

THE ANNOTATED SHAKESPEARE

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

The Merchant of Venice



FULLY ANNOTATED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION, BY BURTON RAFFEL

WITH AN ESSAY BY HAROLD BLOOM

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To the memory of my father, my mother,
my brother, and all the others

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ABOUT THIS BOOK



The learned doctor of the law, Belario, is never seen or heard on stage. But the chief judge, the Duke of Venice, reads aloud a letter from Belario:

Duke Meantime the court shall hear Belario's letter:
(*reading aloud*) "Your Grace shall understand, that at the receipt of your letter I am very sick, but in the instant that your messenger came, in loving visitation was with me a young Doctor of Rome, his name is Balthasar. I acquainted him with the cause in controversy between the Jew and Antonio the merchant. We turned o'er many books together. He is furnished with my opinion, which bettered with his own learning (the greatness whereof I cannot enough commend), comes with him at my importunity to fill up your Grace's request in my stead. I beseech you, let his lack of years be no impediment to let him lack a reverend estimation, for I never knew so young a body with so old a head. I leave him to your gracious acceptance, whose trial shall better publish his commendation."

This was perfectly understandable, we must assume, to the mostly very average persons who paid to watch Elizabethan plays. But though much remains clear, who today can make full or entirely comfortable sense of it? In this very fully annotated edition, I therefore present this passage, not in the bare form quoted above, but thoroughly supported by bottom-of-the-page notes:

Duke Meantime the court shall hear Belario's letter:
(*reading aloud*)¹ "Your Grace shall understand, that at the receipt of your letter I am² very sick, but in the instant that your messenger came, in loving visitation was with me a young doctor³ of Rome, his name is Balthasar. I acquainted him with the cause⁴ in controversy between the Jew and Antonio the merchant. We turned o'er⁵ many books together. He is furnished with my opinion, which bettered⁶ with his own learning (the greatness whereof I cannot enough commend), comes⁷ with him at my importunity⁸ to fill up your Grace's request in my stead.⁹ I beseech you, let his lack of years be no impediment to let him lack a reverend¹⁰ estimation, for I never knew so young a body with so old a head. I leave him to your gra-

1 it is not clear whether it is the Duke or a court official who reads the letter aloud

2 was

3 lawyer

4 case, action*

5 turned over = read through, searched, perused

6 improved

7 i.e., Belario's opinion comes

8 solicitation, urging

9 (it is not clear exactly what the Duke has requested of Belario)

10 respectful, courteous

cious acceptance, whose trial¹¹ shall better publish¹² his commendation.”

Without full explanation of words that have over the years shifted in meaning, and usages that have been altered, neither the modern reader nor the modern listener is likely to be equipped for anything like full comprehension.

I believe annotations of this sort create the necessary bridges, from Shakespeare’s four-centuries-old English across to ours. Some readers, to be sure, will be able to comprehend unusual, historically different meanings without any glosses. Those not familiar with the modern meaning of particular words will easily find clear, simple definitions in any modern dictionary. But most readers are not likely to understand Shakespeare’s intended meaning, absent such glosses as I here offer.

My annotation practices have followed the same principles used in *The Annotated Milton*, published in 1999, and in my annotated editions of *Hamlet*, published (as the initial volume in this series) in 2003, *Romeo and Juliet* (published in 2004), and subsequent volumes in this series. Classroom experience has validated these editions. Classes of mixed upper-level undergraduates and graduate students have more quickly and thoroughly transcended language barriers than ever before. This allows the teacher, or a general reader without a teacher, to move more promptly and confidently to the nonlinguistic matters that have made Shakespeare and Milton great and important poets.

It is the inevitable forces of linguistic change, operant in all liv-

¹¹ putting to the proof, testing (“performance”)

¹² declare

ing tongues, which have inevitably created such wide degrees of obstacles to ready comprehension—not only sharply different meanings, but subtle, partial shifts in meaning that allow us to think we understand when, alas, we do not. Speakers of related languages like Dutch and German also experience this shifting of the linguistic ground. Like early Modern English (ca. 1600) and the Modern English now current, those languages are too close for those who know only one language, and not the other, to be readily able always to recognize what they correctly understand and what they do not. When, for example, a speaker of Dutch says, “Men kofer is kapot,” a speaker of German will know that something belonging to the Dutchman is broken (“kapot” = “kaputt” in German, and “men” = “mein”). But without more linguistic awareness than the average person is apt to have, the German speaker will not identify “kofer” (“trunk” in Dutch) with “Körper”—a modern German word meaning “physique, build, body.” The closest word to “kofer” in modern German, indeed, is “Scrankkoffer,” which is too large a leap for ready comprehension. Speakers of different Romance languages (French, Spanish, Italian), and all other related but not identical tongues, all experience these difficulties, as well as the difficulty of understanding a text written in their own language five, or six, or seven hundred years earlier. Shakespeare’s English is not yet so old that it requires, like many historical texts in French and German, or like Old English texts—for example, *Beowulf*—a modern translation. Much poetry evaporates in translation: language is immensely particular. The sheer *sound* of Dante in thirteenth-century Italian is profoundly worth preserving. So too is the sound of Shakespeare.

