

**THE MERCHANT OF
VENICE:
A COMEDY**

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The Merchant of Venice: A Comedy by William Shakespeare

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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

**THE MERCHANT OF
VENICE:
A COMEDY**



DAVID BELASCO

**THE
MERCHANT OF VENICE**

A COMEDY

BY

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

AS ARRANGED FOR THE CONTEMPORARY STAGE

BY

DAVID BELASCO

AND

**Acted Under His Direction
At the Lyceum Theatre, New York**

WITH

DAVID WARFIELD

**In the Character of Shylock
December 21, 1922**

**NEW YORK
PRIVATELY PRINTED
1922**

PREFACE.

All my life I have desired and purposed to produce THE PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE. They were the chief part of my earliest study, and my love for them increased with my years. In youth it was my frequent privilege to see many of the best actors our Stage has known in their finest Shakespearean embodiments, and, sometimes, personating minor characters, to act in association with them. The first words that I ever spoke in the theatre were words of Shakespeare,—those of the little *Richard, Duke of York*, in “*King Richard III.*,” a part which, in childhood, I played at the old Theatre Royal, in Victoria, B. C., with the famous Charles Kean and Ellen Tree, his wife.

Year by year my familiarity with the best Shakespearean acting increased. Walter Montgomery (idol of my boyhood!) as *Marc Antony, Benedick* and *Hotspur*; John McCullough as *Brutus, Falconbridge* and *Lear*; Lawrence Barrett as *Hamlet, Iago* and *Cassius*; Barry Sullivan as *Richard the Third, Othello* and *Macbeth*; Adelaide Neilson as *Juliet, Viola* and *Imogen*; Edwin Booth as *Othello, Iago, Hamlet, Richard, Macbeth* and *Brutus*,—those, and many others like to those, were objects of my constant and admiring study. Among the plays of Shakespeare in which I appeared during my theatrical novitiate, and which then were acted under my stage management—some of them many times—were “*Hamlet*,” “*King Richard III.*,” “*Othello*,” “*Romeo and Juliet*,” “*Julius Caesar*,” “*Macbeth*,” “*King John*,” “*King Lear*,” “*Coriolanus*,” “*Cym-*

beline," "Measure for Measure," "The Comedy of Errors," "Much Ado About Nothing," "A Midsummer Night's Dream," "The Taming of the Shrew," "As You Like It," "Twelfth Night" and "The Merchant of Venice." Among the great players of *Shylock* for whom it has been my fortune to direct the stage and to rehearse the immortal drama of which he is the central and pervasive figure are McCullough, Barrett, Sullivan, Booth, and—by no means least—William E. Sheridan. In various early barnstorming ventures of my own I indulged my dominant desire and presented "The Merchant" and some other of the Bard's great plays—with, be it said, a simplicity of scenic investiture which would cause productions made "in the Elizabethan manner" to appear as lavishly over-loaded with ornament! But such juvenile endeavors do not count; and circumstances have not, until now, permitted me really to begin fulfillment of my ambitious purpose,—which I do with this oft-postponed but at last accomplished revival of "The Merchant of Venice," in which it is my privilege to present the leader of the American Stage, my dear friend Mr. David Warfield, in one of the most exacting of test parts. In Shakespeare's own words: "Joy be the consequence!"

It is my earnest purpose to follow this revival with presentments of many other great plays of Shakespeare—among them "King Lear," with Mr. Warfield as the heart-broken and heart-breaking monarch of misery; "Romeo and Juliet," "King Henry V.," "Julius Cæsar," "Twelfth Night," and a trilogy comprising "King Richard II." and the First and Second Parts of "King Henry IV." The last named three plays were in great part arranged for my presentation by my friend the late William Winter, to whom I was, at the time of his lamented death, under promise to produce them. They shall be brought forth as soon as it is possible for me

to do so. All these ventures must, in the very nature of things, be beset by great difficulties and must entail a staggering burden of expense. They can be carried to success only with the approval, the hearty and practical encouragement, coöperation and support of the vast theatre-going public (which, in the past, has been so generously bestowed upon my enterprises) and of all those thoughtful and conscientious writers for the newspaper press who have at heart both the welfare of the community and the interests of the Stage and who by their critical commentaries so profoundly influence the popular taste. I do not subscribe to the despairing dictum of old Frederick Chatterton, sometime manager of Drury Lane Theatre, London, that "Byron spells bankruptcy and Shakespeare spells ruin,"—and the intellectual approval and practical support essential to adequate revivals of Shakespeare I not only earnestly bespeak but confidently expect to receive.

"The Merchant of Venice" is one of the plays by William Shakespeare mentioned by Francis Meres in his "Pallis Tamia." That work was published in 1598—and, therefore, the comedy must have been written at least a little earlier. It was entered at Stationers' Hall, London, in that year (1598), by James Roberts. It was published by Roberts, London, 1600 (the First Quarto), and it was issued again, in 1600, by Thomas Hayes (the Second Quarto). After that it was not reprinted until it appeared in the First Folio—1623.

The period of the action of "The Merchant of Venice" is generally accepted as being that in which it was written.¹ There is no known positive record of its first production. In the "Diary" of Philip Henslowe (partner

¹"The Venice of Shakespeare's own time, and the manners of that city, are delineated with matchless accuracy in this drama."—CHARLES KNIGHT.

in theatrical management with the famous Edward Alleyn, who founded Dulwich College, where the "Diary" is preserved) an allusion occurs to presentment of "the Venesyan Comedy" as having occurred in London on August 25, 1594. That allusion has been accepted by scholars as referring to the first production of "The Merchant of Venice." It seems a reasonable conjecture.¹ The dates assigned for composition of this comedy, by various commentators of authority, range from 1594 (Malone, Grant White, and others) to 1598 (Stevens, Hudson, and others). Charles Knight (without stipulating for any particular year) pleads, in general terms, for "a much earlier date than any hitherto assigned": i. e., for a date much earlier than 1594. To me it has long seemed that "The Merchant of Venice" was well described by the late Richard Mansfield as "a fairy tale,"—that is, as wholly a figment of fancy, fittingly localized in any Venetian period remote enough to be romantic and colorful enough to be picturesque. Therefore, without attempting contribution to the fog of scholarly dispute as to when it was written, I have placed the period of its action at about the first quarter of the sixteenth century. That was what may be called The Golden Age of Venice—the time when she had touched the highest point of all her greatness; when, resplendent in the full meridian of her glory, she seemed, indeed, a jeweled queen of the summer seas. Selection of that time, accordingly, permits me to provide for this lovely comedy not only romantic environment but, also, pleasingly novel as well as beautiful costuming. And I have been further swayed in so placing the period of its action by the fact that Jews, especially those of wealth and therefore of influence, were then permitted to live in

¹Dowden is inclined to think otherwise. He says: "This may have been Shakespeare's play, but more probably it was not."