

A rare third quarto of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*

William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*. London: Laurence Hays, 1637. 6 7/8 inches x 4 15/16 inches (175 mm x 125 mm), [72] pages, A-I4

The most excellent | Historie of the Merchant | of *VENICE*. | With the extreame crueltie of *Shylocke* | the Iewe towards the said Merchant, in | cutting a just pound of his flesh : and the ob- | taining of *PORTIA* by the choice | of *three Chests*. | As it hath beene divers times acted by the | *Lord Chamberlaine his Servants*. | Written by *WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE*. | [ornament] | LONDON, | Printed by *M. P.* for *Laurence Hayes*, and are to be sold | at his Shop on Fleetbridge. 1637.

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 third quarto of the *The Merchant of Venice* is bound in half dark blue morocco over marbled paper boards. Lettered in gold up the spine is "MERCH. OF VENICE"; "1637" is in gold at the foot of the spine. The bookplate of John Patrick Crichton Stuart, the third Marquis of Bute is on the front pastedown; the bookplate for the Bute Collection of English Plays is on the back pastedown.

This third quarto of *The Merchant of Venice* was purchased by the National Library of Scotland from Major Michael Crichton Stuart on 3 April 1956. It is part of the Bute Collection of early English plays that was initially formed by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762). It was expanded by her son-in-law John Stuart, third Earl of Bute, and further enlarged by her grandson the first Marquis of Bute, also named John Stuart (1744–1814), who notably acquired 39 Shakespeare quartos. The collection contains 1,266 English plays and includes seventeenth- and eighteenth-century adaptations of Shakespeare's plays and examples of the foremost dramatists from Elizabethan, Jacobean, Caroline, and Restoration periods; also included are a number of promptbooks.

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