

*The
Connell Guide
to
Shakespeare's*

The Merchant of Venice

by Michael Neill

Contents

Introduction	4
The characters	6
A summary of the plot	
Act one	7
Act two	8
Act three	9
Act four	10
Act five	11
What is <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> about?	12
Does <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> set out to teach a moral lesson?	21
What is the significance of <i>The Merchant's</i> two settings?	30
What kind of play is <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> ?	38
Is <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> an anti-semitic play?	48
What is the significance of Shylock's "bond"?	70
Why do Antonio and Shylock so detest one another?	80
What accounts for Antonio's melancholy?	86

Who is the play's true protagonist?	91
What makes Portia an engaging character?	98
What is Jessica's role in the play?	104
What is the function of Lancelot Gobbo in the play?	109
What view of the world does <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> leave us with?	114

NOTES

<i>Three views of Shylock</i>	14
<i>Moral confusion in The Merchant Shylock and Antonio</i>	24
<i>The bond plot in Il Pecorone</i>	52
<i>An Elizabethan Dr No</i>	54
<i>Shylock as the Devil</i>	58
<i>The medieval legend of the Processus Belial</i>	60
<i>Usury</i>	62
<i>Ten facts about The Merchant of Venice</i>	64
<i>Sir Thomas More</i>	68
<i>Jews</i>	82
<i>The Marxist view</i>	88
<i>After the Holocaust</i>	96

Introduction

The Merchant of Venice has become perhaps the most contentious of all Shakespeare's plays. Its only rival in this respect is *Othello*; and this is because both plays deal with dangerous issues of race. In *Othello* Iago uses the protagonist's colour both to goad his victim's jealousy and to excite the animosity of Venetians against this visible outsider; in *The Merchant* Shylock's Jewishness renders him, from the beginning, the object of general opprobrium in Christian Venice.

But, whereas the Moor is treated as a generally sympathetic character – the tragic victim of another's malice – the Jew appears to be cast in an entirely negative light: he may be a comic figure, as John Palmer insists, but he is nevertheless “a villain ...a whining and fawning hypocrite”, in the words of E.E. Stoll. The result, according to Harold Bloom, is that “one would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognise that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work”.

Yet as long ago as 1817 such hostile, one-dimensional accounts of Shylock were challenged by William Hazlitt who insisted that

we can hardly help sympathising with the proud spirit hid beneath his “Jewish gaberline”, stung to madness by repeated undeserved provocations, and labouring to throw off the load

of obloquy and oppression heaped upon him and all his tribe.

Subsequent attempts to demonstrate the Jew's humanity have been matched by an emphasis on the bullying self-righteousness of his persecutors, as well as on the mercenary self-interest that underlies their romantic adventuring. In her extended study of the play, *Blood Relations*, Janet Adelman highlights the ways in which Shakespeare systematically “troubles the distinction between Christian and Jew” to produce a profoundly ambiguous work: “the knowledge that *The Merchant* simultaneously gestures towards and defends against is that the Jew is not the stranger outside Christianity but the original stranger within it”.

Debate about how we are to judge *The Merchant's* characters has inevitably led to further disagreement about what kind of play we should take it to be. It is usually classified as a comedy, but any emphasis upon Shylock's underlying humanity and the suffering to which he is exposed will upset its comic balance – to the point where it can seem to belong to the mixed mode of tragicomedy, or even (as it appeared to some in the 19th century) to be an odd kind of tragedy.

If, on the other hand, one stresses the materialistic hypocrisy of the Venetian Christians, the play can seem to have more in common with satiric drama. While admitting that it contains elements of medieval morality drama and of early

modern citizen comedy, Molly Mahood insists that “first and foremost *The Merchant of Venice* is a romantic play” – thereby associating it with romantic comedies like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*. By contrast, W.H. Auden, struck by the “questionable” light in which Shakespeare shows even the seemingly fairytale world of Belmont, concludes that *The Merchant of Venice* must be classed among Shakespeare’s “Unpleasant Plays”... as much a “problem play as one by Ibsen or Shaw”.

This book sets out to explore and explain the contradictory ways in which *The Merchant of Venice* has been interpreted both on the page and in the theatre; to explore how far they can be reconciled; and to consider how far the play actually sets out to create a divided response in its audiences. In the process it aims to establish a fresh reading of one of Shakespeare’s most compelling dramas.

