THE MERCHANT OF VENICE
6-20 MARCH 2014

TEACHERS’ NOTES
The Merchant of Venice – Teacher’s Notes

Writing the Merchant of Venice

Antonio:
I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano,
A stage where every man must play a part,
And mine a sad one.
*The Merchant of Venice* (1.1.77-78)

**Shakespeare: Actor, Playwright, Poet**

*The Merchant of Venice* is thought to be written around 1596-7. William Shakespeare was by then a leading member and chief playwright of acting troupe the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. The Lord Chamberlain’s Men and another company, the Lord Admiral’s Men, performed regularly at court during festive occasions. The Lord Chamberlain’s Men also performed at the Theatre in Shoreditch, built by James Burbage in 1576.

It was with this company that Shakespeare was a shareholder and would later become a ‘house’ holder in the Globe Theatre, built in Southwark in 1599 from the timbers of the demolished Theatre.

Although the exact date of composition of many of Shakespeare’s works is difficult to determine, by this time he had written such famous plays as *Titus Andronicus* and *The Taming of the Shrew* (1593-4), *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1594-6), as well as the poem *Venus and Adonis* (1593).

For a detailed timeline of Shakespeare’s life and works, see [A Shakespeare Timeline Summary Chart](#). For an interactive version, see Routledge’s [Interactive Timeline](#). Or why not visit our Globe shop and purchase a timeline poster for your classroom?

**Shakespeare and Queen Elizabeth I**

Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603, r. 1558-1603), the so-called ‘Virgin Queen’, had been on the throne almost 40 years. After the turmoil of the reign of her father Henry VIII, this ‘golden age’ was proving to be a time of considerable advancement for England in both exploration and colonisation (the Americas), military power (the defeat of the Spanish Armada), science, literature and music.

Shakespeare’s company enjoyed the patronage of the Queen. He performed in two comedies before the Queen at the Royal Palace, Greenwich, in December 1594; *Love’s Labour’s Lost* was performed for her on December 26, 1597.

It is no surprise that Shakespeare chose to have strong, central female characters in *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. While this may have said something about the talent of boys in Shakespeare’s company, it also demonstrates the potential of Elizabeth I as a powerful role model in the mid to late sixteenth century. Some scholars speculate that perhaps Portia, in particular, was written with the strong attributes of the Queen in mind.

**Shakespeare: Man of Property**

We know Shakespeare was quite well off because in October 1596 he was living in Bishopsgate, a genteel area near the Theatre, Curtain and Rose Theatres. A further sign of Shakespeare’s growing prosperity is that in 1597, Shakespeare bought New Place, deemed one of the grandest houses in Stratford-upon-Avon. A record of corn and malt holdings in Stratford-upon-Avon, held by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, further illustrates Shakespeare’s wealth as his holdings are ‘exceeded only by 13 other of the 75 households’ in the region.
Shylock:
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gabardine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.
Well then, it now appears you need my help.
_The Merchant of Venice_ (1.3.105-108)

Throughout history, the Jews have occupied a tenuous position in society – theirs is a story of co-existence but also persecution. An uneasy tension has existed between Christians and Jews since Biblical times. The Jews’ rejection of Jesus Christ as the Messiah and, therefore, the question of who was responsible for his death (Goldstein, 2012), is a deep-rooted source of conflict.

The Holocaust is the most well-known, recent example of persecution of the Jews; however the Jews have been persecuted throughout history. Popular Renaissance theories about the behaviour of Jews included crimes such as poisoning wells, killing Christian children, spreading the plague and monopolising finance. Like many forms of prejudice, these accusations were more often based on fear than fact.

One way in which Christian countries dealt with their unease over the Jewish presence was to expel Jews from places where they had settled. In 1537, the famous Protestant reformer Martin Luther, upon realising the Jews’ unwillingness to convert to Christianity, petitioned the Prince of Saxony to expel Jews from the region. This is one of a number of times throughout history where Jews have been forced by authorities to migrate: 250 CE Carthage, 325 CE Jerusalem, 415 CE Alexandria, 612 CE Visigoth Spain, 855 CE Italy, 1181 CE France

Other forms of persecution the Jews in Europe suffered included: forced conversions, book burning, property confiscation, vandalisation of synagogues, being burned alive, bans on travel and mass killings.

