



# **A Critical Analysis William Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice"**

**By: Mrs. Eqbal A AL.Farhan**

**Instructor at Public Authority for Applied Education and Training**

**Kuwait**

**Email: [zentalsomer@hotmail.com](mailto:zentalsomer@hotmail.com)**

## **Abstract**

This is an approach to understand Shakespeare's attitude towards Jews through his famous romantic comedy "The Merchant of Venice". In this play he demonstrates the religious state of the society regarding Judaism and the Jewish and how they conduct usury and trade. In addition, how usury influenced the social class structure of the Christian and Jews that increased hatred towards Judaism. The religious state was depicted through two main characters. "Shylock" the Jewish moneylender whose has thrust for blood and money. The second main character is "Antonio" a Christian merchant known for his kindness and generosity. Similarly to other plays in his time, he illustrates the constant conflict between virtue and evil. Through series of events along the play, during pleasant moments and desperate situations, eventually virtue defeats evil.



## **Introduction**

The paper will highlight several elements starting with a brief overview of Shakespeare's life and how he rose to fame. Moreover, it will stress on a particular work of his multiple productions. This is "The Merchant of Venice". In addition, the paper will provide a critical analysis of the play and the controlling elements such as Christianity, Judaism and trade. The events occurred in Europe, Venice precisely during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, describing the stressed relation between the Jews and the Christians at that time.

## **Shakespeare's life**

William Shakespeare's life is a story of a town and a city. He was raised in Stratford while London gave him the fortune and fame. Before coming one of the most famous authors of that century and nowadays as well.

Living a simple life in a small town where Avon River dividing vines from woodlands, supplied fresh water and means of communications. The significant of Stratford was a quite place till Christianity reached it. For several centuries the Bishop's heirs were the lords of all states and farms. Later when all farmers became free from paying taxes for their lands, Stratford developed into a prosperous agriculture commercial hub. So, the town began to flourish. Churches, markets and banks built over the years.

Shakespeare's grand father Richard settled in 1529 in Stratford. He rented a land, titled the rich soil and pastured his livestock. Richard Shakespeare suffered long term problem with the tenants of lands. He helped to appraise the goods of deceased vicar, as well as other villagers. When Richard died in 1561 he had two sons. One of them was John (William Shakespeare's father), an alderman and successful Glover who married to Marry Arden, the daughter of an affluent landowning farmer. They had our famous English poet, playwright and actor William on 23, April 1564.



That summer the plague struck the small town of Stratford killing more than two hundred inhabitants. At that time it meant seventy percent of the population. But thank God the plague didn't reach the house in which the cradle of infant William Shakespeare and the world will not have Shakespeare's precious work.

William Shakespeare was raised in a fulfilled town. At that period Stratford, on Sundays and Holy Days, shops and markets shut their doors. The law of the Kingdom obliged all people to attend preaches at church and anyone who violates the law he or she will be punished by local court. The religious training provided for Shakespeare by his community was Orthodox and Protestant. His Schooling, if it faithfully committed to the law of the kingdom, would have inclined him to the Church of England. Also Shakespeare received a grammar school education at the King's New School of Stratford-upon-Avon. It was an excellent institution of its kind at that age. Shakespeare's teacher held a university degree and was well qualified. Around 1574 he would have passed from the lower school to the advanced curriculum of the upper. Literary speaking, Shakespeare had formal education and had as any of his equal contemporaries in Stratford but the miracle emerged in London.

The biographer did not know exactly how long did Shakespeare remain at the King's New School of Stratford-upon-Avon but later he worked at his father's shop. The poet was aware of all kind of skin at his father's leather shop.

Marriage is no doubt a crucial event in the histories of most men, but when it occurs in the life of National Poet it assumes a fateful significant. William Shakespeare fell in love with Anne Hathaway, she was older than him; they got married and lived in a cottage at the edge of the Forest of Arden. Shakespeare and Anne had three children. Their first child was a girl (Susanna). Less than two years Anne gave birth to twins, a boy (Hamnet) and a girl (Judith). William Shakespeare's family was completed in 1585.



