

## **A rare quarto edition of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice***

William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*. London: Thomas Pavier, [1619]. 7 inches x 5 3/8 inches (178 mm x 137 mm), [80] pages, A–K4.

The | excellent | History of the Mer- | *chant of Venice*. | With the extreme cruelty of *Shylocke* | the Iew towards the saide Merchant, in cut- | *ting a iust pound of his flesh*. And the obtaining | of *Portia*, by the choise of | *three Caskets*. | Written by W. **Shakespeare**. | [Heb Ddieu device] | Printed by *J. Roberts*, 1600.

Shakespeare's quartos, so named because of their format (a single sheet folded twice, creating four leaves or eight pages), are the first printed representations of his plays and, as none of the plays survives in manuscript, of great importance to Shakespeare scholarship. Only twenty-one of Shakespeare's plays were published in quarto before the closure of the theaters and outbreak of civil war in 1642. These quartos were printed from either Shakespeare's "foul papers" (a draft with notations and changes that was given in sections to actors for their respective roles); from "fair copies" created from foul papers that presented the entire action of the play; from promptbooks, essentially fair copies annotated and expanded by the author and acting company to clarify stage directions, sound effects, etc.; or from a previously published quarto edition. The quartos were inexpensive to produce and were published for various reasons, including to secure the acting company's rights to the material and to bring in money during the plague years in London when the theaters were closed.

*The Merchant of Venice* opens with Bassanio, who needs traveling money to court the heiress Portia, asking his friend Antonio, a Venetian merchant, for the funds. Because Antonio's assets are all at sea, he approaches Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, for a loan. Because Antonio has insulted him in the past, Shylock demands that Antonio surrender a pound of flesh should he default on the loan. Antonio agrees, and Bassanio leaves for Portia's home. The will left by Portia's father requires that her suitors must choose the correct casket among three, and consent, in the event of failure, to remaining forever unmarried. Two suitors choose the wrong casket, but Bassanio selects the casket with Portia's portrait and thus wins her hand. Antonio's luck is poor compared to Bassanio's: two of his ships sink, the others are lost at sea, and he cannot repay the loan. Shylock is determined to exact the penalty, particularly as his daughter Jessica has just run away to marry Bassanio's friend Lorenzo and has taken much of his money with her. Bassanio rushes back to aid Antonio and Portia follows, disguised as a lawyer. Bassanio offers Shylock the double the amount of the loan, but he refuses. Portia enters the courtroom in her disguise and rules that Shylock cannot take the pound of flesh unless it is without shedding a drop of blood. Further, because Shylock's obvious intent was to kill Antonio, he must forfeit his fortune and convert to Christianity. Bassanio offers to pay Portia, whom he does not recognize; she demands the ring that she gave him. When Bassanio returns to Portia, she shows him the ring, revealing herself to be Antonio's savior.

This second quarto of *The Merchant of Venice* was bound by the British Museum Bindery in nineteenth-century gold-tooled red half sheep, with comb-marbled paper boards. "SHAKESPEARE. MERCHANT OF

VENICE. 1600.” is lettered in gold up the spine, between the emblem of King George III at the head and foot. The leaves’ edges are gilt. A note on the third front flyleaf read “Merchant of Venice | Second Edition | Steevens’s List says | Printed for I. Roberts.”

Now at the British Library, this quarto was formerly owned by George III (1738–1820), who reigned as king of Great Britain and Ireland from 1760 until his death. At the start of George III’s reign, there was no royal library to speak of; his grandfather, George II, had presented his library to the British Museum in 1757. In 1763, George III began his collection in earnest with the acquisition of the library of Joseph Smith, the former British consul in Venice whose collection contained many early printed books and classics. The king’s agents attended many English and Continental auctions, and they purchased both single volumes and complete libraries on his behalf, steadily enlarging the royal collection. In 1774 Frederick Augusta Barnard was appointed Royal Librarian, a post he held for the remainder of George III’s reign. Barnard, with the advice of such men of letters as Samuel Johnson, enlarged the king’s library in a methodical fashion, assembling a fine collections of religious texts, English and European history, classics, English and Italian literature, and such incunables as a Gutenberg Bible and a first edition of Caxton’s *Canterbury Tales*. By 1820, the library included 65,000 printed books and nearly 20,000 pamphlets; George IV, who succeeded his father on the throne, donated the library to the British Museum in 1823.

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