

Justice, Contract, and Prejudice: A Legal Analysis of Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice

Jayashree Vilas Nalawade.

Submitted: 06-Jan-2026 Revised: 11-Jan-2026 Accepted: 11-Feb-2026 Published: 28-Feb-2026

Manuscript ID:
IJEWLPSIR-2026-030126



Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0):

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Public License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work no commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.20285946](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20285946)

DOI Link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20285946>

Volume: 3

Issue: 1

Month: Feb 2026

E-ISSN: 3065-7873

Assistant Professor, BV's Yashwantrao
Chavan Law College Karad
Email: jayanalwade8260@gmail.com

How to cite this article:
Nalawade, J. V. (2026). Justice, Contract, and Prejudice: A Legal Analysis of Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice. *International Journal of English and World Languages & Literature Paradigm Shift in International Research*, 3(1), 97–99.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20285946>

Address for correspondence:
Jayashree Vilas Nalawade.
Assistant Professor, BV's Yashwantrao
Chavan Law College Karad
Email: jayanalwade8260@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper explores William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* through a legal lens, focusing on the central trial scene and its implications for contract law, justice, and equity. It examines the legality of Shylock's bond, the role of the Venetian court, and the moral dilemmas faced by the characters, especially in relation to 16th-century English and Venetian legal traditions. The paper also investigates themes of religious discrimination and the legal status of Jews during Shakespeare's time. By analyzing the play's dramatic courtroom scene, this paper seeks to bridge the gap between literature and law, showing how Shakespeare engages with contemporary legal principles and challenges the boundaries between justice and mercy. William Shakespeare's investigating how the play reflects and critiques the legal principles, procedures, and societal norms of Renaissance Venice. By examining key legal themes such as contract law, the civil-criminal law divide, the interplay of equity and strict justice, and the embedded prejudices within legal institutions, the paper highlights Shakespeare's shaded understanding of law's power and limitations. Ultimately, the study underscores the play's enduring relevance to debates about legal ethics, societal bias, and the human consequences of legal formalism.

Keywords: Mercy, Law, Contract, Trial, Equity, Prejudice, Power, Bond, Courtroom, society, Mercy vs. justice

Introduction:

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is often celebrated for its complex characters, dramatic courtroom scenes, and exploration of justice and mercy. From a legal perspective, the play provides fertile ground for analysing the principles and contradictions inherent in early modern legal systems. This paper focuses on how *The Merchant of Venice* reflects and critiques legal doctrines, especially as they relate to contract law, the administration of justice, and the role of societal bias.

Objectives:

The objective of this paper is to analyse *The Merchant of Venice* from a legal perspective, focusing on how the play reflects and critiques the legal principles, procedures, and societal biases of Renaissance Venice. Specifically, the paper aims to:

- Examine the depiction of contract law and the significant courtroom trial, illustrating how legal agreements shape the narrative and character interactions.
- Explore the distinctions between civil and criminal law as presented in the play, and how these transitions impact the outcome of the trial and the fate of the characters.
- Investigate the role of mercy and equity versus strict justice, especially in Portia's legal reasoning and the Duke's authority, highlighting the tension between legal formalism and moral considerations.
- Analyse how legal status and societal prejudice—particularly against "outsiders" like Shylock—are embedded in Venetian law and influence the administration of justice.
- Assess the broader implications of Shakespeare's portrayal of law for understanding the intersection of legal systems, social hierarchy, and morality in both the play and its historical context.

By addressing these points, the paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how *The Merchant of Venice* uses legal drama to reflect and question the values and structures of its time.

Historical and Legal Context:

Set in Renaissance Venice, a city known for its commercial prosperity and sophisticated legal structures, the play mirrors the historical tensions of the time, particularly around commerce, religion, and the treatment of minority communities. Venice's legal system was heavily codified and upheld strict adherence to contracts, particularly in its mercantile dealings. However, the city also maintained a rigid social hierarchy, and Jews like Shylock often faced legal restrictions and societal discrimination. Shakespeare, writing for an English audience, draws on these dynamics to construct a legal drama that reflects both Venetian reality and Elizabethan concerns about justice, tolerance, and the role of law in society.

Contract Law and the Foundations of the Plot:

Law and the Foundations of the Plot at the heart of the play lies a controversial contract between Antonio, a Christian merchant, and Shylock, a Jewish moneylender. The agreement—wherein Shylock lends money on the condition that Antonio forfeits a pound of flesh if he defaults—exemplifies the holiness and literalism of contract law in Renaissance Venice. This legally binding agreement drives the plot forward and highlights the tension between legal obligations and human consequences. Shakespeare presents the contract as legally sound but morally questionable, suggesting that strict adherence to legal terms can lead to injustice.