THE CHARACTERS

THE DUKE OF VENICE

PORTIA, *the lady of Belmont*

NERISSA, *her waiting-gentlewoman*

THE PRINCE OF MOROCCO, *a suitor to Portia*

THE PRINCE OF ARRAGON, *a suitor to Portia*

ANTONIO, *the Merchant of Venice*

BASSANIO, *a young lord, suitor to Portia*

SALERIO,
SOLANIO,
GRATIANO,
LORENZO,

} *Gentlemen of Venice and
friends to Bassanio*

SHYLOCK, *the rich Jew of Venice*

JESSICA, *his daughter*

TUBAL, *a Jew*

LANCELOT GOBBO, *the Clown, servant to
Shylock and then to Bassanio*

OLD GOBBO, *his father*

STEPHANO, *a messenger*

GAOLER

LEONARDO, *servant to Bassanio*

BALTHAZAR, *servant to Portia*

*Messengers, Servants, Attendants, Court Officers,
Magnificoes of Venice*

A summary of the plot

Act one

Antonio, a prosperous Venetian merchant, confesses to his two friends, Salerio and Solanio, that he is suffering from an unaccountable melancholy. Salerio playfully detects the cause in the risks to which his trading vessels are exposed, while Solanio teases him with the suggestion that he must be in love. Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Antonio’s kinsman and protégé, Bassanio, with his companions, Lorenzo and Gratiano.

Although embarrassed by his spendthrift past,

Bassanio has once again come to borrow from his patron. The money, he explains, will make it possible for him to restore his finances by winning the beautiful and wealthy Portia, heiress of Belmont. Antonio promises to use his own credit to secure the required funds.

Next we meet Portia who, with her maid Nerissa, describes the “lottery” devised by her late father to determine whom she must marry. Portia offers derisive caricatures of her four current suitors. Nerissa reveals that two have decided to abandon their quest, and a grateful Portia reveals her partiality for an earlier visitor, Bassanio.

In Venice, Bassanio and Antonio seek to persuade the Jewish moneylender Shylock to lend the three thousand ducats Bassanio needs. Despite a history of mutual loathing between himself and Antonio, Shylock finally agrees – provided that Antonio subscribe to a “merry bond” that will make a pound of his own flesh security for the money he borrows.

Act two

In a series of scenes (1, 7, 9) Portia’s fate is held in the balance, as the Princes of Morocco and Arragon attempt to decide which of three caskets – one of gold, one of silver, and one of lead – will contain her picture, and with it the reward of her hand. Blinded by self-deceiving vanity, Morocco selects the gold and Arragon the silver casket; to their discomfiture, one contains a mocking death’s head and the other

“the portrait of a blinking idiot”. In scene two, Bassanio and Gratiano plan their departure from Venice; and scene nine concludes with news of their arrival at Portia’s gate.

Set against the fairytale romance of Belmont are a set of scenes concerned with Shylock’s household: his servant, Lancelot Gobbo, plans to desert the Jew in favour of Bassanio, and his daughter, Jessica, announces her intention to elope with her Christian suitor, Lorenzo. When Shylock leaves home to dine with Bassanio, Jessica, disguised as a boy, escapes into the arms of her waiting lover, bringing with her a casket full of her father’s gold and jewels. Shylock is furious about his daughter’s betrayal.

Act three

One of Antonio’s vessels, “a ship of rich lading”, has been wrecked on the treacherous Goodwin Sands. His disquieting exchange with Solanio about this is interrupted by the arrival of Shylock, whom the pair proceed to goad mercilessly about Jessica’s elopement, driving him to a vow of revenge – a vow the old man reiterates when he is left to lament his plight with two fellow Jews.

The lengthy second scene brings the carefully orchestrated casket sequence to its conclusion: renouncing false appearances, Bassanio duly chooses the leaden casket. Barely has he claimed his prize than Gratiano announces that he too has triumphed in love: “You saw the mistress, I beheld the maid.” But the general rejoicing is cut short by

the arrival of a desperate letter from Antonio: disaster having overtaken all his ships, he now lies at the mercy of his creditors and must prepare to surrender his fatal pound of flesh to the Jew.

A gloating Shylock visits Antonio in prison to insist upon his entitlement, while Antonio, as he prepares to surrender his bond, yearns for Bassanio's return. The action then returns to Belmont where Portia welcomes the fugitives Lorenzo and Jessica, before telling Nerissa of her plan to follow their husbands to Venice: "accoutered like young men", they will disguise themselves in garments supplied by her Uncle, Doctor Bellario.

Act four

The fourth act is taken up by Antonio's arraignment for debt, the trial and its aftermath: Antonio is brought before the Duke of Venice, to be faced with Shylock's insistent demands for "judgement", "justice" and "law". Supposedly standing in for the learned Bellario, who has been asked to adjudicate in the case, Portia arrives in the guise of a lawyer, preceded by Nerissa who is dressed as her clerk. Impervious to Portia's talk of "mercy", Shylock insists upon his pound of flesh, and when Portia declares that "The law allows it and the court awards it", he appears to have won his case.

