

When Portia enters the courtroom, she asks, "Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?" (4.1.174). Her question implies that Shakespeare intends for Shylock and Antonio to resemble each other, that there is no obvious distinction between Jews and Christians. Antonio and Shylock at times echo each other. Agreeing to Shylock's terms for a loan, Antonio says, "Content, in faith" (1.3.152). Accepting Antonio's demands at the end of the trial, Shylock declares, "I am content" (4.1.394). Discussing the taking of interest, Antonio says, "I never use it" (1.3.70). Shylock then launches into the story of Jacob's ewes, perhaps prompted by Antonio's homophone. Threatened with the loss of his wealth, Shylock laments, "[Y]ou take my life / When you do take the means whereby I live" (4.1.376–377). After Portia informs Antonio that three of his ships have safely reached harbor, he tells her, "Sweet lady, you have given me life and living" (5.1.286).

Antonio hates Shylock because the moneylender is Jewish; Shylock hates Antonio because the merchant is Christian. Both men lend money to Bassanio. Though Shylock usually charges interest, in the case of Bassanio, he lends as Antonio would, gratis. Shylock refuses pleas for mercy from the Duke and Portia. When Portia asks Antonio, "What mercy can you render him [Shylock] ...?" (4.1.378), the demand for Shylock's conversion and insistence on keeping half of Shylock's wealth demonstrate that Antonio is no more compassionate than his antagonist. Both men are condemned to death, but each escapes that fate. Shylock laments the loss of his stones, by which he means jewels, but his statement is understood more grossly by the boys of Venice (2.8.24). Antonio refers to himself as "a tainted wether of the flock" (4.1.114), a wether being a castrated ram.

Both men lose that which they most love: Shylock his daughter, his money, and his religion, while Antonio must surrender Bassanio to Portia. The men's losses are linked in 2.8, as Salerio and Solanio first discuss Jessica's flight with Shylock's money and then describe Antonio's parting with Bassanio. Shakespeare probably did not know that in Dante's fourth circle of hell, hoarders like Shylock collide with wasters, and that in canto 11 of the *Inferno*, Dante placed usurers and Sodomites together in hell's seventh circle. He recognized, however, that beneath the seeming differences of skin color or religion, "one touch of nature makes the whole world kin" (*Troilus and Cressida*, 3.3.175). Following this logic, one could easily claim that Shakespeare made his moneylender Jewish not to demonize members of that faith but to show the common humanity, and inhumanity, of all.

**Time**

A lesser problem with *The Merchant of Venice* is its treatment of time. Shakespeare could be cavalier about chronology. Though *A Midsummer Night's Dream* opens with the statement that Theseus and Hippolyta will wed four days hence, the play occupies only three days. From the arrival of Desdemona, Cassio, and Othello at Cyprus to Desdemona's death, some 36 hours elapse, hardly long enough for even the randiest teenager to have "the act of shame a thousand times committed" (*Othello*, 5.2.211–212).

In *Merchant*, Shylock and Antonio sign their bond between 1.3 and 2.1. The contract allows Antonio three months in which to repay his loan. In 1.3, Bassanio invites Shylock to dine with him that day. Shylock initially refuses, but in 2.5 he changes his mind. During his absence, Jessica and Lorenzo elope, and that same night, Bassanio and Gratiano sail for Belmont. The journey must require less than a day, since at the end of 3.2, Bassanio promises to go back to Venice, save Antonio, and return without sleeping. Arriving at Belmont in 2.9, Bassanio refuses to delay even "a day or two" (3.2.1) before choosing among the caskets. Yet no sooner has he won Portia than Salerio arrives with Antonio's letter announcing that his bond is forfeit. Tubal, too, has had time to travel to Genoa to seek Jessica and learn of her extravagances as well as Antonio's losses. In 3.1, Shylock instructs Tubal to
engage an officer two weeks before the bond falls due, which it does in 3.2.

While a careful reading exposes these chronological inconsistencies, Shakespeare understood that they vanish in performance. Audiences do not recognize the impossibility of Desdemona's infidelity or the early occurrence of the new moon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Theatrical time bears no relationship to real time, so three months can elapse in Venice even as Bassanio contemplates the caskets in Belmont.

**Further Information**


Film and Video Productions
Douglas, Morse, dir. *The Merchant of Venice*. With Tom Yarrow (Shylock), Ed Martineau (Bassanio), Patrick Werner (Antonio), Lizzy Carter (Portia), and Stephanie Bain (Jessica). Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 2009.


Hal, Burton, dir. *The Merchant of Venice*. With Michael Hordern (Shylock), Denis Quilley (Bassanio), Rachel Gurney (Portia), and Veronica Wells (Jessica). BBC, 1955.

Horrox, Alan, dir. *The Merchant of Venice*. With Bob Peck (Shylock), Benjamin Whitrow (Antonio), and Haydn Gwynne (Portia). Channel 4, 1996.


Radford, Michael, dir. *The Merchant of Venice*. With Al Pacino (Shylock), Joseph Fiennes (Bassanio), Jeremy Irons (Antonio), Lynn Collins (Portia), and Zuleikha Robinson (Jessica). Sony Pictures, 2004.

Sichel, John, dir. *The Merchant of Venice*. With Laurence Olivier (Shylock), Joan Plowright (Portia), Jeremy Brett (Bassanio), and Louise Purnell (Jessica). Associated Television, 1973.

———, dir. *The Merchant of Venice*. With Antony Holland (Shylock), Alan Gray (Bassanio), and Trish Grange (Portia). West Coast Actors Company, 1976.

Welles, Orson, dir. *The Merchant of Venice*. With Orson Welles (Shylock), Charles Gray (Antonio), and Irina Maleeva (Jessica). 1969.

Copyright © 2019 Infobase Learning. All Rights Reserved.