

*“You take my life” : tragi-comic
rivalry in ‘The Merchant of Venice’*

by
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The Merchant of Venice is described as a “tragi-comedy”, in purist eyes neither one thing nor the other. The “tragi-” element is usually considered the more significant. It involves Antonio, who is the “merchant” of the title, but not the dominant figure of the drama. His lack of commercial acuity compels him to borrow from a Jewish usurer, Shylock, at risk of his life, for Shylock, recalling past insults from Antonio, insists on a severe condition — the penalty for non-payment on the day of reckoning to be, as he says:

*an equal pound
Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken
In what part of your body pleaseth me*
(I, iii, 144-7)¹

Since the part of the body referred to is that “nearest the merchant’s heart”, failure to meet his obligation would mean Antonio’s death, undoubtedly an extreme penalty for debt, but when he agrees to this arrangement the borrower does not expect to have to pay any forfeit, because

*Within these two months, that’s a month before
This bond expires, I do expect return
Of thrice three times the value of this bond.*

(*ibid.* 153-5)

However, when Fortune fails to smile upon his ventures, which on closer examination turn out to have been risky ones, Antonio finds himself liable to the law’s demands. This is the “tragic situation, though Antonio is no Aristotelian hero. His strategy is of the hit-or-miss variety and his altruism and sense of obligation should not be permitted to divert attention from his shortcomings.

The “comedy” concerns Antonio’s kinsman Bassanio, a prodigal who has squandered his resources and borrows money from Antonio so that he may compete for the hand of Portia, who (in the order in which he estimates her

attractions) is "a lady richly left", "fair", and "of wondrous virtues". Bassanio is a fortune-hunter, not a character to be admired or respected, and he is not even particularly likeable. His friend and companion is Gratiano, a rough type and in respect of Shylock, a Jew-baiter. The pair are birds of a feather, who take life as it comes and are not over-scrupulous when it comes to getting advantage for themselves.

A third story is that of Lorenzo, another friend to Bassanio, and Jessica, Shylock's daughter. This love-affaire between gentile and Jew is not very appealing. Jessica's seems to be the stronger personality. She prevails upon her lover to elope with her together with her father's dowry which she spends in Genoa. Even Shylock's dead wife's ring is traded there by Jessica. The Jew's estate eventually becomes their property according to a deed of gift which Shylock was ordered to make by the court. Lorenzo's conduct has a furtive air about it and Jessica disgraced her father but they reap a generous reward in the end.

None of the trio, Bassanio, Gratiano or Lorenzo, invite praise as husbands and it may be justly concluded that they get the mates they deserve. Portia is far too clever for Bassanio and her manipulation of the law of Venice reveals not only her intellectual superiority but also her lack of scruple — as a modern lawyer observed, her conduct in the court is less than honest. Her speech on "the quality of mercy" is a prime example of verbal casuistry. The incident with the ring in IV, ii demonstrates her cynicism and Bassanio's uncertain loyalty towards his recently-acquired wife, with Nerissa and Gratiano establishing a like relationship of mistrust. The attitudes of both women towards the male sex tend to the contemptuous.

As for her two failed suitors, each of whom she disparages, according neither any virtues, though they are both clearly honourable men with stricter principles than Bassanio, they are perhaps more fortunate than they realise. The shrewd and observant Nerissa, who names the original competitors one by one and listens to her mistress's demolition of their personalities reveals that she had known all along that every one of them had withdrawn:

*You need not fear the lady having any of these lords,
they have acquainted me with their determinations,
which is indeed to return to their home, and to
trouble you with no more suit.*

(II, ii, 96-9)

and, while Bassanio is busy wondering which casket to choose, she agrees to marry Gratiano on condition that Bassanio makes a correct choice.

Jessica has something in common with Desdemona but her motives are more material. She determines to resolve the conflict within herself by becoming Christian and marrying Lorenzo and she knows the value of a ducat as well as her

father does. Her language has a practical ring — in her “in such a night” duologue with her lover she has the final word.

I would out-night you did nobody come

(V, i, 23)

and her last observation in the play is

I am never merry when I hear sweet music

(*ibid* 99)

which Lorenzo accounts for as “your spirits are attentive.” The power of music to weaken human resolution was well known to Tudor writers on education, who advised that it should be guarded against.

The lottery by which Bassanio wins Portia is a dramatic device, absurd in itself, but acceptable as a commentary on the extent to which happy marriage rests on chance, like success in business or a law-suit wherein the outcome may hang on cunning. As Nerissa remarks

Hanging and wiving go by destiny

(II, ix, 83)

so although Bassanio is a less reliable type than Morocco or Arragon, who are men likely to keep to the conditions attached to a wrong choice, he is fated to win the game. As Arragon departs, he arrives, bearing “gifts of rich value” (purchased with five hundred ducats borrowed from Antonio). Of all the named suitors, Bassanio alone makes a good impression in advance. Portia does not love him but with typical self-concern follows her instinct that she should hold on to this young man for “some month or two” but he prefers to make his choice of casket right away rather than live in unhappy suspense.