When exactly did Shakespeare leave his family heading forward to London no one exactly knew that the way from Stratford to London was far long. In London; The Thames, huge cathedral and London Bridge dominated the scene. The houses with their green gardens planted with flowers aside with large trees. For life in the big city had grown fierce because of the increasing number of population and refugees coming from neighboring countries fleeing religious troubles.

But still there were those who are looking for entertainment despite the hard circumstances. Stages were built in the streets in the form of theatres and performances were held by groups of six men and mostly these ends with dramatic endings killing someone. Anyway; Stratford hundred miles distant had its problems too.

The curtains of the theatre opened its doors in 1577. These were the theatres of northern suburbs at the time of Shakespeare's coming to the stages of London.

Coming to London without money and friends, and being a stranger all these factors meant for Shakespeare self support. So, He worked at the play house gaining money from taking care of the gentlemen's horses that came to see the play. This was the first appearance to Shakespeare at a playhouse. Back at Stratford while he was still in his twenties he started writing plays that depict the English history. By 1592 Shakespeare had made his mark as a playwright. During this period Shakespeare combined achievements as an actor, sharer and playwright made him, as our greatest living authority on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage.

Shakespeare did not intend to publish his plays because at that time an author had little control over his literary works once they left his hands. Authors were unprotected by law of copyright. That's why about half of Shakespeare's plays appeared in quarto editions during his life time, however all this came about after 1592.



He continued in writing, producing and acting in his plays until by the mid-nineties. During his life Shakespeare wrote seventeen comedies (among them was the **Merchant of Venice**), ten historical plays, eleven tragedies and six poems.

Shakespeare ordered his life according to his professional needs; first the theatre afterward the Globe as fixed but at the same time maintained over the years straightened his ties with his native Stratford, where he left behind a wife and three children. The record never showed if they ever visited him in London.

When he was back again to Stratford he never forgot the poor of his town remembered with donation of pounds. Shakespeare spent his last years in a fine house, called "New Place" in Stratford where he died and buried. Shakespeare was fifty-three when he died on the twenty third of April 1616.

### **How do Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies differ?**

Tragedies and comedies both differ by the way they end. Shakespeare being the greatest dramatist of all time followed the same method. Tragedies usually end with death of the main characters like (Hamlet). While Shakespearian comedies are those that have happy endings, usually involving marriages between the unmarried characters. Shakespearian comedies tend to also include: a greater emphasis on situations rather than characters, a struggle of young lovers to overcome difficulty, often presented by elders and finally separation and re-unification.

## **The merchant of Venice**

### **Main characters of the play**

- Antonio , a merchant of Venice
- Shylock, a Jewish moneylender
- Portia , the lady of Belmont



- Nerissa , her gentlewomen
- Bassanio , Antonio's friend
- Leonardo , Bassanio 's servant
- Jessica , Shylock's daughter
- Graziano, Bassanio's friend

### **A summary of "Merchant of Venice"**

The events of this play occurred in Venice, Italy. Venice was one of the most commercial cities at that time. Many Christians were living there among them was "**Antonio**" who has great kind heart. He was exceedingly generous helping those who were asking him for money as a loan. The greedy Jewish "**Shylock**" was also there who made a great fortune from lending money to people and taking a large amount of interest. Shylock the moneylender who had hatred to Antonio despite of what he was showing of fabricated respect, honor and consideration. But whenever they meet Antonio rebuke Shylock for his aggressive deeds with debtors and accusing him with imposition and exploitation. Shylock was waiting for the right moment to take his revenge from Antonio but he did not know when this will happen. Antonio was admired by his friend for his bravery and generosity. **Bassanio** was a close and faithful friend to Antonio. Bassanio was a noble from Venice but he is not that rich because he spent his money on his manifestation. He kept borrowing money from Antonio whenever needs who was very generous with him as Bassanio was his preferable friend. Bassanio was in love with a beautiful, intelligent rich girl; her name was **Portia** a lady of Belmont. She had inherited considerable properties from her wealthy father. To win her heart as well as to be her future husband, Bassanio needed three thousands ducats to look like the appropriate husband.