I have annotated prosody (metrics) only when it seemed

truly necessary or particularly helpful. Readers should have no problem with the silent “e” in past participles (loved, returned, missed). Except in the few instances where modern usage syllabifies the “e,” whenever an “e” in Shakespeare is *not* silent, it is marked “è.” The notation used for prosody, which is also used in the explanation of Elizabethan pronunciation, follows the extremely simple form of my *From Stress to Stress: An Autobiography of English Prosody* (see “Further Reading,” near the end of this book). Syllables with metrical stress are capitalized; all other syllables are in lowercase letters. I have managed to employ normalized Elizabethan spellings, in most indications of pronunciation, but I have sometimes been obliged to deviate, in the higher interest of being understood.

I have annotated, as well, a limited number of such other matters, sometimes of interpretation, sometimes of general or historical relevance, as have seemed to me seriously worthy of inclusion. These annotations have been most carefully restricted: this is not intended to be a book of literary commentary. It is for that reason that the glossing of metaphors has been severely restricted. There is almost literally no end to discussion and/or analysis of metaphor, especially in Shakespeare. To yield to temptation might well be to double or triple the size of this book—and would also change it from a historically oriented language guide to a work of an unsteadily mixed nature. In the process, I believe, neither language nor literature would be well or clearly served.

Where it seemed useful, and not obstructive of important textual matters, I have modernized spelling, including capitalization. Spelling is not on the whole a basic issue, but punctuation and lineation must be given high respect. The Quarto uses few exclamation marks or semicolons, which is to be sure a matter of the

conventions of a very different era. Still, our modern preferences cannot be lightly substituted for what is, after a fashion, the closest thing to a Shakespeare manuscript we are likely ever to have. We do not know whether these particular seventeenth-century printers, like most of that time, were responsible for question marks, commas, periods, and, especially, all-purpose colons, or whether these particular printers tried to follow their handwritten sources. Nor do we know if those sources, or what part thereof, might have been in Shakespeare's own hand. But in spite of these equivocations and uncertainties, it remains true that, to a very considerable extent, punctuation tends to result from just how the mind responsible for that punctuating *hears* the text. And twenty-first-century minds have no business, in such matters, overruling seventeenth-century ones. Whoever the compositors were, they were more or less Shakespeare's contemporaries, and we are not.

Accordingly, when the original printed text uses a comma, we are being signaled that *they* (whoever "they" were) heard the text, not coming to a syntactic stop, but continuing to some later stopping point. To replace commas with editorial periods is thus risky and on the whole an undesirable practice. (The dramatic action of a tragedy, to be sure, may require us, for twenty-first-century readers, to highlight what four-hundred-year-old punctuation standards may not make clear—and may even, at times, misrepresent.)

When the printed text has a colon, what we are being signaled is that *they* heard a syntactic stop—though not necessarily or even usually the particular kind of syntactic stop we associate, today, with the colon. It is therefore inappropriate to substitute editorial commas for original colons. It is also inappropriate to employ editorial colons when *their* syntactic usage of colons does not match

ours. In general, the closest thing to *their* syntactic sense of the colon is our (and their) period.

The printed interrogation (question) marks, too, merit extremely respectful handling. In particular, editorial exclamation marks should very rarely be substituted for interrogation marks.

It follows from these considerations that the movement and sometimes the meaning of what we must take to be Shakespeare's play will at times be different, depending on whose punctuation we follow, *theirs* or our own. I have tried, here, to use the printed seventeenth-century text as a guide to both *hearing* and *understanding* what Shakespeare wrote.

Since the original printed texts (there not being, as there never are for Shakespeare, any surviving manuscripts) are frequently careless as well as self-contradictory, I have been relatively free with the wording of stage directions—and in some cases have added brief directions, to indicate who is speaking to whom. I have made no emendations; I have necessarily been obliged to make choices. Textual decisions have been annotated when the differences between or among the original printed texts seem either marked or of unusual interest.

