

Edinburgh, 1 - 23 August 2025

"A new path taken": What if Portia never came to Venice?

A Pound of Flesh - The Merchant of Venice reimagined as a tragedy

by Martin Foreman

***The Merchant of Venice* - the original story**

The Merchant of Venice is one of Shakespeare's best-known plays; for modern audiences, however, it is also one of his most difficult. It not only sits uncomfortably between the stools of comedy, romance and drama but it frequently breaks free of those constraints to jerk the audience between inhuman bigotry and our common humanity.

Creating a coherent story from the many different characters and events in the play is a challenge for any director. The court case is always the climax, with Shylock's humiliation and downfall engineered by Portia and witnessed by Antonio, Bassanio and a cast of peripheral characters. Pre-trial the play has bounced from scene to scene - the Gobbos, the failed candidates for Portia's hand, Jessica's elopement and more; post-trial it ends in a hotch-potch of romance (Jessica and Lorenzo in the garden), comedy (the rings) and the reinstatement of Antonio's wealth. I have seen all these elements played in many different ways; only once - on film with Al Pacino as Shylock and Jeremy Irons as Antonio - have I seen a version of *The Merchant* that convinced me of every scene, word and action from the opening to the final line.

My early encounters with the play before I began working in theatre focused on Shylock and the perennial question as to whether the audience should sympathise with him, revile him or be torn between those responses. In time, however, I became more intrigued by the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. It is, after all, Bassanio's need for money and Antonio's willingness to provide it that is the catalyst that eventually leads to the drama in court. Everything else - even Bassanio's seeking and winning Portia's hand - is secondary to the opening scene with Bassanio's plea and Antonio's unconditional offer.

That offer begs a question. Antonio has already lent Bassanio much money that has not been repaid. Why should he now put himself in debt to send good money after bad? Bassanio may assure him that this second amount will not be lost ("*I do not doubt . . . to find both / or bring your latter hazard back again*") but no astute businessman would borrow money from a third party to lend it to an already defaulting creditor. Either Antonio is not astute - unlikely or he would not be wealthy - or there is another explanation. That explanation can only be that he is in love with, besotted by, has the hots for - whichever phrase you choose - the younger man.

I do not know why so few directors draw attention to this aspect of Antonio's personality. The merchant's attraction towards Bassanio is central to the drama, yet it is almost always ignored, underplayed or treated as an afterthought despite the fact that Shakespeare refers to it in ways that are impossible to ignore. In the opening lines Antonio confesses he is sad; he denies that the cause is love but as soon as Bassanio enters, his mood changes: love walks in the door and wisdom rushes out. Antonio does not hesitate to grant Bassanio another loan even if it means borrowing from his worst enemy. By the end of that first scene he almost forces Bassanio to accept his money: "*you . . . herein but spend time to wind about my love with circumstance.*".

Lest we forget, later in the play Antonio's love is once more brought to our attention. On Bassanio's departure for Belmont Salarino notes that Antonio's "*eye [was] big with tears*" and "*with affection wondrous sensible he wrung Bassanio's hand, and so they parted.*" In the court, where Antonio is faced with certain death, he

implores Bassanio to tell Portia *"how I loved you . . . [and] bid her judge whether Bassanio had not once a love"*. This deep emotion is surely the only explanation for Antonio's passiveness in the face of Shylock's knife; with Bassanio wed and out of his life, Antonio has nothing left to live for.

The merchant's love is not reciprocated. Bassanio is attracted to Antonio's money but there is no hint of any emotion deeper than friendship - and even that friendship may be conditional on Antonio's generosity. They know each other well, but their social lives revolve around different groups of friends - Antonio drinking with Salanio and Salarino and Bassanio carousing with Lorenzo and Gratiano. Only when news comes to Belmont of Antonio's predicament does Bassanio understand the difficulty the merchant is in and rush back to Venice.

