

Shakespeare's **MERCHANT OF VENICE**

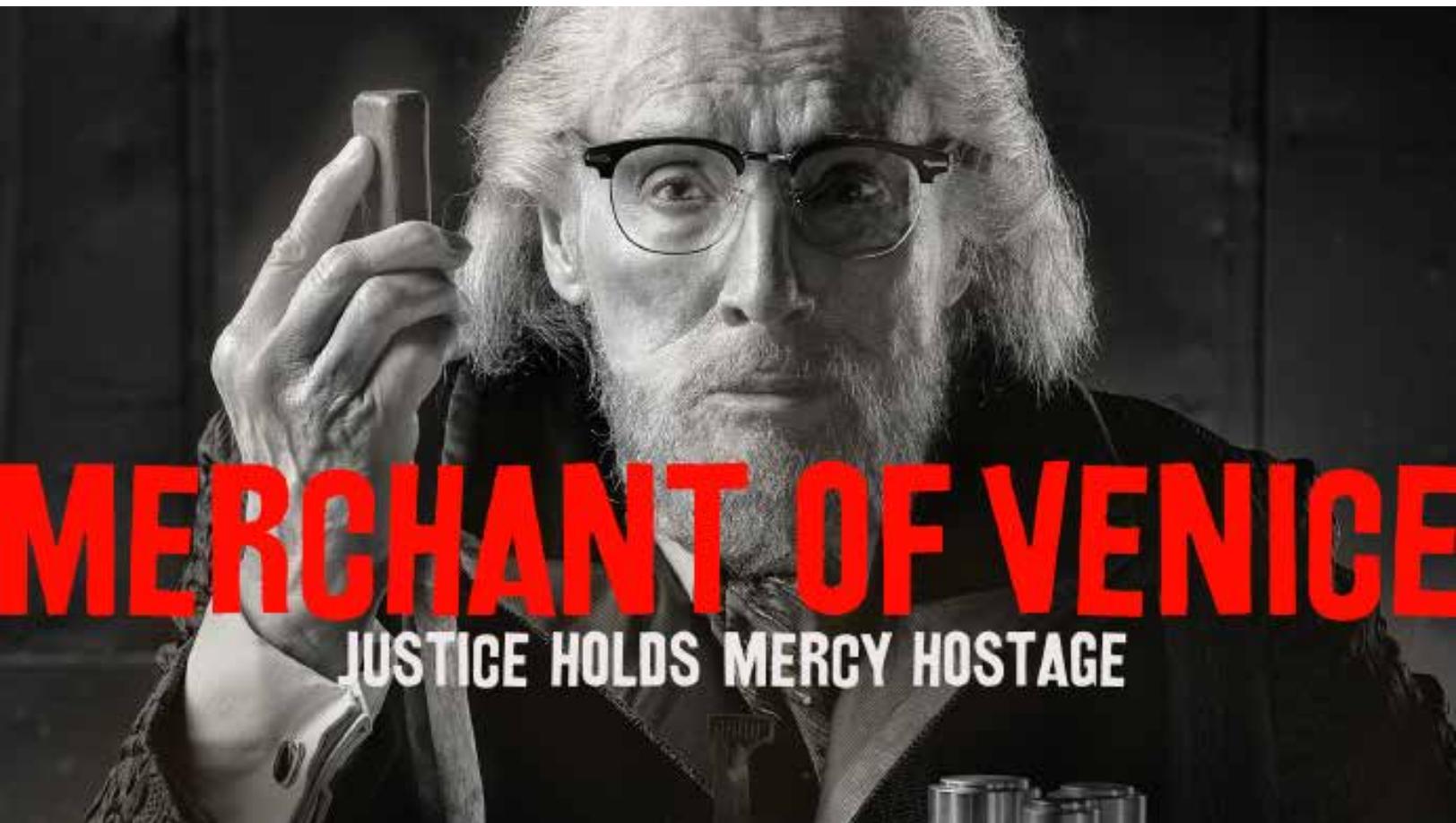
March 2017

These study materials are produced for use with the
Bob Jones University Classic Players production.

smart

SHARING MASTERWORKS OF ART

AN EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH OF BOB JONES UNIVERSITY



The Merchant of Venice SMART Performance for educators and students, March 14 at 7 p.m. at Rodeheaver Auditorium.
Call (864) 770-1372 for tickets.

