Bloom's Literature

Merchant of Venice Modern Criticism and Critical Controversies

The major controversy regarding the play is its portrayal of Shylock, which many critics have regarded as anti-Semitic, though many others have just as vehemently denied the accusation. Harold Bloom in his introduction to *The Merchant of Venice* (2008) calls the play "pragmatically anti-Semitic," adding "Shylock remains vital and vitalizing, a great imagining. And yet his image has done great harm in the world." On the other hand, Kenneth Gross rejects this interpretation, calling the play and Shylock among Shakespeare's greatest achievements. In his 2006 book *Shylock is Shakespeare*, Gross claims that Shylock is an image of Shakespeare himself: "Shylock provides us a mirror of Shakespeare's sense of himself as a human author." He further writes, "There is much in the text that leads one to call it antisemitic, yet by itself that is too simple…. What continues to compel us in Shylock depends on things that cannot be made sense of strictly in terms of his Jewish identity." See the section on Difficulties of the Play for more discussion of the matter.

Marxist Criticism

With its emphasis on money and commerce, *The Merchant of Venice* invites Marxist criticism. Kiernan Ryan in "Re-reading *The Merchant of Venice*" (Coyle: 36–44) argues that the play attacks capitalism in Elizabethan England. Shakespeare shows "the ruthless priority of money values over human values, of the rights of property over the elementary rights of men and women" (39–40). Shylock's demand for a pound of flesh reifies the ruthlessness of mercantile society. As he observes at 4.1.90–101, the Venetians have no qualms about buying human flesh; they purchase slaves just as they would a dog or a mule or any other commodity.

Writing from the same Marxist perspective, Walter Cohen in *The Merchant of Venice and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism* (Coyle: 45–72) arrives at the opposite conclusion, that the play endorses capitalism. He argues that the public theater, itself a commercial enterprise, served to reconcile audiences to the new order. Shylock as usurer is defeated at the end of Act IV, but his vision of the force of contracts remains valid. Moreover, Antonio, the representative of mercantile values, joins the aristocratic assembly at Belmont in a fusion of commerce and landed wealth, feudalism and capitalism.

For John Drakakis, another Marxist critic, Shylock is the evil that capitalism refuses to admit about itself. In "Historical Difference and Venetian Patriarchy" (Wood: 23–53), he argues that Shylock is demonized because Venice does not want to recognize the real basis of its wealth. By forcing Shylock to convert, to become not an alien but a Venetian, the Christians render his wealth socially acceptable.

Feminist Criticism

Feminist criticism, too, has found much to discuss in *The Merchant*, largely because of Portia's strength. Karen Newman's 1987 article "Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structure of Exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*" argues that Portia challenges the traditional view of gender roles. Newman states that in giving Bassanio a ring, Portia surrenders herself and her property to her husband. Later, however, Portia retrieves the ring, and she confers so much more on Bassanio than he can repay that the conventional marriage roles are subverted. Thus, Portia controls the relationship. For Lynda E. Boose, in "The Comic Contract and Portia's Golden Ring" (1988), Portia most deserves the play's title. Boose claims that Portia is Shakespeare's first fully developed powerful comic heroine. Though she may seem generous, Portia actually accumulates power that she uses to control the men in the play.

Julie Hankey concurs that Portia's behavior questions traditional male and female roles. In "Victorian Portias: Shakespeare's Borderline Heroine" (1994), Hankey writes that Portia's "rational, unemotional composure, her methodical manner of speech and argument, her independence, not only of mind but of actions—encroached on traditionally male ground" (432). Such forcefulness could alienate Victorian male critics and compel women writers and actresses to defend Portia's femininity. Nonetheless, she—like Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Viola in *Twelfth Night*—refutes the male stereotype of the weak, emotional, incapable female.
New Historicism

James Shapiro's *Shakespeare and the Jews* (1996), an expansion of the 1992 Parkes Lecture of the same title that Shapiro delivered at the University of Southampton, exemplifies the New Historicist approach to the play. His book provides much background on Shylock's attempt to claim a pound of Antonio's flesh. Shapiro examines the long tradition of blood libel against Jews going back to 1144. For him, the play highlights anxieties that Elizabethans felt about Jews and that persisted for centuries afterwards.

Kim F. Hall's 1992 article "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?: Colonisation and Miscegenation in *The Merchant of Venice*" looks at another Elizabethan concern: interracial marriages. Again approaching this matter from a New Historicist perspective, Hall observes that in 1596, Elizabeth twice ordered the expulsion of blacks from her realm. In *Merchant*, Portia escapes having to marry Morocco, but in 3.5, Lorenzo criticizes Launcelot for impregnating a Moor (who nowhere appears in the play and is mentioned only in this scene). Hall notes that commerce crosses borders, and commercial exchanges can lead to social and sexual interchange as well. Thus, *The Merchant*'s economic concerns embody other fears as well.

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.

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