

# William Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice"

## A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

### Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://www.teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/william-shakespeares-merchant-venice>.

### Introduction

William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is one of the most widely performed, read, and discussed plays of all time. Basing the drama on a handful of tales widely known in the seventeenth century, Shakespeare weaves together a story of love, theft, revenge, and humanity. Shakespeare likely knew no Jews, as they had all been expelled from England centuries before his birth, but he manages to create in Shylock a character that is flawed, undeniably human, and one of the most recognizable Jewish characters in all of world literature.

Through the centuries, different productions and actors have portrayed Shylock in vastly different ways—as comic, villainous, sympathetic, or tragic. The resources in this kit are designed to help students grapple with both the play's, and their own, conflicted feelings regarding Shylock the Jew, Jewish history, and anti-Semitism in western culture.

Cover image: Painting, Auguste Charpentier's "The Jewish Money Lender," 1842, from [MutualArt](#).

### Subjects

Anti-Semitism, Performance, Social Commentary, Theater

### Reading and Background

- Shakespeare most likely never met a Jew, because they had been expelled from England by his time; for a basic introduction to the expulsion of Jews from England, see [this article](#). The most comprehensive study of Shakespeare and Jewishness, with plenty of attention given to *The Merchant of Venice*, is James Shapiro's *Shakespeare and the Jews* (1996).
- A short introduction to scholars' differing perspectives about the play's representation of Jews can be found [here](#) in *Smithsonian Magazine*. A fuller exploration of the history of Shylock, as a character and an image, can be found in John Gross's *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy* (1994).
- Joel Berkowitz's *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage* (2005) contains a chapter that analyzes four different Yiddish performances of *The Merchant of Venice*.
- [A guide to teaching \*The Merchant of Venice\*](#) has been created by the Royal Shakespeare Company.

### Resources

#### 1: Images, examples of Shylock's appearance onstage, 1814, 1905, and 2011.

These three images offer three different ways that Shylock's visual appearance has been represented onstage.

**Suggested Activity:** Before showing any of the images to students, have them draw or describe, in as much detail as they can, how they would imagine Shylock appearing on stage. What would he wear? What would he carry? What would his hair, eyes, and nose look like? Would he be tall or short, fat or thin? Have a discussion about why the students think of Shylock in one way or another, and how different appearances might change the way the character is perceived. Next, show them these examples of historical Shylocks, and ask them to analyze them carefully, attending to all those visual details they have discussed, and to speculate about how each of the different actors might perform the role. Ask them to consider which elements of these representations of Shylock align with, or run counter to, racist stereotypes. For more advanced students, ask them to find evidence in the text to support each of these different visual representations of the character.



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**Sources:** Henry Meyer, "Edmund Kean as Shylock," 1814, mezzotint, 12 in. x 9 3/8 in., National Portrait Gallery, London, UK, <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw37677/Edmund-Kean-as-Shylock?search=sp&sText=shylock&firstRun=true&rNo=15>. Redistributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported license.

Alexander Corbett, "Arthur Bouchier as Shylock in 'The Merchant of Venice,'" 1905, bromide postcard print, 4 7/8 in. x 3 1/8 in., National Portrait Gallery, London, UK, <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw160635/Arthur-Bouchier-as-Shylock-in-The-Merchant-of-Venice>. Redistributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported license.

Gerry Goodstein, "F. Murray Abraham as Shylock," 2011, in *Berkshire On Stage*, February 23, 2011.

## 2: Video excerpt, Sir Patrick Stewart in "Playing Shakespeare," 1982.

In this excerpt, the actor Sir Patrick Stewart (who may be recognizable to students for his roles on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* or in *X-Men* films) performs one of Shylock's speeches in three ways, to exhibit the interpretive choices an actor has in playing the character.

**Suggested Activity:** First, ask students to read the speech that Stewart performs, from Act 1, Scene 3, of the play (beginning, "Signior Antonio, many a time and oft"). Ask them to think about the different possible emotions and personalities that could be conveyed by that speech. If possible, have a few students present different interpretations of a section of the speech to their classmates. Then, show Stewart's three performances, asking students to pay close attention to how Stewart changes the meaning of the speech.

**Source:** Shakespeare Teaching Videos, "Patrick Stewart on Shylock," Mar. 4 2014, video, 8:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7UOdMHW7J2Q>.

## 3: Video, Ashley Thomas performs Shylock in Act 3, Scene 1, of "The Merchant of Venice," 2011.

In a video produced by the BBC to promote a Shakespeare recitation contest, actor Ashley Thomas performs one of Shylock's monologues.

**Suggested Activity:** Following the activity above, show students this video of Ashley Thomas's interpretation of the role. Ask them to consider which of Stewart's dramatic approaches Thomas's resembles most, and ask them how changing the visual appearance of Shylock's character—in this case, to a black man in a wheelchair—changes the impact of Shylock's words.

**Source:** BBC, "Shakespeare, 'The Merchant of Venice', Act 3 Scene 1, Shylock: 'To bait fish withal' – BBC," May 17 2017, video, 2:04, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FC8KMnC3O\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FC8KMnC3O_4).

## 4: Ballad excerpt, "Gernutus a Jew," approximately 1620.

This excerpt comes from a ballad that tells a story quite similar to that of Shylock and Antonio (after the excerpt, Gernutus demands a pound of flesh from a merchant, and in the end a judge warns him to "shed no drop of blood" and to not "take either more or lesse" than a pound, or else "be hanged"). Though the publication date for the ballad is two decades after Shakespeare is said to have composed *The Merchant of Venice*, there's no way to know whether the play inspired the ballad, or whether the ballad was just one published version of a story that had circulated long before the play, and had therefore helped to inspire Shakespeare. The section excerpted here focuses on the description of Gernutus.