THOUGHTS FROM THE DIRECTOR

SHYLOCK AND HIS JEWISHNESS

In recent years, theatre directors have shied away from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The play is plagued by what is often termed "the Shylock problem": The money-hungry Jewish usurer who is both abuser and abused. Understandably, the play's harsh anti-Semitic language poses difficulties for actors and audiences alike. As humans, Christians must renounce all such prejudice and malice. However, beneath Shylock's Jewishness we recognize the same sinful human nature that each of us

possesses, solid evidence of the tragic fall of Adam in the Bible. It is this appalling display of human depravity—not Shylock's ethnicity—that we repudiate in this production.

As the creative team and cast approached *Merchant*, we sought to highlight not Shylock's race, but rather his humanity. Our production does not expunge all references to Jewishness, for insults lobbed at Shylock further reveal the ugliness of human nature. However, our adaptation attempts to thoughtfully minimize indications of race or ethnicity while focusing on character traits.

SETTING

This production is set in 1953 Italy. The time period forces the audience to examine each of the characters' backstories, not in an Elizabethan setting but in a post-Holocaust European world.

When the play was written, Jews in Venice could pursue only a limited number of professions—moneylending being one. This production's mid-20th-century setting removes the limitations of occupation for Shylock, thereby helping to place the focus not on his nationality but on his negative character traits: greed, hatred and revenge.

GREED

Shylock's major flaw is his greed. When he questions Tubal about his daughter Jessica's whereabouts, Shylock seems more passionate about the stolen jewelry and money than about Jessica herself. Salanio recalls Shylock's response to Jessica and Lorenzo's elopement:

*My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
Justice! the law! my ducats, and my daughter!
And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones,
Stolen by my daughter! Justice! find the girl;
She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats.*

Clearly, Shylock's thoughts lie chiefly with his beloved possessions.

HATRED

Shylock states that he hates Antonio because the merchant "is a Christian." But he further reveals the underlying reason for this antipathy:

*But more for that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.*

It is Antonio's generosity that Shylock despises; for by lending without usury to those in financial need, the merchant causes Shylock to lose that which he prizes most: his money.

REVENGE

Avarice and prejudice clearly drive the story of *Merchant*. But they are not what lead to Shylock's ruinous end. Near the beginning of the play's iconic trial, Shylock is offered twice as much money as is required by his bond. Shylock not only refuses the offer, but also says that were it 12 times the sum he

is owed, he would rather have his "pound of flesh." Shylock's revenge seems inexorable. Nor riches nor reason sway him from his demand for justice.

To emphasize Shylock's character traits over his Jewishness, this production includes Tubal, Shylock's Jewish friend and only supporter, in the trial scene. Near the trial's end, Tubal becomes repulsed by Shylock's blind passion for revenge. When nothing assuages Shylock's vengeance, Tubal exits the courtroom, leaving Shylock to his own destruction. Tubal rejects his friend, not because of Shylock's Jewishness—for he himself is a Jew—but because of the evil decisions Shylock has made. They have led to his demise. Shylock's is a human problem. But that is not the end of the story. As Portia begs us to consider,

*In the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.*

■ Jeffrey Stegall, director/designer

A SHOWCASE OF SHAKESPEARE'S SKILL

The Merchant of Venice is one of Shakespeare's most exciting and thought-provoking plays. It includes some of the most remarkable characters ever created, and raises issues that are as pressing today as they were 400 years ago.

If Shylock is one of Shakespeare's most perplexing and repugnant figures, Portia is among his most charming, intelligent women.

The play is also a showcase for some of the playwright's most famous lines. Portia's "quality of mercy" and Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speeches are among the most frequently-cited passages in Shakespeare's plays.

While the text teems with memorable characters and lines, the main attraction of *Merchant* onstage is its drama. The climax of the trial scene—Portia's "Tarry a little; there is something else"—is as startlingly dramatic as anything Shakespeare wrote.

Alongside the high drama and suspense of the pound-of-flesh plot, Shakespeare gives audiences broad comedy, sparkling wit, jests, music and romance in two related plots.

The play ends with lighthearted banter, pledges of love, and luminous poetry in a moonlit garden at Belmont, one of Shakespeare's most delicate and joyful settings.

The full range of Shakespeare's remarkable talents finds no better showcase than *The Merchant of Venice*.





Bob Jones Jr. played the role of Shylock for the first 12 Classic Players productions (1930–1986).

THE STORY

Virtuous Portia is heiress of the Italian estate of Belmont. Among her many suitors is the gallant but destitute Bassanio, a Venetian gentleman. Certain he cannot win Portia's hand without ample funds, he begs to borrow 3,000 ducats from his wealthy friend Antonio—the merchant of the title.

Since his own money is tied up in shipping and not wanting to disappoint his friend, Antonio resolves to take out a loan. He approaches the Jewish moneylender Shylock, a man he despises for his bad temperament and greed.