In the interests of compactness and brevity, I have employed in my annotations (as consistently as I am able) a number of stylistic and typographical devices:

- The annotation of a single word does not repeat that word
- The annotation of more than one word repeats the words being annotated, which are followed by an equals sign and then by the annotation; the footnote number in the text is placed after the last of the words being annotated
- In annotations of a single word, alternative meanings are

usually separated by commas; if there are distinctly different ranges of meaning, the annotations are separated by arabic numerals inside parentheses—(1), (2), and so on; in more complexly worded annotations, alternative meanings expressed by a single word are linked by a forward slash, or solidus: /

- Explanations of textual meaning are not in parentheses; comments about textual meaning are
- Except for proper nouns, the word at the beginning of all annotations is in lower case
- Uncertainties are followed by a question mark, set in parentheses: (?)
- When particularly relevant, “translations” into twenty-first-century English have been added, in parentheses
- Annotations of repeated words are *not* repeated. Explanations of the *first* instance of such common words are followed by the sign ★. Readers may easily track down the first annotation, using the brief Finding List at the back of the book. Words with entirely separate meanings are annotated *only* for meanings no longer current in Modern English.

The most important typographical device here employed is the sign ★ placed after the first (and only) annotation of words and phrases occurring more than once. There is an alphabetically arranged listing of such words and phrases in the Finding List at the back of the book. The Finding List contains no annotations but simply gives the words or phrases themselves and the numbers of the relevant act, the scene within that act, and the footnote number within that scene for the word’s first occurrence.

INTRODUCTION



Written in the period 1596–1598, *The Merchant of Venice* was first printed in 1600. This quarto-sized book, which has become the basic text for all modern editions, also gives us, directly and immediately via the volume's title page, a good idea of what the printer-publisher thought was most worthy of public attention. "The most excellent history of the Merchant of Venice, with the extreme cruelty of Shylock the Jew towards the said merchant, in cutting a just pound of his flesh, and the obtaining of Portia by the choice of three chests."¹ The Quarto text is so clean that scholars think it was quite probably printed directly from Shakespeare's manuscript. Whether or not Shakespeare had anything to do with the title page (most likely he did not), the description of the play focuses on three plot lines: first, Antonio the merchant of Venice; second, Shylock, the rapacious, almost fiendish Jewish moneylender; and third, the courting—by an odd sort of lottery-like procedure—and winning of Portia, a singularly wealthy young heiress. Note that the most intensely dramatic portion of the description is that concerning Shylock, who has often been mistak-

only thought of as the “merchant” of the play’s title. The writer of the title page plainly saw Shylock’s part of the narrative as the play’s best selling aspect.

As is so often the case with Shakespeare, many elements of the story are borrowed, in this case principally from *Il Pecorone* (“The Blockhead”), a collection of stories published in Florence in 1558 and not at that time translated into English. It has been argued, sensibly and on the basis of the totality of Shakespeare’s work, that he could read Italian. The details of the original tale are of some interest, but will not be here discussed: what is most relevant to readers of this edition is how Shakespeare presents material from all his sources, and thus how it seems most accurately and usefully to read his play as we have it.

The Merchant of Venice comes early in what might be called Shakespeare’s “middle” period, shortly after *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and just before *Henry the Fourth, Part One*. The play features a good deal of the “low” comedy to be seen in *The Taming of the Shrew*, which dates from roughly four years earlier. There is also, in the more “serious” parts of the play (those in verse rather than in prose), some of the most beautifully worked-out passages Shakespeare ever wrote:

Your mind is tossing on the ocean,
There where your argosies with portly sail
Like signiors and rich burghers on the flood,
Or as it were the pageants of the sea,
Do overpeer the petty traffickers
That curtsy to them, do them reverence,
As they fly by them with their woven wings.

(I.I.7–13)

Spoken by one of the minor characters, Salarino, about the merchant Antonio, these seven lines are composed of a single tightly woven sea-metaphor. The passage traces Antonio's state of mind, subtly employing the nature of his profession to give us two trains of thought at the same time: the preoccupations of Antonio's mind, and the preoccupations of his business. The passage is also a bold proclamation of the poet-playwright's superb literary mastery. We do not need to know who or what Shakespeare was, nor do we need to understand every one of these lines in detail, to realize that we have here been launched on a tautly controlled literary-dramatic expedition.

But just as there are necessary limitations to our ability to understand all of Shakespeare's *words*, so too there are broader aspects of the play that are historically conditioned and not fully comprehensible without explanation. In matters of religious belief, even matters of knowledge, *The Merchant of Venice* must be approached, today, with caution. We know little about Shakespeare's life (though more than enough to have no doubt that he wrote his plays). We know virtually nothing about his likes and dislikes, or (though he may sometimes seem to know everything knowable) the true extent of his knowledge. He must have enjoyed success, or he would hardly have worked so intensely at achieving it. He used his money to buy land, and to purchase a coat of arms. But who does not enjoy success? Who in a land-dominated culture does not value its ownership? Who in a fiercely status-conscious society does not desire a degree of status?

We must be particularly careful not to lean on a tremendously effective and enormously popular comic drama, trying to place it in an ideological schema—like that which we have come to call anti-Semitism—in which it has little if any legitimate place.