For a more detailed timeline of Jewish persecution, see the History of Anti-Semitism.

It is a great testament to the resilience of the Jews that, despite thousands of years of persecution, their culture and language survive today.

Your school may be eligible for Jewish Museum workshops at a discounted rate (see London Links for more details). Workshops include: Discovering Judaism and Connecting Lives.

Historian Simon Schama wrote and presented a five-part series on Jewish history called The Story of the Jews (BBC2). See bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0392pzx for details and clips. He has also written a book of the same name to accompany the series.

For teaching ideas and resources on Anti-Semitism, see Facing History and Ourselves.
The Jews in England (11th Century–16th Century)

Gratiano:
Thy currish spirit
Governed a wolf, who hanged for human slaughter,
Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
And whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed dam,
Infused itself in thee; for thy desires
Are wolvish, bloody, starved, and ravenous.
The Merchant of Venice (4.1.133-138)

Jews have been present in England as early as 1066, when the establishment of the first Jewish settlement as recorded. Jews followed William the Conqueror to Britain from Rouen.

As in Europe, the Jews faced persecution in England. They could not own land outside the towns or join guilds. Consequently, many turned to money lending, an occupation forbidden to Christians. This at least allowed them to have some financial independence in society, though it was a role for which they were despised.

**Royal Regulations**

With the rapid increase of anti-Jewish sentiment came stricter government regulations. Henry III’s 1253 Statute Concerning the Jews set a number of limitations, including:

- Keeping their voices down during synagogue services so as not to upset Christians
- Christians were not to serve Jews, eat with them or live with them
- Jews were not to insult or denounce Christianity
- No sexual relations were permitted between Christians and Jews
- Jews were not to prevent other Jews from converting to Christianity
- Jews needed a royal licence to settle in a new place
- If Jews disobeyed these statutes they would forfeit all their possessions

**Usury**

English monarchs imposed regulations on Jews lending money throughout the thirteenth century. Until 1545, usury was defined as charging interest on money lent, and was considered a crime and unchristian.

The relaxing of laws against Christian money lending and the imposition of taxes on Jews also contributed to the Jews’ loss of financial power. The authorities realised that prohibiting usury did not discourage it, and so in 1571, Elizabeth I legalized money lending in England, meaning Christians could practice it too. The statute allowed the charging of 10 percent interest on loans to guard against corrupt practices.

**Identifying Marks**

A 1215 Lateran Council ruling under Henry III, reiterated in 1218, ruled that Jews must wear the tabula, a white piece of cloth in the shape of the Ten Commandments, as an identifying mark. Wealthy Jews were, however, able to ‘buy the right not to wear it on behalf of themselves and their communities’ (Abulafia, 2013, p. 209).

In 1275, Edward I issued a Statutum de Judeismo stipulating that Jews older than seven were to wear a piece of yellow taffeta, ‘six fingers long and three broad’, over their heart (Fishburn, 2007, p. 28).

**Coin Clipping**

Hundreds of Jews were burnt and executed for crimes such as coin clipping. Ralph Holinshed, whose Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland was often used by Shakespeare as a historical source, recorded that in 1278, 297 Jews and 3 Englishmen were executed because they had ‘clipped, washed and counterfeited the King’s coin’ (Shapiro, 1996, p. 100). One interesting theory is that people were suspicious of Jews clipping coins because they were also fearful of Jewish circumcision – the word used in English documents for coin clipping, curtus, was also used in relation to circumcised Jewish men. This further illustrates the irrationality of the prejudice shown towards the Jews.