To Antonio's surprise, Shylock agrees to the loan. But in "merry sport" Shylock proposes a single condition: Antonio must sign a bond allowing Shylock to slice off a pound of Antonio's flesh should the money not be repaid in three months. Confident that his ships will return well

ahead of the time, Antonio signs the bond.

But Portia is not to be wooed with ducats. Her father decreed before his death that all would-be suitors must use their wits to choose among a gold, silver or lead casket (chest). The suitor successful in unlocking the one containing Portia's portrait wins her, a task that Antonio's wit, wisdom and sound character allow him to accomplish.

The two young lovers marry, and all seems well. Three months pass, during which time not one of Antonio's ships arrives safely home. Shylock wastes no time appealing to the Venetian courts for his pound of flesh.

Not wanting to see her new husband's friend harmed, Portia devises a plan to outwit Shylock and save Antonio. But Shylock is implacable. After a poetic discourse on mercy, the court agrees to satisfy the bond, but stipulates a condition that gives the moneylender pause. In the end, law must give way to mercy.

A PARABLE OF MERCY

The Merchant of Venice is one of William Shakespeare's most richly complex and heatedly debated plays. In it, Shakespeare presents numerous ethical extremes—prejudice and mercy, avarice and self-sacrifice, revenge and forgiveness—within the context of a traditional Elizabethan comedy. There is love, laughter, disguise and a happy-ever-after. The problem comes in the play's insensitive and oft-offensive portrayal of the Jewish moneylender, Shylock. It is a play that forces modern audiences to examine their own biases and misconceptions, and often leaves them teetering uncomfortably between indignation at Shylock's malice and horror at the other characters' treatment of him.

In this late 16th-century play, the terms *Christian* and *Jew* appear to serve more as racial and cultural labels than as religious ones. Most of the play's Christian characters are poor examples of Christianity, just as Shylock is a poor example of Judaism.

Shylock's fraudulence is apparent: He is greedy, unforgiving, vengeful and unkind even to those who love him. But note the hypocrisy of Shakespeare's Christians: They spit on, scorn and defame their Jewish neighbors. So when the Christians cry "Foul!" at Shylock's claim to Antonio's flesh, Shylock protests that he is merely imitating them: "If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge."

Act 4's courtroom scene marks the play's climax, not only emotionally and theatrically, but also theologically. There, emerging from the muck of prejudice and pretense, the Christian ideal is given voice in Portia's famous "mercy" speech and is finally demonstrated in the mercy of the Duke and Antonio. After scene upon scene wherein those called Christian do not act like Christians, Portia's portrait of what the Jewish Apostle James might call "pure and undefiled religion" shines like a candle in the dark Venetian world.

Portia's impassioned appeal, however, cannot touch Shylock's heart. Rather he is smug and self-righteous, demanding only the letter of the law. He resists every appeal but the exact conditions of his bond. This is ultimately his downfall.

The impasse between mercy and justice transforms the courtroom scene into something larger than the case itself. The tension is not merely over Shylock's legal claim ("I'll have my bond") against Antonio's defaulted debt. Nor is the tension over the irrational cruelty of personal revenge.

Seen through the lens of a biblical worldview, the courtroom becomes a parable of the clash between Law (justice) and Gospel (mercy). The one who demands pure justice will find justice to be his undoing. Yet mercy without justice holds no one accountable for evil. God alone is able to dispense complete mercy alongside perfect justice through Christ's sacrifice. His mercy is humankind's only hope—a shorthand for the Gospel.

*Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
That in the course of justice none of us*

*Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.*

In keeping with this progression from religious caricature to religious ideal, this production dispenses with Shylock's forced conversion to Christianity. Whatever it may have communicated in Shakespeare's day, such compulsion is incongruous not merely with modern norms of tolerance, but with the glimpse of true Christianity the audience finally sees in the courtroom.

To be sure, not everyone in the courtroom is changed. However, by scene's end it seems that both Shylock and Antonio are, if not truly changed, at least humbled. The audience leaves the courtroom hopeful that neither will treat the other as he has in the past.

■ Layton Talbert

SHAKESPEARE AND MUSIC

One of Shakespeare's best known and longest passages on music appears near the beginning of the final scene of *The Merchant of Venice*. As Lorenzo and Jessica speak of their love under a starry sky at Belmont, Lorenzo explains to his bride the theory of the music of the spheres.

Writers in Shakespeare's age interpreted literally the phrase in Job 38:7, suggesting that at God's creation of earth "the morning stars sang together." Accordingly, they believed that the planets in motion create tones that blend in beautiful harmony. Since the Fall of Adam and Eve, however, mankind has been unable to hear these heavenly sounds.

