

The National Theatre

The Merchant of Venice

William Shakespeare



The Merchant of Venice

The Duke of Venice
The Prince of Morocco
The Prince of Arragon
Antonio, a merchant of Venice
Bassanio, his friend, suitor to Portia
Solanio } friends to Antonio & Bassanio
Gratiano }
Salerio }
Lorenzo, in love with Jessica
Shylock, a rich Jew
Tubal, a Jew, his friend
Launcelot Gobbo, the clown,
servant to Shylock
Old Gobbo, father to Launcelot
Secretary
Servant to Antonio
Leonardo, servant to Bassanio
Balthasar } servants to Portia
Stephano }
Barber
Portia, a rich heiress
Nerissa, her waiting-maid
Jessica, daughter to Shylock
Singers

Benjamin Whitrow
Tom Baker
Charles Kay
Anthony Nicholls
Jeremy Brett
Michael Tudor Barnes
Derek Jacobi
Richard Kay
Malcolm Reid
Laurence Olivier
Lewis Jones
Jim Dale

Harry Lomax
Michael Edgar
Lawrence Trimble
Alan Dudley
Michael Harding
Patrick Carter
Paul Vousden
Joan Plowright
Anna Carteret
Jane Lapotaire
Laura Sarti
Clare Walmesley

Officers, servants, etc

Hugh Armstrong	Kate Coleridge	Michael Edgar
Sean Roantree	Lawrence Trimble	Paul Vousden

Musicians

Benedict Cruft	Chuck Mallett	Nigel Pinkett
----------------	---------------	---------------

Production by Jonathan Miller

Designed by Julia Trevelyan Oman

Lighting by Robert Ornbo

Musical arrangements and original music by Carl Davis

Assistant to the Producer: Harry Lomax

Stage Manager: John Rothenberg

The action takes place in Venice and Belmont

There will be one interval of eighteen minutes



A note on the play

The Merchant of Venice was probably written some time after July 1596 and before the middle of 1598 when Shakespeare was between 32 and 34 years old. In style and manner, in its grace and immediacy of language, it belongs to the period of *Much Ado*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*

The earliest text is the quarto of 1600, printed by James Roberts for Thomas Heyes and believed to be very close to the fair copy of Shakespeare's own manuscript. This has remained the accepted version of the text although various reprints were published between 1619 and 1652

It is likely that Shakespeare took his story from several available sources. The legend of the bond for human flesh was of ancient origin, and long part of Eastern folklore. But the primary source and the version which is closest to Shakespeare's tale is to be found in one of a collection of old Italian stories, *Il Pecorone*, first printed in 1558. Here the Venetian lover and the older man who lends him money, the fair lady of Belmont, the bond and the pound of flesh, the Jew who insists on his bond and refuses money, the last-minute rescue by the heroine disguised as a lawyer, the demand for the ring, even (though in a somewhat different form) the testing of the lover's sincerity – all these elements exist in the Italian fairy tale

Clearly there was an abundance of material from which Shakespeare felt he could freely borrow. But the event which probably served more directly to fire his inspiration was the earlier presentation in a rival playhouse of Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* which had its first performance in 1589. The acclaim which greeted Marlowe's monstrous Jewish villain (the role was played by the great Edward Alleyn) may well have persuaded Shakespeare to try and emulate Marlowe's success with something of his own on a similar theme

At the time, moreover, the Jewish question was very much a public reality. Although practising Jews had been expelled from England since the end of the thirteenth century, there still remained a small number of Jews in Elizabethan England who, while probably professing Christianity in order to escape persecution and expulsion, would have retained certain features of their ancient customs and worship

Contemporary playgoers would also have been keenly aware of the feeling aroused by the execution of Dr Roderigo Lopez, the

white; ogres, witches, bogeys are constantly encountered who have their temporary victories but in the end are always vanquished by the good and banished, leaving Arcadia to its unsullied innocent joy where the good live happily ever after. But the malevolence of a wicked character in a fairy tale is a given premise; their victims, that is to say, never bear any responsibility for the malice, have never done the malevolent one an injury. The Devil, by definition malevolent without a cause, is presented in the medieval miracle plays as a fairy-story bogey, never victorious but predestined to be cheated of his prey . . .