While he is making up his mind, music sounds at Portia’s request and the song “Tell me where is Fancy bred” is sung. This draws attention to the speech to follow wherein Bassanio comments on the deception of appearances, rejects the gold and silver caskets and selects the lead.⁴ He has won the lady, his material welfare is assured and he joyfully becomes master of all he surveys. The token of this victory is Portia’s ring; she makes him swear to be faithful to her for, as she tells him, their future relationship depends on continued possession of it. He does not keep his promise and her threat proves empty but the effect of the arrangement is to reduce Bassanio in stature and maintain Portia’s control. Gratiano’s parallel vow to Nerissa produces the same result. He breaks his word, the woman knows it and forgives his unreliability after he has been made to look foolish. Both women dominate the action because they control it and the “mercy” which they eventually show to their husbands is easily afforded.

The play is unified by the figure of Shylock, who first appears with Bassanio in I, iii and departs alone in IV, i. He is open to various interpretations, more or less

favourable. Most commentators agree that he merits some degree of sympathy but it is not easily decided whether his defeat at the hands of Portia-Bellario is the one significant item in the play or whether Shakespeare's motives in creating such a character were purely melodramatic. Is Shylock a symbol of the unacceptable face of money-power? Certainly weighty observations are made on the relationship between love, hate and riches.⁵ The Jew is at times menacing, at times pathetic. He is abused by the other characters, called villain, dog, devil, wolf, cur and faithless.⁶ He is a "usurer",⁷ an occupation looked upon hypocritically by the Elizabethans as sinful, even though the legal rate of interest at that time was ten p.c. and men like Sir Thomas Gresham were busy promoting the Queen's credit in Antwerp's money-markets. Popular sentiment was against usury and Shakespeare drew heavily upon such feelings and upon "official" moral postures. He created Shylock, a Jewish usurer and thus a man condemned on two counts, since unconverted Jews were not allowed to live in England, and explained to the audience in dramatic terms how such a man might be expected to behave, given the kind of pressures to which he was bound to be subjected.⁸ It is surprising that Shylock should respond to Antonio's petition as he does in I, iii, 101-24, or that Antonio considers his own past treatment of this usurer just? As one commentator observes:

*... for the Elizabethan age, to understand
did not necessarily mean to forgive. Shylock
can be a thorough villain and yet be
allowed to express what
sort of treatment has made
him what he is.⁹*

In terms of Elizabethan dramatic tradition, Shylock is at bottom a "revenger." His unusual bond, which has nothing to do with cash, is exacted to pay back Antonio, the epitome of Christian enmity, for a series of offences against Shylock's person. Antonio's attitude may be considered anti-semitic, but in fact he is just a typical Elizabethan Londoner lacking in understanding and disliking people who are different from himself. He does not "hate" Shylock, although Shylock hates him, "for he is a Christian" (I, iii, 37). He simply does not think of Shylock as a person with feelings that have to be considered. Shylock's assessment of their relationship is based as much on "the ancient grudge" as on personal insults in the Rialto.

Shakespeare was one of many writers who condemned lending for gain, even though it was admitted to be a necessary evil.¹⁰ Shylock defends himself (I, iii, 66-85) when he describes how Jacob made a profit from sheep-breeding but Antonio rejects the Jew's argument angrily, telling Bassanio that

*The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose
An evil soul producing holy witness
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,
A goodly apple rotten at the heart.
O what a goodly outside falsehood hath!*

(*sc.cit.* 93-7)

and linking Shylock with the appearance-reality motif which runs through the play.

We have touched on the abuse directed at Shylock. Even the Duke of Venice pre-judges him, saying to Antonio before the trial:

*I am sorry for thee, — thou art come to answer
A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch,
Uncapable of pity, void and empty
From any dram of mercy.*

(IV, i, 3-6)

to which Antonio responds by stating his readiness

*To suffer with a quietness of spirit,
The very tyranny and rage of his*

(*ibid.*, 12-13)

thus conveying an image of Christian martyrdom and Stoical endurance of a rigid inhumanity which nothing can modify — the Duke has tried and failed to soften Shylock's heart and the law supports the Jew in his demand for a licence to kill, or so it seems. Old Testament justice is being opposed to New Testament grace — but Shylock has no faith in the latter. He wants his pound of flesh, and his logic tells him that he is right to reject sentiment which conflicts with his underlying wish for revenge.