**Expulsion**

Things came to a head in 1290 when Edward I ordered the expulsion of Jews from England. It is estimated that the Jewish population of England at the time was 2000-2500; the total population of England was 5-6 million (Shapiro, 1996, p. 46).
‘Secret Jews’

Between expulsion and re-admittance in 1656, Jews who remained in England were forced to keep a low profile. Records show that after the 1290 expulsion, there were Jews who arrived in England from European countries (including France and Spain) who were baptised and sheltered at the Domus Conversorum, the House of Converted Jews (Jewish Encyclopedia, 2011). Henry VIII declared he would ‘punish soundly any Jew or heretic to be found in his realms’ (Shapiro, 1996, p. 68), although intriguingly, he employed Jewish musicians at Court, including the Bassano family from Venice. They seemingly managed to survive because they married Christians.

During the reign of Elizabeth I, there were estimated to be up to 100 Marranos (secret Jews living as converted Christians) in London. Jews in London had to hold services in secret. The most high-profile case of Jewish persecution during Elizabeth I’s reign was that of Roderigo Lopez. Lopez was a Portuguese doctor who arrived in England in 1559. By 1567 he was already the esteemed house physician at St Bartholomew’s Hospital in London; one of his high-profile patients was Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth I’s secretary of state. In 1586, he became the queen’s chief physician. Physicians not only attended to illnesses, they also provided cosmetics and beauty care to high-born women, such as the Queen.

Lopez was tried in 1594 for plotting to poison the queen. He was known to have been an informer for Sir Francis Walsingham, but also possibly a double agent because he had contact with the Spanish authorities. At the gallows, Lopez said he loved the Queen and Jesus Christ, but the crowd reportedly responded with ‘He’s a Jew!’. He was hanged, drawn and quartered.

Shakespeare and Jews

There is some debate over the extent to which Shakespeare was familiar with Judaism and Jews, owing to the fact that Jews in Elizabethan society were forced to keep their faith secret. Jews were regarded as cultural figures (and rejecters of Christianity) of popular imagination, rather than real people. Society’s negative ideas about Jews were informed by the fears of the past and such representations as Christopher Marlowe’s unlikeable Barabbas in The Jew of Malta.

In other Shakespeare plays, the term ‘Jew’ is used in a derogatory manner. In Much Ado About Nothing, Benedick says about Beatrice: ‘if I do not love her, I am a Jew’ (2.3.253-4), implying that Jews are heartless. In Henry IV, Part I Falstaff declares ‘or I am a Jew else, an Ebrew Jew’ (2.4.177), as if this was an insult.

For further information about the Jews in Britain, visit the Jewish Museum London’s British Jewish History Timeline and Jewish Britain: A History in 50 Objects. Your school may be eligible for Jewish Museum workshops at a discounted rate (see London Links for more details). Workshops include:

Discovering Judaism
Connecting Lives

Historian Simon Schama wrote and presented a five-part series on Jewish history called The Story of the Jews (BBC2). See bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0392pzx for details and clips. He has also written a book of the same name to accompany the series.
Setting: Sixteenth-Century Venice

Antonio:
The duke cannot deny the course of law.
For the commodity that strangers have
With us in Venice, if it be denied,
Will much impeach the justice of the state,
Since that the trade and profit of the city
Consisteth of all nations.
*The Merchant of Venice* (3.3.26-31)

Commerce and Multiculturalism

During the sixteenth century, Venice was the capital of a republic and one of the ten most populated cities in Europe, with as many as 150,000 residents. Venice enjoyed important status in the sixteenth century as a crucial centre for trade due to its location and proximity to the East. Venice had been a site of trade with the Islamic world as early as the ninth century, including Egypt, Syria, and Iran, as well as partners as far away as China, thanks to the Silk Road.

Venice had a reputation for producing many goods, especially their high quality woollen textiles and Murano glass, and these were exchanged for exotic items such as spices, wine and salt. Trade was so central to the Venetian economy that they held ceremonies to pray that their merchant ships would be safe from piracy or tempests – the two most destructive forces at sea.

This east-west exchange also meant that sixteenth-century Venice was a booming, multicultural city. Trade with the East brought exotic visitors, including Egyptians, Ottomans and Persian Safavids. It is not surprising that Shakespeare included princes from Morocco and Aragon in *The Merchant of Venice* (not to mention a merchant as the title character).