Antonio appreciates Bassanio, so when he asked for three thousands ducats, Antonio said yes before knowing it was to propose to Portia. All his capitals tied up in merchant ship at sea, Antonio must go to greedy Jewish Shylock demanding the money.



Shylock wrapped his hatred in kindness offering three thousands- month loan at no interest, but not repaid. The loan will repaid by a pound of flesh of Antonio. Shylock hated Christians because his daughter eloped with a Christian. Antonio and Shylock went to a lawyer to sign on the conditioned contract. Bassanio tried his best to make his friend retract from his decision but he failed. Antonio was sure that his ships will arrive at the designated time.

As soon as Bassanio had the money from Antonio, he headed straight forward to Belmont (a city near Venice) where his dream girl lived to make his proposal. He was accompanied by his loyal servant **Graziano**. Without any hesitation Portia said yes with happiness for the nobleman proposal. He admitted to her that he doesn't have that great wealth; all what he have that he is coming from his deep- rooted noble family. She did not hesitate to grant him herself and her wealth for the sake of their love. Portia gave him as well her ring and begged him to never ever give it away no matter was the reason. In the same vein his servant Graziano felt in love with her gentle woman **Nerissa** and also wanted to marry her. Their masters agreed happily for their engagement.

Unfortunately, these peaceful moments did not last long for Bassanio; he received shocking news from Antonio telling him that "I had lost all my ships at the sea and I will not be able to pay my loan to Shylock. I will cut a part from my body as agreed upon .what I hope for is to see you before I die".

With sadness and grieve Bassanio told his beloved Portia that he owed his friend Antonio three thousands ducats as he took them from a Jewish lender and he has to reclaim this loan by Antonio's flesh. Portia was very impressed by grieves destiny of this faithful friend. She said to her lover to part instantly to Venice with the money to save him and promised that she will be a great support for him. They have to get married sooner so that Bassanio could have the right to dispose her money. That what had happened? They got married and even their servants. When Bassanio reached Venice Antonio was already imprison.



Bassanio spend great effort to make Shylock takes the money but he insisted to have the flesh especially that payment had expired according to what they agreed on in the contract. Antonio has to be at court.

Not only Bassanio was in anxiety and confusion but also even Portia. She made a decision to travel to Venice to save Bassanio's loyal friend. Before that she wrote to her famous lawyer informing him about this weird, complicated and hostile contract asking for his advice. She demanded also a lawyer gown. Directly she received a letter from the lawyer with all the details that might help to attend the trail at the court.

Portia began her trip to Venice with Nerissa and then to the court. As soon as she was there she informed the jury that she will be attending as a defense lawyer for Antonio. At the court she saw Antonio, Shylock and her husband, standing next to his intimate friend who did not recognize her because she was disguised as a male lawyer. She directed her words to Shylock to be more compassionate and recede his condition of taking a flesh from Antonio especially that he has the ability to pay the three thousands ducats now. She pretended that she accepting the judgment. She began by ordering Shylock to show the scale that he is going to use to weigh Antonio's flesh and bringing a doctor to help Antonio not bleeding to death because this will be a crime. Shylock has to be punished for this crime. If he is going to do so he will be convicted of this crime all his properties and money will be confiscated by the Venetian government. The shocked Shylock beseeched the court to forgive him. In sequence the court announced it is judgment against Shylock to surrender half of his money to Venice's authority and second half to Antonio who was going to die because of the deadly conditioned contract. Antonio knew that Shylock deprived his daughter of inheritance because of her marriage to a Christian. So, he refused to take the money but Shylock had to alter his will now, giving all his wealth to his daughter and her husband after his death. Shylock couldn't flee the condition so he agreed. The trail ended with releasing Antonio.





Bassanio expressed his appreciation to the skilful lawyer offering him the three thousands ducats without recognizing that she was his wife. The lawyer refused to take the money instead he is going to have the ring that Bassanio was wearing. Bassanio was embarrassed and refused politely apologizing he cannot never give away this ring because it is a gift from his loveable wife. He declared that he can buy another ring for him. The disguised Portia left angrily but Bassanio's followed her with the ring later.