**Suggested Activity:** Read the excerpt from the ballad, and discuss the similarities and differences between Gernutus and Shylock. Is one more or less sympathetic? Is there as much ambiguity in the character of Gernutus as there is in Shylock? Compared to a play, how much room does a ballad (which would have been performed like a song) give performers to interpret characters? Finally, how does it change the way you think about Shakespeare's play to know that he may have been drawing on a common folk story of his time?

**Source:** "A new Song, shewing the crueltie of Gernutus a Jew," c. 1620, EBBA 20063, English Broadside Ballad Archive, University

of California at Santa Barbara, <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20063/transcription>.

## 5: Excerpt, Mitchell Dunier’s “Ghetto,” 2016, and image, Giovanni Andrea Dalle Piane’s “The New Moon on Taking Leave of Shabbat: Blessing the Moon,” mid-1700’s.

Mitchell Dunier’s 2016 book explores the history and concept of the ghetto, especially in terms of urban, African American neighborhoods in the United States in the twentieth century.

Art historians believe that the artist Dalle Piane may have based this engraving on the Jewish ghetto in Reggio Emilia or the one in Venice, but it is an unusual example of art depicting Jewish life in Italy before the nineteenth century.

**Suggested Activity:** Before beginning to study the play, ask students what the word “ghetto” means. Ask them where they think it comes from. Have them read the excerpt of Dunier’s book, and show them the image. Once they’ve read the play, come back to this excerpt and ask them how the modern history of the term ghetto might change the way they think about Shylock and other Jews in *The Merchant of Venice*. Then, show them Dalle Piane’s engraving, and ask them whether the scene depicted looks like a ghetto—why or why not? How do the costumes and gestures of the Jewish people represented here change the way they think about the visual appearance of Shylock?

**Sources:** Mitchell Dunier, *Ghetto: The Invention of a Place, the History of an Idea* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), ix-x.

Giovanni Andrea Dalle Piane, *The New Moon on Taking Leave of Shabbat: Blessing the Moon*, c. eighteenth century, in *Venice, the Jews, and Europe, 1516-2016* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2016), 255.

## 6: Excerpt, Francesca Trivellato’s “The Promise and Peril of Credit,” 2019, and painting, Auguste Charpentier’s “The Jewish Money Lender,” 1842.

Why was Shylock a moneylender? The association of Jews with “usury”—an exploitative form of moneylending—was a major stereotype throughout the medieval period. This short excerpt from a major work by the historian Francesca Trivellato discusses the dynamics of that stereotype as it began in the thirteenth century. Auguste Charpentier’s portrait of a Jewish moneylender is from a much later period, and gives a sense of the way such figures were visualized, as well as how enduring this image was.

**Suggested Activity:** Ask students where they or their families would go if they needed a loan. Who lends money in their community, and how are those people perceived? Is it a good thing to lend money? What if you charge interest? Is it sometimes less acceptable to do so? Show the students the excerpt and painting, and ask them to consider how the stereotype about Jews as moneylenders arose, and the different ways that stereotype might have helped or hurt the Jews throughout history—would it be a good thing or a bad thing to be known as the person to turn to when you need money? Why?

**Sources:** Francesca Trivellato, *The Promise and Peril of Credit: What a Forgotten Legend about Jews and Finance Tells Us about the Making of European Commercial Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 16-17.

Auguste Charpentier, “The Jewish Money Lender,” 1842, oil on canvas, 40.94 in. x 32.05 in., MutualArt, <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/The-Jewish-money-lender/18B76CC6074F714B>.

## 7: Oral history excerpt, Harold Bloom on Maurice Schwartz as Shylock, 2019, and review excerpt, “Jacob P. Adler’s Shylock Scores,” 1903.

In an excerpt from an oral history interview, the literary critic Harold Bloom recalls seeing renowned actor Maurice Schwartz as Shylock in a Yiddish performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. A review from *The New York Herald* describes an earlier performance in which another famed Yiddish theater actor, Jacob P. Adler, performed the role of Shylock in Yiddish while the rest of the cast performed in English.

**Suggested Activity:** Ask students to consider how it would change their perception of the character of Shylock if he spoke a language other than English. What if he spoke a Jewish language specifically? Would a Yiddish-speaking Shylock be significantly different from a Hebrew-speaking Shylock or a Spanish-speaking Shylock? Why or why not? What if Shylock was the only character in the play speaking that language? If students in the room have studied another language, have them perform a scene in which all the characters speak English but Shylock speaks another language (translations of *The Merchant of Venice* into [Hebrew](#),

Spanish, Yiddish, and other languages should be relatively easy to find either on the internet or in a library).

**Sources:** Harold Bloom, interview by Christa Whitney, "'The First Shakespeare Plays I Ever Saw Were in Yiddish': Harold Bloom Remembers Maurice Schwartz as Shylock," Yiddish Book Center: Wexler Oral History Project, Sep. 22 2019, <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories/excerpts/woh-ex-0006761/first-shakespeare-plays-i-ever-saw-were-yiddish-harold-bloom-remembers-maurice-schwartz>.

"Jacob P. Adler's Shylock Scores," *New York Herald* (New York, NY), May 26 1903, 10.