Venetian Society

The presence of foreigners did not necessarily mean that sixteenth-century Venice was a tolerant society. Venetian society was structured and hierarchical. At its apex was the doge, a prince who was elected for life, a representative head who oversaw the Great Council, Senate, Collegio and Council of Ten. Society was divided into approximately three classes: the nobility or gentilhomeni, the ruling class, was an hereditary group of 200 clans and families; the middle class, the cittadini, consisting of the general populace of citizens; and the popolani or plebei, the artisans, guildsmen and shopkeepers. A distinction was made between citizens who were Venetian-born natives (*per natione*), and those who were granted citizenship, resident aliens – those who lived in Venice on a long-term basis (*per privilegio* or *per grazia*). A further distinction was added in 1569 when the Great Council ruled that cittadini originari (original citizenship) could be claimed by those who fathers and grandfathers had been legitimately born in Venice. These definitions must have made new arrivals feel like outsiders.

The Social Status of Jews

The Jewish population of Venice was made up of immigrants from European countries such as Poland, Bohemia, Spain and Portugal, but also from as far afield as Constantinople and Cairo. Jews could not gain citizenship, and hence were classed as ‘aliens’ (Gross, 1992, p. 26).

Despite being a somewhat intolerant society, Venetian authorities did not want to expel Jews because they recognised their importance to the economy. However, the authorities did limit their way of life. Jews were deprived of the right to own land or houses. As in Elizabethan England, there were strict rules forbidding Christians and Jews from sleeping together, eating together and engaging in sexual relations. Thus in *The Merchant of Venice*, Jessica must make the difficult decision to renounce Judaism in order to marry Lorenzo.

The Jews and the Ghetto

Laws confined Jews to living in certain areas. A 1516 decree restricted Jews to living in an area which became known as the Ghetto, where they paid a third more rent than Christians. The ghetto was surrounded by high walls and gates guarded by Christians that were kept closed from sunset to dawn. During the day, Jews were permitted to venture into the city as moneylenders, sellers of second-hand clothes and providers of medical services for wealthy Venetians. This was on the basis that they wore a distinguishing yellow mark on their chests, and a beret or yellow hat. When Shylock says ‘For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe’ (1.3.104) – could this be a reference to the distinguishing mark Jews had to wear?

To give a sense of the crowded conditions in which they must have lived, the population density was 662 people per hectare, compared to 351 people per hectare in the city of Venice.

Thus there was a clear separation in Venice between Christians and Jews, a distinction echoed in *The Merchant of Venice*, though, as Shaul Bassi comments wryly, there is no explicit mention of the Ghetto in the play.
The Jews and Money lending

In 1573 the Venetian court ruled that Jews could continue money lending without having to make annual payments, recognising the important function the Jews played in society as providing funds for the poor and that money lending was a necessary ‘evil’ to facilitate trade.

The ducat, short for *ducatus venetorum*, was a gold coin and the currency of Venice. In today’s money, a ducat would be worth approximately £100. This would make Shylock’s loan of 3,000 ducats equivalent to £300,000 today – a huge sum. As well, Shylock’s house would probably have been full of treasures as a result of pledges which were not claimed.

Women and Marriage

Portia:

O me, the word ‘choose’! I may neither choose whom I would, nor refuse whom I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father.

(1.2.19-22)

Jessica:

Farewell, and if my fortune be not crossed,
I have a father, you a daughter lost.

(2.5.55-56) *The Merchant of Venice*

Elizabethan England

Despite there being a female monarch, Elizabethan England was a patriarchal society. Women were considered to be second-class citizens and there are scores of books, known as ‘conduct manuals’ that instruct women how to behave in the home, in public and towards their loved ones. Importance was placed upon a woman’s body as property belonging to a man – either her father or husband. Therefore, she was supposed to guard her behaviour to avoid shaming and dishonouring her family name.