When Antonio, Bassanio and his servant reached Belmont; Portia and her gentle woman showed great sorrow and regret of their husbands because they lost the rings. A real sadness prevailed around. Antonio asked Portia to forgive him because he was to be blamed for this problem and her husband gave the ring to the lawyer as an expense for the case. He assured her that her husband will be faithful as long as they live together. Portia responded saying that for your sake I will give this ring back to him. At this moment the three men discovered that she was the lawyer who was at the court. All of them were in great pleasure and the story ended with Portia announcing the news that Antonio's ships has arrived safely to Venice.

### **Critical analyses for William Shakespeare's play the Merchant of Venice.**

In this play William Shakespeare demonstrates the social, political, economic statuses in Venice in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He demonstrates several important elements such as Venice, Europe, Christians, Jews, racism, anti-Semitism, usury and justice.

During that era of time the Christians for several reasons hated the Jews such as the crucifixion of Jesus, their habits, their economic status and being wealthy and enjoy some luxury more than Christians and other reasons. Moreover, anti-Semitism was significantly common among the public in England, based on all of these reasons William Shakespeare was inspired to write this play, the play believed to be written between 1596 and 1598.



The play demonstrates an Italian merchant and his friend who wants a loan of 3000 ducats (the currency) from a Jewish a moneylender who imposes interest (usury), to continue his business. In this case the moneylender did not ask for interest from the merchant. However, they signed a contract, the deal states that if the merchant did not pay the agreed amount of money in the agreed time, the moneylender will cut off a pound of flesh from the merchant body and the play continues. the plot and the events get more complex(Wells, 2008)

There are several characters at the play; these characters are considered the main characters:

Antonio: the merchant of Venice who wants to loan money from the Jewish moneylender, who hates the moneylender for his Judaism and exploitation of people and the use of usury.

Shylock: the Jewish moneylender who hates Antonio for his Christianity and he keep disrespecting and humiliating Shylock.

Jessica: Shylock's daughter and in love with Lorenzo.

Lorenzo and Bassiano: Antonio's friends.

From a historical perspective, after the expulsion of the Jews from England a significant number of them inhabited Venice and during that time Venice was a commercial and financial hub of Europe. However, due to hatred of the Jews that were not allowed to own any land and they could not occupy any job and the only way of surviving is trade usury and was not forbidden in Judaism when loan money to the public. Furthermore, they were considered as 'aliens' under the Venetian law. (Wells, 2008)

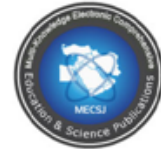
According to academics there is a huge debate regarding shylock's character whether it is a greedy villain character or poor tragic character. For various reason and different perspective such as being hated for his Judaism , race , ethics and usury and being financially capable of living a good decent life. However, shylock is just practicing his religion.



Additionally, Shylock was and still seen by different academics that he is a greedy and filthy person who only cares about money and they believe that Judaism play a significant part about in his morals and principals and was always depicted him as an evil person. However, Shylock is just a perfectly normal human being and each human his own qualities weather they were good or bad and particularly from this point we blame the Christian Antonio for the consistent cursing of Shylock, which is morally wrong regardless the religion of the human. Another misfortune that supports the argument of Shylock is a tragic character is that was betrayed by his own daughter Jessica after she stole his ducats, stones, and jewelry, also she married Lorenzo a Christian man and converted to Christianity. Moreover, from a social perspective Shylock suffered from social isolation from the Venetian society because of his religion and usury, also he and the rest of the Jews used to live in place called the “ghetto”, which is place only for the Jewish in Venice and is considered a kind of social isolation. From a humanitarian or human rights perspective Shylock should have been a citizen in Venice with job to occupy and a property to own. However, the Venetians regarded him as alien. Furthermore, the human rights of Shylock were violated significantly because he is used to cursed, humiliated and disrespected, also was ordered to abandon his religion and practice and finally he lost everything his money, religion, daughter, commerce and lived in social isolation (Coyle,1998) , (Grebanier,1962) , (Cooper,1970) , (Cady,1933)

According to academics, we can see that Antonio enjoys several things at the play regardless that he is a Christian merchant; they see him as a generous, friendly person with a good character and morals. However, from a personal perspective, Antonio is not quite ethical good person for different reasons for instance, he is used to curse, humiliate and disrespect Shylock for his religion, race and being a usurer.