It is also debatable in the opening scene whether Bassanio is in love with Portia. They have met before but his first description of his future wife is that she is *"a lady richly left"*. With her wealth uppermost in his mind, only as an afterthought does he add that she is *"fair and fairer than that word"*. Taken together, Portia's wealth and beauty are a trophy to make men jealous - a common enough attitude for many men then and now, but it is unlikely that if Portia were poor Bassanio would wish to marry her. In Shylock's memorable words, money is Bassanio's suit.

At the start of the play, therefore, we can only conclude that Bassanio is a hustler whose primary concern is money and the luxuries that money can buy. He has not had the luck of inheriting it and he has no intention of working for it. He uses his charm - and no doubt youth and good looks - to play on Antonio's love as expertly as an angler lures a fish. His conscience briefly troubles him when Shylock states the terms of his bond but that impediment is soon forgotten as he welcomes the moneylender's servant into his house and prepares for a night of revelry. Bassanio's behaviour does change as the play progresses - his developing love for Portia and his fears for Antonio are sincere - but his earlier manipulation of the merchant should not be forgotten.

My focus on Antonio and Bassanio does not mean that I relegate Shylock to lesser role in the play. In this short essay, I hold back on discussing the moneylender to any great extent for two reasons. The first is that I doubt I can say anything about his personality and motives that has not been said and argued over many times before. My second reason is probably more controversial - I consider Shylock's Jewishness and Antonio's Christianity of little importance in themselves.

To some that statement may be inexplicable or offensive. No offence is intended; perhaps an explanation will suffice. Sixteenth century English playwright Shakespeare writes of Jew and Christian because they are familiar to him; in another time or culture it might be Tamil and Sinhalese that he puts on the stage, or Tutsi and Hutu, Uyghur and Han, black and white, Catholic and Protestant; the potential list goes on and on. Since recorded history, across the globe prejudice and violence have simmered and erupted between different religious / ethnic / racial groups. The language may change, the hostility may lie on the broadest of spectrums from insult to genocide, but whichever group is oppressor and whichever oppressed, the same lies are uttered, the same dehumanisation is practised, the same violence is meted out and suffered; the only difference is which group is demonised and how deep the antagonism runs.

Many modern productions focus on the elements of Jew and Christian today as Shakespeare's contemporaries did. I cannot fault them but I prefer a path in which Antonio's Christianity and Shylock's Jewishness are primarily symbolic, evidence of the ease with which each of us, whoever we are, wherever we live, is capable of vilifying The Other. From that perspective Antonio's contempt for Shylock's Jewishness is rationale, not reason: Antonio hates and therefore he must find a cause for his hatred.

As for Portia, I have little to add to what has been said by many before. Her status forces her to suppress her emotions except when alone with her companion Nerissa. Her intelligence is not in question. What appears unresolved - although we can assume it is resolved off-stage - is who has command of her money once she is wed. Having pledged with her ring all she owns to Bassanio, in theory she has nothing of her own, but her peremptory command to offer Shylock thousands more ducats than has been lost to the bond suggests that she still has some control over her father's inheritance. By the end of the play she appears not just Bassanio's equal

but quite likely his superior. Surrounded by the wealth he has always sought, Bassanio, we suspect, will easily adjust to his new life and wife.

A Pound of Flesh - a new path

I was already mulling over the ideas above when in early 2023 an online literary challenge inspired me to consider an alternative outcome to the play. I wondered what might happen if Portia could not come to court and what would prevent her getting there. That obstacle was at hand, provided by Shakespeare himself. Portia and Bassanio were lovers, as were Juliet and Romeo; like Juliet Portia had a secret plan to resolve a life-threatening situation; if the plague intervened with dreadful consequences in one woman's life, might it not also intervene and cause equal harm in the other's? And so in *A Pound of Flesh* the pestilence comes to Padua, confining Portia to Bellario's house. Then if Portia did not reach Venice before the trial concluded, what would happen to Antonio? to Shylock? to Bassanio? With the *dea ex machina* no longer on the stage *A Pound of Flesh* must proceed to inevitable tragedy, although who dies and in what circumstances will not be revealed here.

