

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649076949

The merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare

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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

**THE MERCHANT
OF VENICE**

Ms. A. 552.1.16.1 Shakespeare, William. Works. Vol. 163

THE ARDEN SHAKESPEARE

General Editor, C. H. HEYFORD, Litt. D., University of Manchester

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

EDITED BY

H. L. WITHERS

SOME TIME SCHOLAR OF BALLIOL COLLEGE, OXFORD

REVISED BY

MORRIS W. CROLL

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH IN PRINCETON UNIVERSITY



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24.1.48

D. C. HEATH AND COMPANY

BOSTON

NEW YORK

CHICAGO

ATLANTA

SAN FRANCISCO

DALLAS

LONDON

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GENERAL PREFACE

IN this edition of SHAKESPEARE an attempt is made to present the greater plays of the dramatist in their literary aspect, and not merely as material for the study of philology or grammar. Criticism purely verbal and textual has only been included to such an extent as may serve to help the student in the appreciation of the essential poetry. Questions of date and literary history have been fully dealt with in the Introductions, but the larger space has been devoted to the interpretative rather than the matter-of-fact order of scholarship. *Æsthetic* judgments are never final, but the Editors have attempted to suggest points of view from which the analysis of dramatic motive and dramatic character may be profitably undertaken. In the Notes likewise, while it is hoped that all unfamiliar expressions and allusions have been adequately explained, yet it has been thought even more important to consider the dramatic value of each scene, and the part which it plays in relation to the whole. These general principles are common to the whole series; in detail each Editor is alone responsible for the play or plays that have been intrusted to him.

Every volume of the series has been provided with a Glossary, an Essay upon Metre, and an Index; and Appendices have been added upon points of special interest which could not conveniently be treated in the Introduction or the Notes. The text is based by the several Editors on that of the *Globe* edition.

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INTRODUCTION

I. DATE OF THE COMPOSITION OF THE PLAY

The Merchant of Venice was first printed in 1600, when it appeared by itself in two quarto editions, one, called the First Quarto, published by James Roberts, the other, the Second Quarto, by Thomas Heyes. It had been in existence at least two years before, for on July 22, 1598, it was entered in the Stationers' Register by James Roberts under the name of "a booke of the Marchaunt of Venyce or otherwise called the Jewe of Venice." And, in the same year, 1598, appeared the *Palladis Tamia* or *Wit's Treasury*, by Francis Meres, who names the following comedies of Shakespeare: "his Gentlemen of Verona, his Errors, his Love labors lost, his Love labours wonne, his Midsummers night dreame, and his Merchant of Venice."

So far as external evidence goes, therefore,¹ we can be certain that the play was written not later than the end of 1597.

All attempts to fix the date more precisely than this rest upon unsatisfactory evidence. For instance, much use has been made of the fact that in the account book of Philip Henslowe, proprietor of the theatre where Shakespeare's fellow-actors were playing between 1594 and 1596, we find under the date August 25, 1594, a reference to the performance of a new play, the *Venesyon Comodey*. But there is no sort of proof that this is Shakespeare's play. Again, some have seen a close resemblance between Shylock's argument in the trial scene as to the treatment of slaves and the argument of a Jew contained in Silvanus's *Orator*, which was published in 1596. But the differences are at least as striking as the resemblance.

In manner, *The Merchant of Venice* is near akin to *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*. With these plays of Shakespeare's middle period, it has much more in common than with the earlier comedies mentioned along with it by Francis Meres. This is particularly conspicuous in the free employment of prose,

¹For the different kinds of evidence obtainable in settling the date of one of Shakespeare's plays, see the admirable summary in chapter iv of Dowden's *Shakespeare Primer*.

even in scenes of serious interest, and in the easy and varied rhythm of the verse. We ought not perhaps to make much of the fact that it is the *last* in Meres' list. But on general grounds it seems safe to believe that *The Merchant of Venice* was written only a short time before the *Palladis Tamia* appeared, and that 1597 is therefore its probable date.