Furthermore, Antonio is an arrogant person because Shylock offered him money without asking for interest. Additionally, few academics argue that Antonio should have treated Shylock as a merchant not as Jew. However, he was driven by the hatred of the Jews and Shylock (Cliffs Note), (Rosen shield, 2002)



Usury plays a dramatic role in the play, during that era and until this the Jewish are the masters of the economic and commercial activity due to their relations, and this caused the Jews to live a decent luxuries life and enjoy a good financial conditions. Furthermore, it was accepted in Judaism to practice usury. However, in Christianity it was prohibited to practice usury, which was one of the reasons that Christians hate Jews because the lived in a worse conditions then the Jews (Wells, 2008).

As we mentioned at the begging, Venice is used to be the economical hub of Europe to it harbors, because the Jews had a great impact on the financial and commercial activity they were hared by the Christians and from this point William Shakespeare based his play at and his hatred for the Jews (wells,2008).

According to the play we can say the Jews suffered from racism and discrimination even when the law is being applied. Although, Shylock and Antonio signed a deal, shylock was considered an “alien” under the Venetian law and was regarded guilty for trying to kill a Venetia citizen and all of his property and belongings were prosecuted and have been distrusted between Antoine and the state (The Merchant of Venice).

The merchant of Venice has a significant impact of the European heritage for several reasons such as being one of the most famous plays in the English literature. However, it highlighted very important subjects; these subjects are Jews, Judaism, and anti-Semitism. The play gives us a historical glance at the Jews and their suffering before, during and after that era; it gave a stereotypical image of the Jews characters being, greedy, dirty. Furthermore, it effected significantly on European states and other countries because it demonstrated Jews as bad people and this action influenced badly because it raised anti-Semitism in countries that Jews does not exist or represent a miniature minority of the society that they live it. Furthermore, Jewish are still suffering from anti-Semitism in different places and during history they suffered from mass-murder crimes such as the Holocaust during the Nazi state of Germany, and from this point we must carefully and correctly distinguish between the Jews and the Zionists because most of the people cannot distinguish between these two.



In addition, Judaism in this play was represented and introduced by a villain or demon according to the writer, and from the point the reader or the watcher can adopt a bad idea regarding the religion, which effected badly of Jews and Judaism (adl.org).

Meanwhile, during the same period of time the Jews were being treated decently with had almost equal rights like Muslims in the soil of the Ottoman Empire that lasted for 600 hundred years. The Jews conducted trade and mixed well in the religiously diverse society of the Ottoman Empire. During their residency in the Ottoman Empire documents never showed any kind of violence or discriminations against the Jews. The Jews themselves contributed in the development of the empire and claimed that they were treated respectively not like European states that expelled them from Europe. This demonstrates that Islam is faith of religious toleration and the people their right to practice their religion and Judaism is a monotheist.

**Resources:**

*Shakespeare, W. The Merchant of Venice, Penguin books, London.*

*Wells, S. (1988), The Oxford Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, Oxford University, Oxford*

*Grebanier, B. (1962) The Truth About Shylock, Randon House, Inc. New york.*

*Adl.org (online Access)*

*Rosenshield, G. (2002) Shofar, Vol. 20 No. 2, Jstore Online access.*

*Cooper, John R. (1970) Shakespeare Quarterly, Vol. 21, No.2, Jstore ,Onlie access*

*Cady, Frank W. (1933) The Shakespeare Association Bulletin, Vol. 8 , No. 3/5, Jstore online access.*



*William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life : S ...*

[www.bookdepository.com/William-Shakespeare-Compact-Documentary-Life-S-Schoenbaum/9780195051612](http://www.bookdepository.com/William-Shakespeare-Compact-Documentary-Life-S-Schoenbaum/9780195051612).

*The Merchant of Venice - William Shakespeare - Oxford ...*

[global.oup.com/academic/product/the-merchant-of-venice-9780199535859](http://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-merchant-of-venice-9780199535859).