

William Shakespeare
The Merchant of Venice

Boika Sokolova

“... How shalt
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mercy, render'ing
none?...”

Literature Insights
General Editor: Charles Moseley

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The Author

Boika Sokolova is a Visiting Research Fellow at Birkbeck College, London. She teaches Shakespeare on the London programmes of the University of Notre Dame, the University of California and the British American Drama Academy (BADA). Sokolova has published widely on Shakespeare, performance and Shakespeare's reception in Europe. Her latest book (co-authored) is *Painting Shakespeare Red. An East-European Appropriation* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, London: Associated University Presses, 2001).

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Preface

The Merchant of Venice (1596) is one of Shakespeare's most popular plays, with a continuous stage life of over four hundred years. It is also a controversial and complex text which, for the modern reader or playgoer, grapples with painful questions of anti-Semitism, xenophobia, identity, race and gender, woven around a story about love, marriage and friendship, mercy and justice. For a long time the play has created unease, even distaste. Especially after the mass extermination of Jews in the Second World War, history itself has added to that reaction and caused its banishment from schools and theatres in some parts of the world. So it is necessary, right from the start, to face up to a major problem—that of the play's alleged anti-Semitism. To begin with, we should distinguish between the culture of the time when a text was written and the way it sits in a different, in this case, modern context. The term, [anti-Semitism](#), as understood nowadays, dates back to the 19th century and conceptually 'differs from the anti-Jewish ideas and theories which pre-dated the rise of racial theory in the 1850s in that it identifies Jewish characteristics as congenital, rather than as specifically religious or broadly cultural (and, therefore, capable of rejection by individual Jews)'.¹ The Elizabethans would not have understood modern anti-Semitism (it would have made Shylock's conversion devoid of meaning), nor does the play ever suggest that the hero is different from other characters, except in his religious and economic ideas. He is a 'misbeliever' (1.3.108), whose faith is 'righted' in the end, but he is also a character whose humanity is asserted in the strongest of terms as equal to that of the Christians.

This does not mean that old religious anti-Semitism gave Jews advantages or relieved them of pressures and humiliation. In fact, religion was used as an argument for their banishment from England

1 <http://www.answers.com/topic/anti-semitism>

in 1290. In the play, we find an intolerant society, but presented so that the audience is invited to question its verities, the limitations of its justice, the moral ambiguity involved in checking the powers of non-Venetians under the guise of objectivity; we are made to observe and think about the fundamental similarity of disaster incurred by blending extreme religious positions with everyday grudges by both Christians and Jews.

While anti-Jewish sentiments had their provenance in Biblical texts and a long European history of intolerance during the Middle Ages, it is also of interest that after the [Reformation](#), the period to which the play belongs, in the new historical reading of Scripture by [Protestant](#) theologians, Jews were considered redeemable and were viewed as a link in the divine plan of salvation. However, they had to be convinced to change their views by intellectual debate. Approached from this angle, the conversion imposed on Shylock could have been felt by some in the Elizabethan audience as questionable. Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries the forced change of religion was an accepted method of erasing difference and the awareness of its painful edge was alive in the culture. In the south-eastern parts of Europe, occupied by the Ottomans, Christians were forced into Islam; at the other end, in Spain, both Muslims and Jews had been pressed into a mass conversion to Christianity. The English themselves had lived through the religious cataclysm of the Reformation with the consequent trauma on those who had wished to preserve their Catholic faith. Though presented as an act of mercy, Shylock's unwilling change of religion would not have been seen by all as a happy end, a reaction strengthened by the fact that the play compounds it with a punitive legal judgement.

The 16th century saw the gradual emergence of a what we might recognise as a modern sense of English national identity, which played itself on the London stages in various ways, one being an interest in national history (Shakespeare's History plays are a major contribution to the national debate). Another way of defining the 'self' is through the 'other'. Elizabethan plays abound in foreigners: a few of them are Jews, covering the entire spectrum from the generous and upright man of [Robert Wilson's](#) [*The Three Ladies of London*](#) (1584)

to the grotesque villain of [Christopher Marlowe](#)'s *The Jew of Malta* (1589?), to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) with its complex villain/victim living in a society whose principles and self-representations often seem questionable.

While it cannot be denied that the play carries the historical baggage of the time when it was composed, which can be abrasive to modern sensitivities, we should not forget that we also carry later historical baggage of anti-Semitism and racism. Sometimes, contemporary performances cut the text to remove what might be regarded as potentially offensive. This is not new in the play's history. An example of the opposite, tweaking the play so as to give maximum offence, is how in the 1930s Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda tried to appropriate it for its own ideological ends. To obtain the desired effect however, Nazi propagandists had to slash the text, because in its wholeness *The Merchant of Venice* refuses to engage with extreme and simplistic agendas. We can continue by listing its resistance to generic descriptions, preconceived ideas of order, justice, etc. While it is the product of a culture which was religiously anti-Semitic, the great strength of Shakespeare's play is that it inexorably undermines attempts to define unambiguously its position vis-à-vis its culture. It could have been written so as to take sides, produce a straightforward moral reading, capitalize on social prejudices, or refute them, but it does not. The play exhibits the same evasiveness in the hands of modern directors and, where it comes to literary criticism, the brief survey at the end of this book shows how radically different views have been upheld by different generations of scholars in the course of almost three hundred years. By the same token, the question, 'How shalt thou hope for mercy, rend'ring none?' (4.1.87), used as an epigraph to the present discussion of the play, though asked of Shylock, can be seen to apply to the moral positions of most characters.

The purpose of this Insight is to open the play to its student as a multifaceted and challenging text. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare transforms the genre of romantic comedy to enable it to talk about darker matters; its language takes us from the exalted idealisms of love to the lowest kind of racist abuse; powerful characters representing opposing value systems clash, revealing the limitations