Recent history has made it utterly impossible for the most unsophisticated and ignorant audience to ignore the historical reality of the Jews and think of them as fairy-story bogeys with huge noses and red wigs. An Elizabethan audience undoubtedly still could – very few of them had seen a Jew – and, if Shakespeare had so wished, he could have made Shylock grotesquely wicked like *The Jew of Malta*. The star actors who, from the eighteenth century onwards, have chosen to play the role have not done so out of a sense of moral duty in order to combat anti-semitism, but because their theatrical instinct told them that the part, played seriously, not comically, offered them great possibilities

The Merchant of Venice is, among other things, as much a 'problem' play as one by Ibsen or Shaw
–W H Auden



Opposite: Joan Plowright (Portia) and Anna Carteret (Nerissa)





Two eye-witness reports

For when as walking in the Court of the Ghetto, I casually met with a certain learned Jewish Rabbin that spake good Latin, I insinuated myself after some few terms of compliment into conference with him and asked him his opinion of Christ and why he did not receive Him for his Messiah . . . and at last descended to the persuasion of him to abandon and renounce his Jewish religion and to undertake the Christian faith without which he should be eternally damned . . . In the end he seemed somewhat exasperated against me, because I sharply taxed their superstitious ceremonies. For many of them are such refractory people that they cannot endure to hear any terms of reconciliation to the Church of Christ

– Thomas Coryate (1577-1617)

I was brought acquainted with a Burgundian Jew who had married an apostate Kentish woman. I asked him divers questions: he told me, amongst other things, that the world should never end, that our souls transmigrated . . . and then when the Messias came, all the ships, barks, and vessells of Holland should, by the powere of certain strange whirle winds, be loos'd from their ankers and transported in a moment to all the desolat ports and havens throughout the world, to convey their brethren and tribes to the Holy Citty . . . He was a merry drunken fellow, but would by no means handle any money (for something I purshas'd of him) it being Saturday; but desired me to leave it in the window, meaning to receive it on Sunday morning

– John Evelyn (1620-1706)

The Jew in English literature

by John Gross

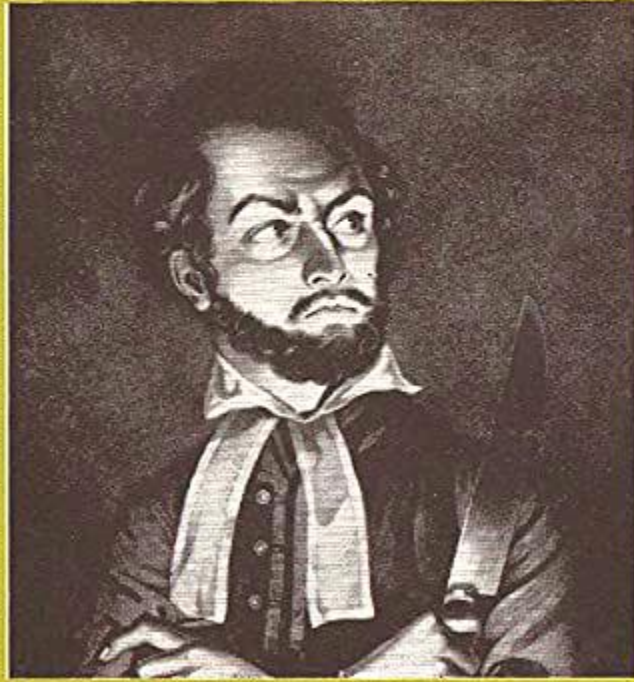


In creating Shylock, Shakespeare started out with a stereotype – one of the most venerable in European culture. At the very heart of the indictment lies the charge of Deicide: the earliest Jewish characters on the English stage were the red-wigged Judases and the mocking rabble around the Cross in the mystery and morality plays. More immediately, the Middle Ages bequeathed the image of the Jew as quintessential usurer, and the grisly folklore of ritual murder. When Chaucer, the most humane of medieval writers, wanted a suitably touching story to put into the mouth of the Prioress, he chose the legend of little Hugh of Lincoln, mercilessly done to death by the ‘Hebrayk peple’; and behind the picture of Shylock hungering for his pound of flesh there still lurk primitive fears of mutilation and even cannibalism. As for usury, the rise of capitalism merely intensified the need for a symbolic scapegoat. The obverse of Shylock’s avarice is that in the play, at least, the non-Jewish merchant still supposedly inhabits an aristocratic, free-spending, pre-capitalistic world

Another time-honoured ingredient of the myth is the beautiful Jewess, object of sensual curiosity and (given a pogrom) potential victim of rape. That she should so often appear in close conjunction with the old ogre, usually as his daughter, cries out for a Freudian interpretation; and something of this pattern persists even among benign myth-makers – e.g., in *Ivanhoe*. Shakespeare, of course, wrote with the precedent of Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* close at hand, but the differences are as illuminating as the similarities. Where Marlowe’s Barabas is a wholly grotesque criminal master-mind, a kind of sixteenth-century Goldfinger, Shylock is made of sterner stuff. He is the repressive father-figure who lays down the law and who prides himself on his puritan virtues: he keeps ‘a sober house’. Here, too, he has a representative role. He is meant to personify Old Testament legalism at its harshest, the attitude of a people who insist on going entirely by the Book