Civil and Criminal Law-Shifting Legal Frameworks:

The courtroom trial scene in Act IV introduces a significant shift from civil to criminal law. Initially framed as a civil dispute over the enforcement of a contract, the proceedings genius when Portia, disguised as a male lawyer, succeeding the case. She argues that in seeking Antonio's life, Shylock has attempted murder—a criminal offense under Venetian law. This transition allows the Duke and Portia to impose harsh penalties on Shylock, including the commit of his estate and forced conversion to Christianity. Shakespeare uses this shift to critique the adaptable of legal categories and the potential for judicial authority to manipulate legal outcomes.

Equity, Mercy, and the Limits of Justice:

Portia's famous appeal—"The quality of mercy is not strained"—emphasizes the importance of equity in legal decision-making. Her argument for mercy contrasts with Shylock's insistence on the letter of the law. While Portia ultimately uses legal techniques to defeat Shylock, her rhetoric advocates for a justice tempered by compassion. This duality raises questions about the balance between legal formalism and moral judgment. Shakespeare suggests that true justice must go beyond firm statutes to incorporate human values.

Legal Status and Societal Prejudice:

The play reflects and succeeding the societal biases of its time, particularly anti-Semitic attitudes that influence the application of justice. Shylock's legal status as a Jew in Christian Venice furnished him vulnerable to discriminatory treatment. Although he seeks redress through the legal system, he is ultimately undermined by it. The forced conversion and loss of property imposed on Shylock reveal how legal decisions can be shaped by prejudice rather than principle. Shakespeare thus exposes the deep ambiguity of law with social hierarchy and exclusion.

Outcome of the Trial:

The trial concludes with Shylock losing his legal battle and facing a devastating personal and financial loss. Portia's legal clever, skillfully and genius action—that Shylock may take his pound of flesh but not spill a drop of blood—furnished the contract unenforceable. This outcome transforms Shylock from plaintiff to accused. He is convicted of attempting to take a citizen's life and, according to Venetian law, faces the death penalty. However, the Duke spares his life on the condition that he converts to Christianity and leaves his estate to his daughter Jessica and her Christian husband Lorenzo. This conclusion highlights the triumph of Christian mercy as defined by the play's characters, while simultaneously illustrating the harsh and biased nature of the justice delivered.

Women Empowerment and Love:

Portia shows us that even when society tries to limit women, intelligence and creativity can break through those barriers. By disguising herself as a man and using her sharp legal mind, she steps into a space that women were never meant to enter and completely changes the outcome of the trial. In doing so, she challenges the traditional roles assigned to women and proves that they are just as capable, resourceful, and influential as men. Her actions remind us that empowerment doesn't always come from having formal authority—it can come from wit, courage, and the determination to make a difference.

Conclusion- Legal Drama as Social Critique: The Merchant of Venice uses the structure and spectacle of legal drama to interrogate the justice system of its time. Through its portrayal of contracts, courtroom strategies, and the interplay of justice and mercy, the play offers a critical lens on the legal and moral codes of Renaissance Venice. Shakespeare reveals how law can serve both as a tool of fairness and as an instrument of oppression, depending on who wields it and why. In doing so, the play invites ongoing reflection on the ethical responsibilities of legal systems and their practitioners.

Outcomes:

- The legal perspective in The Merchant of Venice is a direct mirror of the societal norms of its time.
- It reveals a world where law serves the interests of commerce and the ruling class, enforces social and religious hierarchies, and is shaped by ongoing tensions between justice and mercy.
- The play exposes both the strengths and the prejudices of Renaissance legal culture, making it a powerful commentary on the intersection and ambiguity of law.
- Portia shows that women, even when society limits them, can use intelligence and creativity to challenge gender roles and make a real difference.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who have supported and guided me in the completion of this research paper on Justice, Contract, and Prejudice: A Legal Analysis of William Shakespeare's The Merchant of

Venice. I am deeply thankful to my institution for providing the academic environment and resources necessary for this study.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

Bibliography:

- Barkan, Leonard. *Law and Theater in Shakespeare*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Dolan, Frances E. *Marriage and Violence: The Early Modern Legacy*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
- Gross, Kenneth. *Shylock Is Shakespeare*. University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Prest, Wilfrid. *Shakespeare's Laws: Law, Justice, and Equity in the Plays*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Shapiro, James. *Shakespeare and the Jews*. Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Barkan, L. (2005). *Law and theater in Shakespeare*. University of Chicago Press.
- Dolan, F. E. (2008). *Marriage and violence: The early modern legacy*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Gross, K. (2006). *Shylock is Shakespeare*. University of Chicago Press.
- Prest, W. (2005). *Shakespeare's laws: Law, justice, and equity in the plays*. Oxford University Press.
- Shakespeare, W. (2008). *The Merchant of Venice* (J. Drakakis, Ed.). Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare. (Original work published 1596)
- Shapiro, J. (1996). *Shakespeare and the Jews*. Columbia University Press.