Shakespeare's passage goes on to extol music's powerful impact on human feelings and the actions of beasts alike. Lorenzo's lines also associate harmony in the heavenlies and in nature with the need for harmonious relationships in society. They suggest that the human who is not moved by the sweet sounds of music is a person who cannot be trusted.

Shakespeare's relationship to music does not end with his profound allusions to it in his plays. Music itself also plays a key role in many of his plays, including *Merchant*. In the final scene the music which greets the return of Portia to Belmont suggests peace and love, signaling the calm the three couples and Antonio will enjoy now that their ordeal in Venice has ended.

Shakespeare's dramas also have inspired more musical compositions than those by any other writer. Although no music originally written for Shakespeare's lyrics has survived from his own age, since then thousands of composers, prominent and obscure alike, have undertaken settings inspired by the plays and sonnets. It is certainly a manifestation of the playwright's universal appeal that a 1992 Oxford University Press listing of musical settings of Shakespeare's lines and the musical works inspired by them includes over 21,000 compositions.



Benjamin Nicholas
Classic Player since 2012



Wilbur Mauk
Classic Player since 2014



Philip Eoute
Classic Player since 1995 (child role)



Jeffrey Stegall
Classic Player since 1986



Nathan Young
Classic Player since 2013



Christina Yasi
Classic Player since 2016



Rebekah Frampton
Classic Players Debut



Elisabeth Ernhof
Classic Players Debut



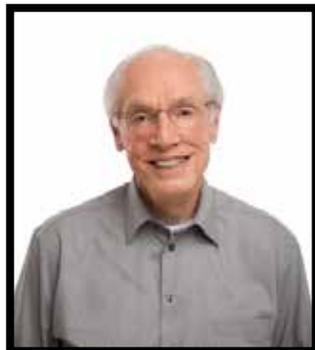
Colton Beach
Classic Player since 2014



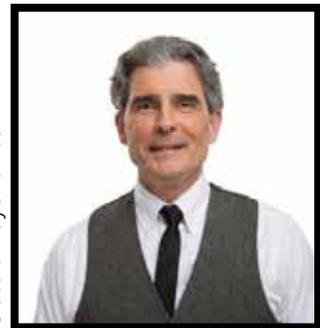
Seth Sanders
Classic Player since 2016



Cameron Smith
Classic Player since 2013



Bob Jones III
Classic Player since 1945 (child role)



Brad Payne
Classic Player since 1977



1930

CLASSIC PLAYERS

2017





Bob Jones III plays Shylock in our current production.

THE JEWISH QUESTION AND SHAKESPEARE'S THEMES IN MERCHANT OF VENICE

For modern audiences, *The Merchant of Venice* is perhaps Shakespeare's most controversial play, condemned by some for being anti-semitic (a work that is hostile toward Jews) and praised by others for fostering religious tolerance. Next to *Hamlet*, Shylock has provoked more discussion than any other character created by Shakespeare.

Nazi atrocities against European Jews have made it much more difficult to ascertain Shakespeare's meaning and fairly assess his accomplishment. Elizabethan audiences of *Merchant* likely experienced few qualms about the Jewish question.

Although *The Merchant of Venice* issues from a culture that denigrated Jews, it is not an anti-semitic play. Shakespeare acknowledges the prejudice of the Elizabethan age and even draws from it for his own theatrical purposes, but *Merchant* is not a work about racial prejudice.

In creating the figure of Shylock, Shakespeare uses the familiar medieval stereotype of a miserly Jewish moneylender as a form of dramatic shorthand. But rather than embodying religious or ethnic condemnation in *Merchant*, the playwright upholds love and friendship as positive virtues for all races and creeds.

Merchant is a play about value, or relative worth, and values, or those qualities or things a person esteems. The play invites us to question the degree to which we treasure gold, love and human life.

Shylock is a negative player in Shakespeare's plot, not because he is a Jew but because he is greedy and vengeful. His daughter Jessica, on the other hand, is a positive character because she is vivacious and discerning.

Shylock's greed and materialism typify the usurer, a person who loans money at a high rate of interest, rather than the Jew as such. The practice of usury was despised in Renaissance Europe, based on the Catholic Church's misapplication of Old Testament law and the common belief that minerals such as gold

do not have the power to regenerate as vegetables and animals do.

Judaism also condemned usury, citing the Old Testament law stated in Exodus 22:25, "If thou lend money to any of my people that is poor by thee, thou shalt not be to him as an usurer, neither shalt thou lay upon him usury." Nehemiah 5 labels as usury an interest rate of only one percent.

