

## THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

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### Date of the Play.

*The Merchant of Venice* was first published by a printer named Roberts, in a quarto edition, in the year 1600. But we know that it was written as early as 1598, for it is entered in the *Stationers' Register* (similar to our copyright registration) in July of that year; and in a book called *Palladis Tamia* or *Wit's Treasury*, written by one Francis Meres, and published in September, 1598, it is also mentioned. There are some critics who argue that it must have been written as early as 1594; but the evidence for this date is very slight, and in all probability it was produced in the year 1596 or 1597.

### Sources of the Plot.

*The Merchant of Venice* contains two main stories—the bond story and the caskets story; and growing out of these are two minor stories—the elopement of Lorenzo and Jessica and the episode of the rings. The story of the pound of flesh and the story of the caskets are both very old, and they appear in various forms in different collections of mediæval tales and romances. It appears certain, however, that Shakespeare obtained the material for the bond story, including the Rings' Episode, from a collection of tales entitled *Il Pecorone*, compiled by an Italian named Ser Giovanni Fiorentino and published in 1558. The material for the caskets story he obtained from a collection of mediæval tales called *Gesta Romanorum* (The Deeds of the Romans), which was well known in Shakespeare's day. Nothing definite is known as to where Shakespeare obtained the material for the story of Lorenzo and Jessica. It may be, however, that the idea was suggested to him by the play entitled *The Jew of Malta* written by his contemporary, Christopher Marlowe, or by an Italian tale written during the preceding century which contains much the same story.