For this new story I stripped away extraneous scenes and characters. The irritating Gobbos were the first to go, followed by the tedious Morocco and Arragon, although the challenge of the caskets remained. Salanio and Salarino hung around for a while until they merged into a single Salarin. Nerissa stayed, as did Bassanio's roistering companions and Jessica's desire to escape her father. The loss of several scenes and characters allowed others, such as Jessica and Gratiano, to express themselves more fully. More pertinent to the central plot, Bassanio's relationships with Portia and Antonio deepened while Antonio searched his soul for the source of his hatred of Shylock.

My reimagined play combined both Shakespeare's language (a few lines borrowed from other plays) with my attempts at his style. Thus Antonio expresses his desire for Bassanio: *"The pow'rful love I bear him / o'erwhelms and harsh confounds me. I know not / if this poor heart is raised to heaven's gate / or drawn to baser thoughts 'gainst nature's law"*; Portia's and Bassanio's mutual attraction are a little less sudden than in the original: *"Oh, happy memory, within thy vault / was this Adonis' form recorded true! / Now stands he here and I my unquiet heart / must tame with harsh and cold demeanour"*; and death approaches in the final scene: *"Without thy breath, without thy love, this world / must be a haunted room wherein thy ghost / no longer grants this mortal audience"*. Whether the result flows smoothly or jars the ear I leave to others to judge.

New words, new scenes. I have always been irritated by productions where a writer's creation has been twisted to suit a director's vision without acknowledging that the original has been changed (Agatha Christie is a frequent victim). I accept, however, that they are merely following Shakespeare himself, who blatantly borrowed, copied and stole from the past. I excuse my presumption with a prologue that reminds the audience that Shakespeare was not the first to tell this story: *"each author from a previous takes a theme / and to the next bequeaths a mewling babe / with pray'rs its cries fall not on ears unheard. / Now hear our story stripped of comedy. / A new path taken, tragedy appears"*.

A ten-actor, two-act version of the play was given a rehearsed reading in Edinburgh in April 2024. Although well received, this did not lead to offers of a full-scale production. In its stead a fifty-minute version premieres at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2025. Four protagonists remain - Antonio, Bassanio, Portia, Shylock (not for the first time a woman in that role); a fifth actor plays the Doge and other parts. The plot is intense and the pace unrelenting as Antonio and Bassanio are finally confronted with the consequences of the young man's greed. I urge you to see it.

This play would not exist without the encouragement I have received over the last two years from Danielle Farrow. Her patience, her insights into all things Shakespearean and her enthusiasm for the project were

considerable help when I could not see how to marry my vision with the original text. Her presence in the production as Shylock is a vote of confidence which I fully appreciate.

A Pound of Flesh

Edinburgh Fringe 2025

by Martin Foreman and William Shakespeare

directed by Martin Foreman

Venue theSpace on the Mile (Venue 39)

Dates 1, 2 August (previews)

20.20 (50 mins)

£8 (£6)

3 - 9, 11 - 16, 18 - 23 August

20.20 (50 mins)

£12 (£10)

Full details of cast and crew, publicity images and background material can be found on arberytheatre.uk/a-pound-of-flesh (use QR code)

Tickets can be booked through the website, the Fringe Box Office and, during the run and subject to availability, at the venue in the Royal Mile.

more information: 0798 965 5482

info@arberytheatre.uk

Facebook / Instagram / Threads / TikTok / X: @arberytheatre



Martin Foreman is an Edinburgh-based playwright and theatre director whose work ranges from the classical (versions of Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and Petronius' *The Satyricon*) to modern comedies and dystopias. His most recent production as director was J B Priestley's *Dangerous Corner* in October 2024.

martinfoorman.com