According to Jewish writers, usury along with the related professions of extortion, gambling and tax collecting was detested by Jews themselves. Those who deliberately chose such a profession were said to be greedy and/or disillusioned with Judaism.

Shylock's false values directly contrast with the values of love and friendship exemplified in Antonio, Portia and Bassanio, who risk gold in the interest of love and who give away gold as a token of their love. Shylock clutches his gold with all his might, yet he places no value on love, friendship or family ties.

Like the proud suitors Morocco and Arragon, Shylock regards as foolish those who take risks for love or friendship. Like them, he is also driven by the impulse to possess. The play suggests, however, that in order to gain love, one must give it away; that true love is characterized by risk and self-abasement; and that non-material values are superior to material ones.

Shylock also scoffs at those who frolic and make music. He attempts to shut his daughter away from all such merriment, admonishing her to close the windows so she will neither bear nor see "Christian fools."

Jessica's name, in fact, is derived from the Hebrew Ischah of Genesis 11:29, a name which means "she that looketh out." Jessica metaphorically looks out from her father's Judaism to the New Covenant of love and mercy found in Christianity when she falls in love with Lorenzo, a Christian. Her elopement is depicted as a type of conversion to Christianity.

Jessica states her intentions to "become a Christian, and [Lorenzo's] loving wife." In so doing, she abandons her father's tyranny, hate and greed for the love and happiness exemplified by Belmont. In a figurative sense she also gains salvation.

The audiences for whom Shakespeare created the character Jessica did not think it was bad to depict Christianity as the one true religion. There was an age in which men and women fought and died for their religious beliefs. When Jessica converts to Christianity, she is doing the right thing in the Elizabethan view. The Jews had rejected Christ and willingly refused His salvation.

Shylock is so dehumanized by his greed that the loss he feels at Jessica and Lorenzo's elopement seems more material than paternal. In his frustration he literally confuses his daughter and his ducats.

Shylock's desire for revenge also contributes significantly to the audience's negative impression of him. Since revenge is a criminal passion that can destroy Roman, Dane, Moor or any other type of character Shakespeare depicts, the playwright's attribution of this obsession to Shylock cannot be interpreted as anti-semitic.

Shylock's desire for revenge is related to his greed, for he desires vengeance against his business rival, Antonio, because the merchant brings down the rate of usury in Venice by loaning money gratis to those in need.

In the most famous and controversial speech in Merchant, "Hath not a Jew eyes?," Shylock equates vengeance with justice. Although many have taken these lines out of context as Shakespeare's argument for the equality of Christianity and Judaism, they actually confirm the monstrosity of Shylock's hate and his villainous desire for vengeance.

As Shylock lists the abuses he has suffered, he concludes falsely that they have all occurred simply because he is a Jew. He sees himself as morally equal to Antonio because they possess the same body parts and senses. Ironically, as the audience realizes, so do animals.

The speech is actually a defense of revenge, not of Jews. In terms of inhumane actions, Shylock vows that he will surpass all those characters who have wronged him; he will "better the instruction" by his heinous plan to take a pound of Antonio's flesh.

As Shylock sharpens his knife during the trial scene in preparation to kill Antonio, he loses all audience sympathy. No amount of pleading or bargaining will soften his hard heart. He is a legalise, a would-be murderer, and one who has grown wealthy by exploiting humans in need.

Shylock's demand for strict interpretation of the law ultimately backfires on him, however, and the scene culminates in his downfall. Even then Antonio and the Duke offer Shylock mercy rather than revenge.

In Shylock, Shakespeare has created a complex character for playgoers in today's post-Holocaust era, who are predisposed to react sympathetically to all those who belong to a persecuted minority. If Shakespeare does momentarily invite us to see the human being inside Shylock's skin, he certainly never asks us to excuse his conduct, nor does he make a case for the common humanity of all men and women.

Instead, the playwright invites us to exercise sound moral judgment concerning the nature of evil as the conflict between Shylock and Antonio unfolds. Shylock's hate and desire for vengeance must be condemned. If we pity Shylock at all, it is not because he is a member of a persecuted minority but because the would-be murderer has been justly punished.

The Merchant of Venice is neither an anti-semitic work nor an argument for the equality of the Jewish and Christian religions. The play suggests that it is a person's actions and attitudes, not his race or religion, that determine his character.

■ Janie Caves McCauley



Bob Jones Jr. in our 1986 production set in the late 18th century Rococo period.



Bob Jones III in our current production set in Venice, 1953.