Yet Shakespeare’s audience also accepted the Old Testament as Holy Writ, and there was a certain latent ambiguity in the situation. If the Jews had rejected Christ, they were none the less descended from the Patriarchs and Prophets, and in the seventeenth century, especially with the growth of puritanism, this aspect was brought to the fore. Over the years the strongest literary antidotes to Barabas and Shylock were not the rather insipid efforts of well-intentioned apologists, but the Authorised Version, and the deep sense of affinity with Hebraism which

Shylocks of the past



Edmund Kean (1814)



Charles Macklin (1767)



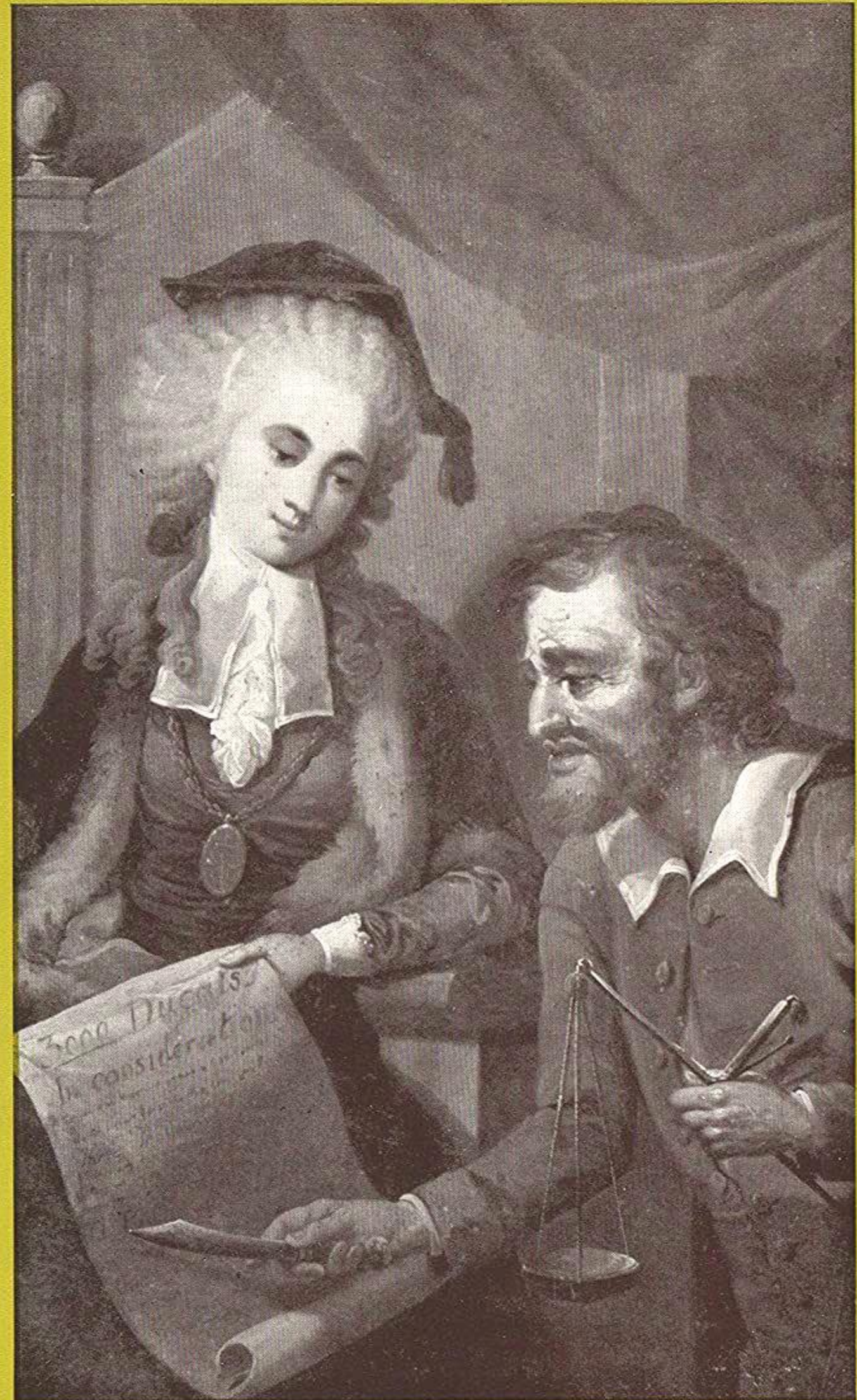
Henry Irving (1879)



William Charles Macready (1839)



Beerbohm Tree (1908)



Mrs Siddons as Portia and John Philip Kemble (1789)

A theory by Walter Kerr

Is it possible that the way Shylock was played in Shakespeare's time, and for nearly one hundred and fifty years thereafter, is the right way, the only practical way if the piece as a whole is to prove satisfying?