The three principles of womanhood in Shakespeare’s time were: chastity, silence and obedience. To remain a virgin until marriage, and then to be a loyal and faithful wife were the most important goals for a young woman. To listen and not speak, was her public duty, but if a woman was spoken to and asked to respond, she should only speak ‘the best of her head’ as sixteenth-century writers commented. Finally, if a woman was not obedient and did not listen to her husband or her father, she was potentially a liability. She could be unruly and marry someone her father did not approve of.

Because daughters were viewed as property, fathers cared deeply about their future marriages. Marriage could be consented to at 7 years of age, but could not be consummated until a girl was 12 years old and a boy 14 years, however marrying at such a young age was a rare occurrence. The average age at which members of the aristocracy and gentry married was 27 years for men and 25 for women.

Women from aristocratic households were often unable to choose their own partners. Many writers in the period questioned this, and indeed, there are many cases in which daughters had run away from home and eloped with their lovers. This is a theme that interested Shakespeare. Love is an important value in his plays, and he was preoccupied with the natural human desire to choose one’s own marriage partner.

Both Portia and Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* must deal with this issue. The terms of her father’s will prevent Portia from choosing her spouse; Jessica knows her choice of spouse is going to devastate her father.

While women had few legal rights, in Protestant England a lot of emphasis was placed upon companionship and love within marriage. But Shakespeare never makes it easy for us to decide whether the marriages at the end of his plays will achieve such a balance. Portia is enterprising and smart, while Bassanio seems to be too materialistic and somewhat deceptive. Will Portia’s strength and courage help to balance their relationship? How will Jessica reconcile the treatment of her father? How would Shakespeare’s audience have understood her disobedience?
Sixteenth-Century Venice

Like Elizabethan England, Venice was a patriarchal society in which all positions of power were held by men, including within the family, and the public sphere was man's dominion. Visitors to sixteenth-century Venice observed that noblewomen were rarely seen in public as they would only be allowed out with an escort. Again, this was to guard and protect their chastity and, therefore, their family name. In the domestic sphere, husbands had authority over wives and fathers had authority over their children.

In a city where trade and money were major industries, women were also a sort of commodity. It was commonplace in England and in Italy to make comparisons between women and vessels. In The Merchant of Venice, the link between marriage and trade becomes a running joke:

Salerio:
...Should I go to church
   And see the holy edifice of stone.
   And not bethink me straight of dangerous rocks,
   Which touching not my gentle vessel's side
   Would scatter all her spices on the stream...
(1.1.29-33)

High dowry prices meant some families had to choose between marrying their daughters off, sending them to convents or to live with wealthier families. In 1505, the Venetian Senate had to cap dowries at 3,000 ducats; however, noble dowries were often known to exceed this.

For some families, having assessed their daughter's 'marriageability', sending her to a convent may have been more economically viable. Thus Venetian women had essentially two paths in life – marriage or the convent, though both required subservience to a patriarchal structure.

In Portia's case, being the only child and a daughter of a wealthy man explains why she is not allowed to choose her own partner. Her father's casket tests are a means of protecting Portia and her (his) fortune as well as the family name. She does, however manage to provide clues to Bassanio while he is choosing a casket through an accompanying song. In doing so, she demonstrates her intelligence.

Jessica, on the other hand, escapes the laws and customs of Venetian society by forming a love match with Lorenzo, a Christian. As sexual relations between Christians and Jews were forbidden, in doing so Jessica must renounce her religion and her father; in lieu of a dowry, she steals money and jewels from her own father. Shakespeare leaves us wondering what his original audiences would have made of such betrayal. Would it have been acceptable to them because Shylock was a Jew?
Like many of Shakespeare’s plays, Shakespeare drew inspiration for *The Merchant of Venice* from sources and real events, in some cases ‘borrowing’ from aspects such as plot and characterisation.

**‘Il Pecorone’ by Giovanni Fiorentino (1558)**

Giovanni Fiorentino was a fourteenth-century Italian author (exact dates unknown). He wrote a collection of short stories called *Il Pecorone* (‘The Stupid Man’ or ‘The Cowardly Sheep’), which was published in 1558.