The Jew is, however, completely unprepared for the casuistry with which Portia then demonstrates that the bond entitles him only to his exact pound of flesh, and that should he either 'shed / One drop of

Christian blood" or remove the tiniest fraction more or less than his allotted pound, his life and fortune will be forfeit to the state. Confounded by the ploy, the Jew offers to abandon his demands in exchange for the return of his bare principal – only to be informed of another unexpected proviso by which, as an alien conspiring against the life of citizen, he will be required to surrender his entire estate.

As a final humiliation Shylock is now forced to accept the "mercy" recommended by Antonio, which, provided he become a Christian, will allow him to retain half of his wealth. The other half, however, must be given to his daughter and her prodigal husband, who, moreover, will inherit all of the remainder at his death. The closing moments of the scene are used to set in motion a new plot in which the supposed judge and clerk trick Bassanio and Gratiano into surrendering their wedding rings by way of recompense for the triumphant acquittal of Antonio.

Act five

The brief final act returns us to a moonlit Belmont, where, in an exchange curiously tinged with melancholy, Jessica and Lorenzo talk of love as they await the return of the other couples. Portia and Nerissa arrive first, followed by Bassanio and Gratiano with the newly freed Antonio. The two women proceed to tease their husbands by demanding to see their betrothal rings, forcing them to reveal the circumstances of the rings' surrender.

Having thoroughly tormented them, the women finally confess the deception, extracting protestations of undying love from their embarrassed victims. A letter then informs the grateful Antonio that by some “strange accident” three of his vessels have, after all, returned to Venice, thereby restoring his fortunes; Lorenzo and Jessica in their turn receive the welcome news of what they are to inherit from Shylock; and the play ends in what appears to be a circle of rejoicing and general happiness.

What is *The Merchant of Venice* about?

“The concept of a play’s overall meaning,” writes Molly Mahood in her edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, is “basically alien to the theatrical experience, in which our responses change from minute to minute as they do in the flux of daily living”. We should, then, be a little cautious in deciding what *The Merchant* is “about”. Nevertheless, fluid as a play may appear in performance, the power of its individual moments is always to some extent dependent upon a sense of their relationship to larger patterns of meaning, and *The Merchant of Venice* is nothing if not an elaborately patterned work.

A good place to start is the play’s title: in contrast

to the teasingly throwaway *Much Ado about Nothing*, *As You Like It*, or *What You Will* (the alternative title of *Twelfth Night*), *The Merchant of Venice* anchors the play’s action in a solidly material world – the busy realm of commerce, voyaging, and exotic trade which the Elizabethans associated with the maritime empire of Venice. The merchant of the title is the wealthy Antonio, whose fleet trades westward to Portugal and England, across the Atlantic to Mexico, as well as eastward along the North African coast to the Levant, and on to India and the East Indies.

Set against Antonio is Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, who controls his own kind of business empire, with a network of influence that reaches beyond Venice to the banking and trading centres of Genoa and Frankfurt. The play’s Christians, however, regard his usurious practices with self-righteous contempt. In England, the taking of interest had been outlawed until the mid-16th century; and since it was still sinful in the eyes of the Church, many in Shakespeare’s audience would have sympathised with Antonio’s denunciation of the practice as a blasphemous violation of nature, whose profits make inert metal, gold and silver, appear to “breed [like] ewes and rams” (1.3).

Yet the play shows that, despite their bitter mutual antagonism, merchant and Jew are bound together by the system of usury on which Venetian commerce depends; and, as a result of that bond, they can sometimes appear like two faces of the same

mercantile culture – so much one another’s doubles that, in the trial scene, Portia is at first unable to tell “Which is the merchant here and which the Jew” (4.1). It is appropriate, then, that the earliest mention of *The Merchant* should have been in words that seem to make Antonio and Shylock almost interchangeable: in 1598 its intending publisher entered on the Stationers’ Register “a book of the merchant of Venice or otherwise called the Jew of Venice” – which is clearly Shakespeare’s play.

This pairing of merchant and Jew is not the only doubling suggested by the title: a crucial piece of



THREE VIEWS OF SHYLOCK

[Shylock] seems the depositary of the vengeance of his race... There is a strong, quick, and deep sense of injustice mixed up with the gall and bitterness of his resentment. The constant apprehension of being burnt alive, plundered, banished, reviled, and trampled on, might be supposed to sour the most forbearing nature...The desire of revenge is almost

inseparable from the sense of wrong; and we can hardly help sympathising with the proud spirit, hid beneath his “Jewish gabardine”, stung to madness by repeated undeserved provocations, and labouring to throw off the load of obloquy and oppression heaped upon him and all his tribe by one desperate act of “lawful” revenge...

William Hazlitt
(1778-1830)

The story Shakespeare tells of Shylock is of a man who declines into the very obduracy of temper he is accused of by those who want him to be nothing else. It is a part that not

word-play links the two main plots, tying the commercial “ventures” of Antonio to the amorous “adventuring” of his friend and protégé, Bassanio. If Antonio is the Merchant of Venice who brings exotic goods from every corner of the world, Bassanio is the Merchant of Venus, competing for Belmont’s riches with a gallery of amorous entrepreneurs whom “the four winds blow in from every coast” (1.1) – from Naples, France, England, Scotland, Germany, Morocco, Spain, and some unspecified Palatinate.