The thought horrifies us. Are we going to make Shylock a villain again and poke crude fun at him besides? . . .

Was there no familiar image, no elderly, moneygrubbing, fantastically funny fellow, *anywhere* in the Elizabethan storehouse to help set Shakespeare in motion and the rest of us on a likely scent?

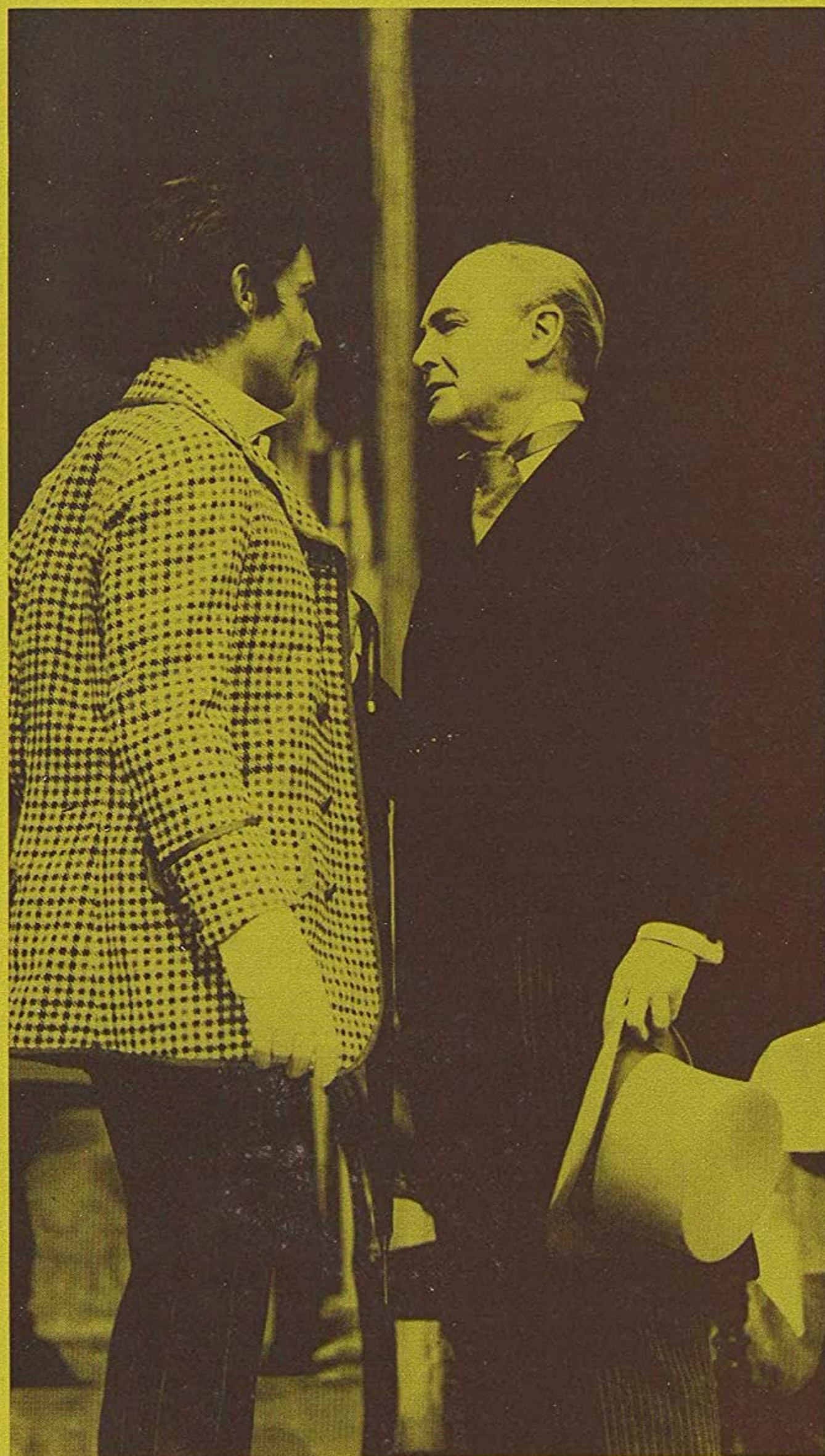
There was such an image, just such a fellow. His name was Pantalone, and he appeared endlessly, with many droll variations but with a few indispensable comic trademarks, in the improvised performances of the Italian *commedia dell'arte* . . .