Shakespeare seems to have borrowed quite heavily from the plot of this story. A man named Giannetto is on a quest to win a lady living in Belmonte. He is sponsored by his godfather, Ansaldo, a wealthy Venetian merchant. Ansaldo borrows ten thousand ducats from a Jew (who remains nameless), ‘on condition that if they were not repaid the next June on St John’s day, the Jew might take a pound of flesh from whatever part of his body he pleased’.

The bond expires and Ansaldo is arrested. The Jew refuses compensation, saying: ‘understand this: if you were to offer more ducats than this city is worth, it would not satisfy me: I would rather have what my bond says is mine’. The lady of Belmonte comes disguised as a lawyer to plead his case. She rules that the Jew can only take a pound of flesh from Ansaldo, but cannot take any of his blood: ‘if you take more or less than a pound, I shall have your head struck off...if one drop of blood is spilt, I shall have you put to death...’.

The Jew is taunted by those present at the trial: ‘He who thought to ensnare others, is caught himself’, and tears up the bond in rage.

**Useful Sources**


**‘Gesta Romanorum’ c.13/14th centuries; English translation c.1577)**

*Gesta Romanorum* is a collection of stories originally written in Latin around the 13th or 14th centuries. The author is unknown, although English translations began appearing from the mid-15th century. It is believed to have been used by preachers as a source for stories to illustrate sermons (White, 2013).

Story number 4, ‘The Three Caskets’, was clearly used by Shakespeare as a source for the device employed posthumously by Portia’s father to determine her husband, however in the *Gesta Romanorum*’s version, it is the woman who must choose in order to win the man.

In the story, the King of Amplug sends his daughter to marry the only son of the Emperor of Rome. She is shipwrecked, swallowed by a whale and rescued by an earl, who delivers her to the emperor. The emperor wants her to prove her love for his son by choosing from 3 vessels, each of which is engraved with a message:

- **Gold**: ‘Who so chooseth me shall finde that he deserveth’
- **Silver**: ‘Who so chooseth me shall finde that his nature desireth’
- **Lead**: ‘Who so chooseth mee, shall finde that God hath disposed for him’

(Kellscraft Studio, 2006)

The Emperor cautions her: ‘If thou choose one of these, wherein is profit to thee and to others, then shalt thou have my son. And if thou choose that wherein is no profit to thee, nor to any other, soothly thou shalt not marry him’ (Kellscraft Studio, 2006).

The maiden petitions God to help her make the right choice (Kellscraft Studio, 2006).She correctly chooses the lead vessel, obtaining gold, precious stones and the emperor’s son (Brown (ed.), 1955, pp. 172-173). The ‘moral’ is that Christians are to lead simple, unadorned lives, storing up their treasures inside and in heaven (Brown (ed.), 1955, p. 174).


Zelauto, or the Fountaine of Fame by Anthony Munday (1580)

Anthony Munday (1560?-1633) was a London writer and a contemporary of Shakespeare’s. Like Shakespeare, he also started off as an actor. His story *Zelauto, or the Fountaine of Fame* was published in 1580.

**Titled ‘The Amourous lyfe of Strabino a Scholler, the brave behaviour of Rodolfo a martiall Gentleman, and the right reward of Signior Truculento a Usurer’** (Brown (ed.), 1955, p. 156). The story is set in Verona and revolves around Strabino, who is in love with Cornelia, the sister of his friend Rodolfo. Truculento, a usurer (but not Jewish), is also trying to woo Cornelia.

It is Cornelia’s idea for Strabino to borrow money from Truculento to buy a jewel. Truculento is pleased and flattered by Rodolfo’s request for a loan of 4,000 ducats on behalf of his friend. The condition is that ‘if by the first day of the month ensuing, the whole sum be not restored: eache of your lands shall stand to the endamagement, besides the losse of bothe your right eyes’ (Brown (ed.), 1955, p. 160). Truculento’s daughter, Brisana, is Rodolfo’s mistress. Rodolfo also flatters Truculento into agreeing to their marriage.

