



## Martin Foreman

*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.  
Plot borrowed from another play in steals,  
o'ertakes our heroes and with sad death marks  
the consequence of greed.*

Why change *The Merchant of Venice*, one of Shakespeare's best-known dramas?

### **Anti-semitism**

Shylock is repeatedly denounced as a Jew stereotypically obsessed with money and merciless in pursuit of his pound of flesh. Such tropes have persisted for centuries, culminating in the Nazis' attempted genocide and the lingering poison of anti-semitism in the twenty-first century. Dealing with these tropes is a challenge for any director.

### **Portia, the three caskets and the rings**

The caskets of gold, silver and lead and the various suitors who seek Portia's hand seem to come from another play. The comedy of the rings in the final scenes weakens the intensity of the court scene.

### **Antonio and Bassanio**

Antonio is older, unmarried and proclaims his love for Bassanio in terms as strong, if not stronger, than those of Bassanio for Portia. Bassanio's spendthrift nature and his willingness to frequently borrow from Antonio are stressed in the first scene but recede into the background as the play proceeds.

This common trope in modern eyes - an older man besotted by a younger man who acts irresponsibly and who may or may not return his affection or respond physically - is not explored in Shakespeare's play.

## Shylock and Jessica

The relationship between father and daughter is given little depth. When Shylock discovers that Jessica has fled, taking with her jewels and money, he appears to be more concerned with the loss of wealth than his daughter. We are given little information to decide whether Jessica behaved reasonably and we are not sure how to react to Shylock's outcry in court that he has lost his daughter.

## A DIFFERENT APPROACH

In early 2023 The Literal Challenge ([theliteralchallenge.com](http://theliteralchallenge.com)) offered its annual provocation to create a play a day in February. Each day the brief was different; on the seventh the challenge was to change the key element in a famous play. The plague that led to tragedy in *Romeo and Juliet*\* was a natural template for *The Merchant of Venice*. If Portia and Nerissa were detained by plague in Padua, no-one would make the point in court that Shylock could shed no blood and Antonio would therefore die.

*\* Friar John, charged with delivering Friar Lawrence's letter to Romeo that Juliet would only have the appearance of death, was detained by quarantine in Mantua. As a result, when Romeo returned to Verona he believed Juliet to have died; he then killed himself, as she did on discovering his body.*

With these thoughts in mind, I created *A Pound of Flesh*. I considered rewriting the play in modern English but that would have torn it too far from its roots. More than half the text remains Shakespeare's. In my changes and additions I have used iambic pentameters and words, phrases and grammar that were used by the Bard himself or in common use at the time. I continue to revise the text where I see deficiencies.

## A shorter play - a tragedy

*A Pound of Flesh* lasts about two hours fifteen minutes without interval. The Princes of Morocco and Arragon no longer appear; Launcelot Gobbo's humour is reduced to its essentials and his father is absent; with Portia and Nerissa quarantined in Padua, the comedy of the rings in the final scenes has gone. The streamlined play is no longer a comedy or a drama but a tragedy that focuses on Bassanio's relationships with Antonio and Portia, and on the question of Christian and Jew. The essence of Shakespeare's characters remain while nuances not always apparent in the original text are added.

**Bassanio** is in his early twenties, aware of his attraction to both men and women and willing to lever it to his advantage. He is happier to spend money than to save or earn it but vaguely aware that at some point money borrowed should be repaid. His dramatic journey takes him from carefree spendthrift to realisation of the grim implications of his greed.

**Antonio** is middle-aged, set in his ways, attracted to younger men although he may not have had sexual experience with them. His journey is from infatuation with Bassanio to increasing awareness of his perilous position. Finally, in the condemned cell he accepts that he is the architect of his own fate.

In both plays, **Portia** is a woman of status and wealth whose scope for action is limited. She is bound by her father's will to accept the husband fate chooses for her; she then submits completely - at least appears to do so - to Bassanio when he wins her hand. Even when she takes the initiative to travel to Padua and onward to Venice she must do so in guise of a man. In *A Pound of Flesh* her triumph is unfortunately missing but a few more glimpses of her character appear earlier in the play.

Very little of **Shylock's** dialogue has been altered. Nonetheless Antonio's words in the final scene encourage the audience to view him and his Jewish identity in a more sympathetic light. Earlier in the play additional dialogue

given to Jessica opens up the relationship between father and daughter.

In order not to stray too far from the original at this stage of development, *A Pound of Flesh* portrays Shylock as a man. However the character and her relationship to others in the play would be even more interesting if she were a woman - a choice that I would make if I were director.

### **Jew / Christian**

Religion is a double-edged sword. Irrespective of messages of peace and harmony from faith leaders and of the charitable works carried out by many believers, the mere fact that one claims a religion implies, intentionally or not, division from and superiority over other faiths. Throughout history that division has fuelled hostility and aggression not only among the three large monotheistic religions but between Hindu and Muslim, Buddhist and Muslim and so on.

If *The Merchant of Venice* leans towards anti-semitism despite Shylock's pleas for a common humanity, *A Pound of Flesh* aims to balance the scales. In the final scene Antonio accepts that it was his hatred of Shylock, not Shylock's hatred of him that led him (Antonio) to the condemned cell. This attitude is a logical development of Antonio's behaviour in court, in both versions, where he accepts his fate from the start of proceedings and entreats his defenders not to prolong his torment.

The underlying ethos of *A Pound of Flesh* is that there is no difference between Christian and Jew; the labels are meaningless and the distinction absurd. Whether others see the play in the same light depends on the director and cast who bring it to the stage.

### **And now**

I am offering the script to directors, producers and theatre companies to see if there is an opportunity to bring this play to the stage. Although I would be willing to direct a production myself, it would undoubtedly gain from other perspectives and I look forward to discussing options with those interested.

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