

**THE PLAYS OF  
SHAKESPEARE. THE  
MERCHANT OF VENICE**

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The Plays of Shakespeare. The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare

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**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**

**THE PLAYS OF  
SHAKESPEARE. THE  
MERCHANT OF VENICE**



THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

# PLAYS OF SHAKSPEARE

*THE "FALCON" EDITION*

With Introduction and Notes to each Play

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*THE PLAYS OF SHAKSPEARE*

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**The Merchant of Venice**

EDITED BY

**H. C. BEECHING, M.A.**

LATE EXHIBITIONER OF BALLIOL COLLEGE, OXFORD  
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## INTRODUCTION

THE interest of the *Merchant of Venice* is principally the interest of its plot. At the same time it is not one of Shakespeare's best-constructed plays. It will be well therefore to examine the sources from which it is derived, both because of this interest, and also to see whether they afford any explanation of the difficulties which most strike the reader. The main outline of the plot is found among the tales in a book called *Il Pecorone*, written by Ser Giovanni, a notary of Florence, about the year 1378, though not published until 1558. Ser Giovanni's story is shortly as follows :

The hero, whom to avoid confusion we may speak of as Bassanio, though Giovanni calls him Gianetto, is the youngest son of a Florentine gentleman, who on his death-bed instead of giving him, as he gave his brothers, a portion of his goods, recommends him to the care of his godfather, the richest merchant in Venice among the Christians. The merchant, who had been the dearest friend of the father, is charmed with the son's good manners, and adopts him as his heir. Accordingly Bassanio takes his place in the fashionable world of Venice, distinguishing himself both by his skill in all sports and by his universal courtesy. "He conducted himself so discreetly with all sorts of people that almost everybody in Venice was fond of him, and loved him greatly. His godfather could think of nothing but him."



One spring two of Bassanio's companions suggest that he should make with them the voyage to Alexandria to trade and see the world. His godfather consents to his going, and fits out a ship with merchandise. But on their way Bassanio sees a gulf with a fine port, and learns that it belongs to the lady of Belmont, a rich and beautiful woman, who will marry any one who succeeds in wedding her on the day of his arrival. If he fails he forfeits all that he brings with him. The condition seems simple, and Bassanio being determined to try his fortune slips away from the other ships and enters the port. Of course he fails, the lady's device being to feast her suitors, and give them a sleeping draught; he awakes to find his chance gone and his ship lost, and returns home with the story that they had struck upon a rock in the night, and he alone escaped on a floating spar. The next year he begs to be allowed to make another voyage on the pretext of retrieving his loss, but really to try his fortune once more at Belmont. His godfather reluctantly consents, and as Bassanio is unsuspecting, the event of this voyage is the same, and he returns home, having lost the second ship. He becomes in consequence so dejected that his godfather is obliged to consent to his going on a third voyage; but in order to make up the freight he has not only to sell most of his possessions, but to borrow ten thousand ducats of a Jew, the condition being that if they are not repaid on the feast of St. John, he must lose a pound of his flesh. This time Bassanio succeeds in his quest; a waiting woman betrays the trick, and he becomes lord of Belmont. But in the marriage festivities the godfather and the bond are forgotten. It is not until he sees the procession on St. John's day that he remembers, and then hurries to Venice only to find the Jew inexorable. But the lady of Belmont comes to the rescue; she disguises herself as a lawyer, and turns the tables on the

Jew by pointing out that the bond makes no mention of blood, refusing to take any fee for her services except her husband's ring, by which she afterwards makes herself known.

Now this story is clearly in more than one respect unfit for dramatic purposes. Nothing could be made upon the stage of the several voyages to Belmont, or of the trick of the sleeping draught. For these therefore it was necessary to find substitutes. The story adopted in the *Merchant of Venice*\* to give interest to the lady of

\* It has been thought certain from a passage in Stephen Gosson's *Schoole of Abuse*, an attack upon the stage, published in 1579, that this change was not made by Shakespeare, but had already been made in some previous play now lost. Gosson mentions a play called *The Jew*, for which he finds some words of commendation as representing "the greedinesse of worldly chusers and bloody mindes of Usurers," a description the first part of which seems to point to the casket episode. Mr. S. L. Lee, in two letters to the *Academy* (May 14th and 28th, 1887), brings forward two references, which make it probable that there was a previous play on the Story of the Pound of Flesh. The first is a letter of Spenser's to Gabriel Harvey of the year 1579, in which he signs himself, "He that is faste bounde vnto thee in more obligations than any marchante of Italy to any Jewe there." As Spenser shows in other places a familiarity with the stage, and as the *Merchant of Venice* was not written for at least fifteen years after the letter, it is not unreasonable to suppose that there is a reference to the same lost play of *The Jew*. The other passage is an episode in an old allegorical play called the *Three Ladies of London*, printed in 1584, in which Mercatore, an Italian merchant, is prosecuted by his creditor, the Jew Gerontus, to recover a loan of "three thousand ducats for three months." As the episode has nothing to do with the plot, Mr. Lee conjectures that it was introduced from a popular play, probably *The Jew*, to give a new term of life to the old morality. It should be noticed that the loan and the time for which it was borrowed are the same as in Shakespeare's play.

Belmont is the old story of the three caskets. It may readily be seen what advantages it offers. In the first place the character of Portia is relieved and humanised. The gay "lady of Belmont" in the Florentine story belongs to another world than ours—the world of Circe and Calypso. Her marriage with the young Venetian is an episode hardly of her choosing, and not very characteristic. By the device of the caskets there is at least a chance of winning her, and the chance can be made to turn more or less upon the character of the chooser. It is a further relief to represent the condition not as a caprice of the heiress herself, but as a safeguard devised by an eccentric father upon his death-bed. The substitution enables Shakespeare to preserve all the gaiety and cleverness required by the main plot, and at the same time to reconcile them with the deeper feelings. Portia's sprightly criticism of her wooers in the first scene in which she appears, is of a piece with the zest with which she undertakes the part of the young lawyer, and with the design to cajole her husband of his betrothal ring, and its great cleverness prepares us for the ability and self-confidence which she displays in court; but neither her vivacity nor her intellectual power, which is greater than that of any other of Shakespeare's women, is incompatible with genuine affection and admiration for a lover who should be worthy of them. Another advantage of the substitution would be that the casket story was in itself popular. It is found in various forms, and in many collections of stories, such as the *Decamerone* and the *Cento Nouvelle Antiche*, and in two different shapes in that great promptuary of monkish preachers, the *Gesta Romanorum*.\*

\* The particular form of the casket story used in the play is the story of *Anselmus the Emperor*. In order to discover if the daughter of the king of Naples was worthy to wed his son, he set her to choose one of three vessels—gold, silver, and lead—