Shakespeare surely shared much of the experience common to most Elizabethans. But though incredibly gifted, he remains no more than human. Most of the people he knew were Christian, and he had to know a good deal about that faith. Did he know any Muslims, and what did he know about Islam? There is a total lack of evidence. But did he know any Jews, and what did he know about Judaism? The play plainly seems to be deeply concerned with both Jews and Judaism; Shylock and his daughter are major players in the plot. But what is the true role and importance of their stated religious identity? How much are either Jews or Judaism the play's concerns?

The Merchant of Venice is dramatic fiction, and fiction is by definition pretense: the writer tries (and Shakespeare brilliantly succeeds) in making us believe in his fiction. The writer (and even more, the good writer) rarely has much interest in persuading us that his fiction is fact. No matter how devoted he or she may be to a cause or to a belief system, it is the fiction that matters the most—to the writer as to us. When we learn that in fact, despite an ancient expulsion of the Jews, “there were Jews in Shakespeare’s England,” what have we learned about Shakespeare’s play? When we are told, further, that the number of such Jews was “probably never more than a couple of hundred at any given time,” have we any useful information about either Shakespeare or his play?² On the other hand, knowing that “a villainous Jewish usurer was being portrayed on the London stage some twenty years before *The Merchant of Venice* was written” seems decidedly relevant, for this helps us understand the background from which the play emerged.³ Similarly, it is useful to know that “England’s fascination with the conversion of the Jews had begun in earnest

in the late 1570s and early 1580s and was quite well established by the time that Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*.”⁴

James Shapiro, who has made a thorough study of the matter, explains that “the word *Jew* had entered into the English vocabulary in the thirteenth century as a catchall term of abuse.” Noting “such stock epithets as ‘I hate thee as I do a Jew,’ ‘I would not have done so to a Jew,’ and ‘None but a Jew would have done so,’” he concludes that “the Jew as irredeemable alien and the Jew as bogeyman . . . coexisted at deep linguistic and psychological levels.”⁵ As John Gross puts the matter, “Nothing can alter the fact that, seen through the eyes of the other characters, Shylock is a deeply threatening figure, and that the threat he poses is of a peculiarly primitive kind.”⁶ We need to add that what “the eyes of the other characters” truly means, here, is “Elizabethan England,” the citizens of which were of course the intended and the actual audience of the play (and the readers of its Quarto publication).

We also need to understand that Elizabethan England had only relatively recently been caught up in the Renaissance transformation of European economies. We know that, unlike Mediterranean economies, “there were no private moneychangers in medieval London” and that, although “from the fifteenth century onwards London goldsmiths were beginning to engage in deposit banking,” no such effective system was in place in England until the end of the seventeenth century.⁷ Thus, Europe’s long record of hostility to money lending, and the interest charged thereon, had been largely dissipated in countries like Italy but lingered in countries like England. “By the end of the sixteenth century, . . . Jews were increasingly identified [in England] not with usury per se, but with outrageous and exploitative lending for profit.”⁸ In-

deed, “Shakespeare’s ‘alien’ Shylock cannot really be understood independent of the larger social tensions generated by aliens and their economic practices in London in the mid-1590s.”⁹ It is in no way surprising that “most moneylenders in Elizabethan literature were thoroughly sadistic.”¹⁰

Accordingly, if we ask, as Martin D. Yaffe does, how “are we meant to understand Shylock’s Jewishness,” the answer seems reasonably clear.¹¹ Despite the power of Shylock’s two speeches of protest, the nature of his Jewishness is both vague and elusive. Perhaps, for our purposes, today, it ought to be considered largely symbolic. Shakespeare’s compatriots did not want or need more than that. It is therefore completely appropriate for that symbolic representation to say, as Shylock does at the approach of Antonio, “I hate him for he is a Christian” (1.3.36). It is equally appropriate for Shylock’s daughter to say to Gobbo, the clown who is leaving Shylock’s employ in order to be with a good Christian employer, “I am sorry thou wilt leave my father so. / Our house is hell, and thou a merry divel / Did’st rob it of some taste of tediousness” (2.3.1–3). Or for her to say, on the same subject, “But though I am a daughter to his [Shylock’s] blood, / I am not to his manners” (2.3.7–8). Similarly, Lorenzo, Jessica’s Christian lover and future husband, can declare with the absolute confidence of anyone who confronts a mere totem, “If e’er the Jew her father come to heaven, / It will be for his gentle daughter’s sake” (2.4.34–35).

In short, “Shylock’s stage-Judaism is a pseudo-religion, a fabrication: there is no true piety in it, and nothing to hold him back as he pursues his revenge.”¹² We can no more go to *The Merchant of Venice* for perspectives on, or information about Jews and Judaism, than we can go *Hamlet* for guidance on Renaissance Dan-

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