2. SOURCES OF THE PLOT

1. Shakespeare did not as a rule invent the incidents that occur in his plays, but borrowed them, in outline at least, from various sources. Some of his plots are founded on older plays, others on romances; several are taken from Sir Thomas North's version of a French rendering of *Plutarch's Lives*. Scholars have spent endless pains in tracking out the old plays and stories on which Shakespeare drew for material; a number of them were collected and published in 1843 by John Payne Collier, under the title of *Shakespeare's Library*.

2. In the case of *The Merchant of Venice*, the outline of the plot was found by Capell as one of a collection of stories in an Italian book called *Il Pecorone*, written by a certain Ser Giovanni Fiorentino, and printed in 1578. A modern translation of it is given in the second volume of Collier's *Shakespeare's Library*; but no translation of Shakespeare's time has been discovered, and either such a translation once existed and has since perished, or else Shakespeare read the story in the original Italian. [For another possible alternative, see § 4, below.]

In the story as told in *Il Pecorone*, we find, as in Shakespeare's play, a Venetian merchant fondly devoted to a young kinsman, and this kinsman in love with a fair and wise lady of Belmont, who is only to be won by the suitor who shall undergo successfully an extraordinary test; we have the same pledge with a Jew, made for the same purpose, followed by the lover's success and the merchant's bankruptcy, and later on by a trial in which the merchant's rescue is achieved, through just the same interpretation of the law, by the lady in the same disguise; and finally, on their return to Belmont it is by means of a ring, begged from her husband when in Venice, that she is able, after due banter and mystification, to prove her identity with the unknown lawyer.

There are minor differences: for instance, in the Italian story none of the names of persons are the same as Shakespeare's. The lover makes *three* voyages to Belmont; the sum borrowed is *ten* thousand ducats; when the marriage takes place the young kins-

man forgets the merchant, and is only accidentally reminded of him just as the time allowed by the bond is on the point of expiring; and so on.

But, besides these slight variations, two important differences in incident are made by Shakespeare. First, he changes the method by which the Lady of Belmont is to be won, from its unsuitable form in *Il Pecorone* to that of the choice among three caskets; and second, he gives the Jew a daughter, whose elopement with a Christian forms an important part of the play.

3. The sources of these two variations must be looked for elsewhere. (i) The story of a choice among three vessels, respectively of gold, silver, and lead, with inscriptions somewhat similar to those in the play, and with a marriage depending on the right choice, occurs in the *Gesta Romanorum*, a Latin collection of mediæval tales, made in England probably about the thirteenth century. This collection was translated into English, became extremely popular, and was frequently printed in Shakespeare's time. (ii) A story resembling in some points that of Jessica has been found in the *Tales of Massuccio di Salerno*, who flourished about 1470.

4. Scholars have proved that both the story of the Pound of Flesh, and the story of the Caskets, were widely popular, and that they occur in slightly different forms again and again in European and in Oriental literature.¹ But it is certain, from accumulation of coincidences, that it was upon *Il Pecorone* and the *Gesta Romanorum* that Shakespeare drew for the plot of *The Merchant of Venice*. It has been conjectured, indeed, that Shakespeare did not use these sources at first hand, but that the two stories had already been combined to form a single play, and that it was this play that Shakespeare used as his material. This conjecture is founded on a reference which has been discovered in a book called *The Schoole of Abuse*, published in 1579, written by Stephen Gosson, a student of Oxford. The book is an attack on the poets and playwrights of the time, and among the plays specially excepted from blame by the author is "*The Jew . . . shown at the Bull . . . representing the greedinesse of worldly chusers and bloody mindes of usurers.*" This description is exceedingly short, but it is certainly apt enough if it refers to the combined tales of the Bond and the Caskets.

Two other possible references to this play of *The Jew* have been discovered: one in a letter of Edmund Spenser's, written about 1579, and another in a play called *The Three Ladies of London*,

¹ For details, refer to F. S. Boas, *Shakspeare and his Predecessors* (Murray-London, 1896), page 215, note.