Who was he, what was he like? To begin with, he was a merchant of Venice. He was old, wealthy, and had his fortune tied up in shipping. When one of his cargoes was destroyed by storm or pirates, he tore his beard and spat into the sea in impotent rage. He was a miser . . .

At the last, Pantalone is the butt of the joke – robbed of his ducats, deceived by his daughter, the sputtering, breast-beating hair-tearing victim of his own greed. . .

While it is unlikely now that anyone will ever be able to *prove* that Shakespeare took his Shylock from his memory of Pantalone the catalogue of similarities is too striking to be dismissed. As will be obvious, each item in the catalogue appears – with a surprising minimum of alteration – in *The Merchant of Venice* . . .

Let us suppose that Shylock *could* be played as a delightful dervish of a Pantalone, and that the comedy as a whole would profit by the vision. Clearly, we have not yet accounted for everything. Though the 'Hath not a Jew eyes?' passage begins in a joke, it moves on to something else: to a quite firm defence of Jewishness and the common humanity of Jews and Christians. Though the 'Lear' line is surrounded by comic images, it is in itself instantly moving, a catch of breath in the middle of a laugh. If Shylock is the English cousin of an Italian vaudevillian, where does that pathos come from? Precisely where it has always come from, I think: from that unexpected stab of sorrow that so often accompanies the comic image when it is raised to its highest power



Jeremy Brett (Bassanio) and Anthony Nicholls (Antonio)

The likelihood that pathos will emerge from the most outlandishly, even grotesquely, conceived cartoon stems from a very simple principle: all truly funny figures are necessarily sympathetic figures. If a man makes us laugh, we like him. He may do quite terrible things in pursuit of the objects of his lust, his avarice, or his spite, because he delights us in his outlandishness, in his methods, in his mania – and because we are quite sure he is going to be as delightfully discomfited – we feel no emotional revulsion for the things he does, or for his person. We secretly admire him; we look forward eagerly to his next appearance onstage; in an oddly inverted but very understanding way, we feel for him. And because we feel for this enchanted buffoon, we can always be, delicately, touched by him . . .

What of the Jewishness? Pantalone, with his black cloak, black cap, and exceedingly prominent nose, was not Jewish. In the process of dovetailing sources, Shakespeare can have taken the Jewishness from the *Il Pecorone* tradition, from the commercial popularity of Marlowe's play, from the talk current in London after Lopez' execution. Wherever he took it, what he took was a stereotype: the medieval stereotype of the Jew as avaricious. He took it *as* a stereotype; there were too few Jews then living in England for Shakespeare to have had extensive personal knowledge of the race. Insofar as he borrowed the stereotype at all, and he probably borrowed it for commercial reasons, he cannot be absolved of a certain opportunism, of having lent himself to the exploitation and perpetuation of a disparaging legend. (He behaved even more badly, and for just as poor reasons, towards Richard III.) The fact in itself is unpleasant, and we will have to live with it

We had best, however, not be smug about the matter. It should first be remembered that Shakespeare would have employed the stereotype as matter-of-factly, and with as little malice, as an American playwright of the early twentieth century making uncritical and even affectionate use of those other stereotypes, the superstitious Negro and the drunken Irishman. Furthermore Shakespeare might have treated his borrowed equation in one of two ways. He might have made the Jew a bloodcurdling melodramatic villain, as most of his sources had done. Or he might have taken the kinder course and made him comic, which is what I think he did do. In the public mind, the progress of social adjustment moves something like this: from the alien as menace to the alien as buffoon to the alien as human being. It is quite conceivable that Shakespeare actually furthered understanding by nudging this process into its second stage. I

do not say that he did this deliberately; but he had noticed that a Jew – and especially a funny Jew – had eyes. If we can imagine an accepted stereotype slowly and mysteriously taking on, under its manipulator's instincts, a broad and rather affectionate grin – as the superstitious Negro did when Mark Twain got around to Nigger Jim, or, more pertinently, as the drunken Irishman did when Sean O'Casey decided to make us fond of the loutish Captain Boyle – we may have come closer to measuring Shakespeare's peculiar achievement, and to the image in his mind as well. The Shylock we find on our stages is ambiguous, nervous, not very attractive in spite of his tears; Shakespeare's – if he was as funny as the earliest tradition tells us he was and as Thomas Pope might well have made him – may easily have been more likeable