This association of commerce and romance

every man could master, and Shylock finds the wherewithal within to play it right enough, but being the Jew who must have his pound of flesh is still as much a capitulation to an expected role as it is an expression of something immutable in his character.

It is clear that [Shylock] had it in him, however deep down, to be humane, kindly, and patient, and his offer to Antonio of a loan without interest seems to have been a supreme effort of this submerged Shylock to come to the surface... Shylock was the leaden casket with the spiritual gold within.

Harold C. Goddard
(1878-1950)

It’s said that finally, as he readies himself to take out Antonio’s heart, he is the Jew of pitiless legality, the moral opposite of love as represented by Christians. Were Shakespeare interested in pressing this opposition to the detriment of the Jews he wouldn’t have allowed the Christians to show as quite so squalid. They speak of love and think of money. They speak of mercy and show none. They are only not more dangerous because they are indolent and forget to be.

Howard Jacobson ■

works both ways, for if Bassanio's amorous voyage is underwritten by Antonio's "credit" and the "present sum" it secures from Shylock, the rhetoric of the opening scene romanticises trade itself as an exotic enterprise whose richly laden vessels float upon "woven wings". Even shipwreck is glamorised as a form of conspicuous consumption in which costly spices are "scatter[ed]" on the tide, while exotic silks "enrobe the roaring waters" (1.1). If the Venetians imagine their city as a space of opulent adventure, their dreams of romance and erotic conquest are typically cast in the language of "debt", "hazard" and "commodity", making Portia the gilded prize in a commercialised version of ancient legend:

*Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,
For the four winds blow in from every coast
Renowned suitors, and her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece
Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos strand
And many Jasons come in quest of her. (1.1)*

"Many Jasons"! It is as though the heroic Argo of classical myth had spawned a whole fleet of questing "argosies". In the 16th century imagination Jason's story had become a familiar metaphor for the imperial conquest, mercantile enterprise and licensed piracy associated with New World

Right: Michael Redgrave as Shylock, 1953



voyaging. In Spain, the emperor Charles V revived the medieval Order of the Golden Fleece to celebrate his triumphs in the Americas, while the English celebrated Francis Drake for bringing home “his golden fleece” from his circumnavigation of the globe.

After Bassanio’s triumph with the caskets, Gratiano crows: “We are the Jasons, we have won the fleece” – only to be silenced by Salerio’s grim reminder of Antonio’s material predicament: “I would you had won the fleece that he hath lost” (3.2). For the educated portion of Shakespeare’s audience, moreover, Gratiano’s initial glee is likely to have been tempered by their knowledge of the tragic sequel to Jason’s voyage, involving Medea, the woman he abducted from Colchos, who appears in the catalogue of tragic lovers remembered by Lorenzo and Jessica in *The Merchant’s* final scene.

Even before this, however, the idea of amorous voyaging is made to look a little less romantic by the parable with which Gratiano prepares us for Lorenzo’s “unthrift” abduction of Jessica and the subsequent squandering of her stolen dowry:

*How like a younger or a prodigal
The scarfed bark puts from her native bay,
Hugged and embraced by the strumpet wind.
How like the prodigal doth she return
With overweathered ribs and ragged sails,
Lean, rent, and beggared by the strumpet wind. (2.6)*

“Prodigal”, tellingly, is the word that Bassanio used of himself in his opening appeal to Antonio (1.1), just as it is the word with which the thrifty Shylock expresses his contempt for them both (2.5; 3.1).

In *The Merchant of Venice*, love is not merely dependent on commerce, as Bassanio’s entanglement with Antonio and Shylock demonstrates, but is imagined as being itself a (frequently questionable) kind of commercial transaction: eloping with Lorenzo from her father’s house, Jessica feels “much ashamed of my exchange”, even as she promises to “gild [her]self / With...ducats”, (2.6); Portia offers to “exceed account” in the store of “virtues, beauties, livings, friends” she brings Bassanio. Boasting that “the full sum of me / Is some of something”, Portia turns the familiar idea of husband and wife becoming one flesh into a kind of currency exchange

*Myself and what is mine, to you and yours
Is now converted. (3.2)*

Such figures reflect the peculiar intimacy of love and money in *The Merchant*: it is not for nothing, after all, that we first meet Antonio in the company of two friends whose own names, Salerio and Solanio (playing on English “salary” and on “sol”, a golden coin), serve as reminders of the city’s material values. When Antonio places “My purse and person, my extremest means” at Bassanio’s disposal, he is asserting the primacy of love over