At the trial, the Judge rules that, according to the law, the usurer is right to claim the forfeit. Brisana steps in and says she went to Truculento’s house to return the money, but Truculento was not at home (Brown (ed.), 1955, p. 166). Cornelia adds that the bond is to be redeemed but only if Truculento executes it himself: ‘if in pulling forth their eyes, you diminish the least quantity of blood out of their heads... you shall stand to the losse of bothe your owne eyes’ (Brown (ed.), 1955, p. 167).

The judge says the bond money is to be given to Strabino and Rodolfo as compensation. Truculento also accepts Rodolfo as ‘his lawfull sonne, and put him in possession of all his lyuinges after his disease’ (Brown (ed.), 1955, p. 168).

The story is thought to be Shakespeare’s inspiration for Lorenzo and Jessica.

**Useful Sources**

The Orator by Alexandre Sylvain (English translation - 1596)

Alexandre Sylvain (or Alexander Silvayn) (c.1535-1585) was a Flemish moralist and poet. He published a series of debates on moral issues in 1581, which was translated into English in 1596 as *The Orator* (Gillespie, 2004, p. 465).

Declamation 95 is headed: ‘Of a Jew who would for his debt have a pound of the flesh of a Christian’. The Introduction reads:

A Jew unto whom a Christian Marchant ought nine hundred crownes, would have summoned him for the same in Turkie : the Marchant, because he would not be discredited, promised to pay the said summe within the tearme of three months, and if he paid it not, he was bound to give him a pound of the flesh of his bodie. The tearme being past some fifteene daies, the Jew refused to take his money: the ordinarie Judge of that place appointed him to cut a just pound of the Christian’s flesh, and if he cut either more or lesse, then his owne head should be smitten off: The Jew appealed from this sentence, unto the chiefe judge... (Internet Archive, 1917)

The text contains a speech believed to relate to Shylock’s at the trial, including some of the arguments used by the Jew to justify his demand for his bond (British Library, n.d.):

...in the Roman Commonwealth, so famous for laws and armes, it was lawfull for debt, to imprison, beat, and afflict with torments the free Citizens: How manie of them (do you thinke) would have thought themselves happie, if for a small debt they might have ben excused with the paiment of a pound of their flesh? Who ought then to marvile if a Jew requireth so small a thing of a Christian, to discharge him of a good round summe?...

...I might also say that I have need of this flesh to cure a friend of mine of a certaine maladie, which is otherwise incurable, or that I would have it to terrifie thereby the Christians for ever abusing the Jewes anie more hereafter... (Gillespie, 2004, p. 466)


A New Song: Shewing the Crueltie of Gernutus a Jew
(date unknown)

_Gernutus_ is a Renaissance ballad (exact date unknown),
‘Shewing the crueltie of Gernutus a Jew, who lending to a
Merchant a hundred Crownes, would have a pound of his
flesh, because he could not pay him at the day appointed’
(Brown (ed.), 1955, p. 153)

A Jewish moneylender living in ‘Venice town’ lends
a merchant one hundred crowns, with a pound of the
merchant’s flesh as bond:

    Jew: And this shall be the forfeyture;
       Of your owne fleshe a pound.
       If you agree, make you the bond,
       And here is a hundred crownes.
       (_Gernutus, the Jew of Venice_)

A court case ensues in which the Judge says the moneylender
may have his bond, provided he does not shed a drop of the
merchant’s blood:

    Judge:
       For if thou take either more or lesse
       To the value of a mite,
       Thou shalt be hanged presently
       As is both law and right.
       (_Gernutus, the Jew of Venice_)

The Jew leaves, crying out against the ‘cruell judge’
(_Gernutus, the Jew of Venice_).


Other Possible Sources Used by Shakespeare

There was a Jewish merchant from Venice living in London
1596-1600 who could be a possible model for Antonio
(Popkin, 1989, p. 330)

1567 lawsuit between Jew Abraham Abencini and Christian/
crypto-Jews Gaspar and Giovanni Ribeira over 3000 ducats,
even though Jews were not allowed to lend more than 3.
Useful Sources

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Journal Articles


Websites


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jewishmuseum.org.uk
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PEARS INSTITUTE
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