The appellation "Jew" is used subtly. At first it is merely descriptive. When Antonio learns that Shylock intends to let him have the money without interest and in exchange for a forfeit he comments:

*I'll seal to such a bond
And say there is much kindness in the Jew*

(I, iii, 148-9)

and as Shylock takes his leave:

*Hie thee gentle Jew.
The Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind*

(*ibid.*, 173-4)

though Bassanio is suspicious and mutters:

I like not fair terms, and a villain's mind

(175)

Launcelot Gobbo refers to "the Jew my master, who (God bless the mark) is a kind of devil... the very devil incarnation" (II, 22-3; 26) and later as "a very Jew" (i.e. a true example of the tribe). By young Gobbo he is almost always called

“Jew”, “Shylock” only once. Solanio is quick to lash out with “villain Jew” and “Dog Jew” (II, viii, 4; 13). In the trial scene, “Jew” is used throughout. Portia-Bellario commences by asking, for purpose of legal identification, “Is your name Shylock?” but only on one further occasion does she so address him. Throughout the examination she employs the vocative “Jew!” while Gratiano’s repeated asides endow the word with dramatic power as a sign of Christian contempt. Like Gobbo, Antonio slanders the race in general when he talks of Shylock’s “Jewish heart” but other characters confine their attentions to the examples they know — Shylock and his fellow-usurer Tubal, of whom Solanio says:

*Here comes another of the tribe — a third cannot be
match'd, unless the devil himself turn Jew*

(III, i, 70-1)

Yet Shakespeare plays fair with Shylock, who is no undiluted villain, in spite of what the other characters say. He makes his case persuasively in two of the five scenes in which he appears — in I, iii as noted above and again in III, i, when he argues that Jew and Christian share a common humanity and by the same token a like need for revenge. In III, iii he shows his obsession with claiming the bond which is legally his without regard to any human considerations. He is not a Christian and his rights therefore are not obligated by the dictates of religion to show mercy under Christian pressure. Antonio thinks that Shylock is out to murder him but he is wrong — homicide is not his object though the irony of the situation is not lost on the audience. Shylock is so obsessed by the letter of the law and by his hatred that he cannot see farther than the act of cutting the flesh. Had he committed this act, he would then have been subject to the law of Venice as Portia-Bellario interpreted it, and liable to a serious penalty, namely, confiscation of lands and goods (IV, i, 305-8). As it is, the Venetian law bites him even more deeply in the end, for, as Portia-Bellario explains:

*If it be proved against an alien,
That by direct, or indirect attempts
He seek the life of any citizen,
The party 'gainst the which he doth contrive,
Shall seize one half his goods, the other half
Comes to the privy coffer of the state,
And the offender's life lies in the mercy
Of the Duke only, 'gainst all other voice*

(IV, i, 345-51)

Shylock’s “crime” here is to be an alien, and an unconverted Christian to boot. He escapes the direct consequences because the Duke is merciful, that is, he does not sentence Shylock to death as Gratiano would have done. But he does forfeit his wealth, half to Antonio and half to the state’s coffers. Antonio’s mercy restores to Shylock the state’s portion but retains control of the rest, though the terms of the arrangement are not indisputable. When Shylock dies, the property becomes Lorenzo’s and Jessica’s in virtue of a deed of gift which her father must

record. The other condition, involving conversion to Christianity, strikes a modern audience as more appalling than it was thought to be when Shakespeare wrote the play — conversion was the only alternative to deportation¹¹ — though the Jews who lived in London at the time held on to their traditional customs and their professed Christianity was probably no more than a device to permit residential status to be maintained. In Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* conversion to Christianity is a punishment, but this was most probably a reflection of popular attitudes to Jews. Shylock's reiterated scorn for Christians is not withdrawn by his forced conversion. Portia-Bellario's "Art thou contented, Jew? what dost thou say?" is rhetorical and Shylock's reply "I am content" is empty — he has anaesthetized himself against the Christian world of which he is now compelled to become a part. The irony is complete and although he has been totally defeated, he still retains some moral mastery of the situation which is difficult to explain other than in tragic terms. Like Iago, he is a "hater", who announces his identity in his first soliloquy:

*I hate him for he is a Christian
 But more, for that in low simplicity
 He lends out money gratis, and brings down
 The rate of usance here with us in Venice
 If I can catch him once upon the hip,
 I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him
 He hates our sacred nation, and he rails
 (Even there where merchants most do congregate)
 On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift,
 Which he calls interest: cursed be my tribe
 If I forgive him.*

(I, iii, 37-47)

Of these the only "comic" or "light" reason is the second — the lending *gratis* — the others are all serious, but remote from the experience of the Elizabethan audiences, since so far as they were concerned the Jew was an unknown quantity. But as a conventional character out of classical comedy, Shylock, a man governed by obsession, is familiar; when this conventional figure is wedded to a stereotype — that of the Jew as seen by the Londoner of the 1590s — the resulting hybrid is striking. The man whose mania unbalances him to such a degree as to render normal social relations impossible was to become a key character in Moliere's comedies. *L'Avare*, *Le Misanthrope*, *Tartuffe*, for example, each depends on such a personage and when he appeared on the French classical stage in the mid-17th century he was regarded as novel, an original creation. An unremitting concern with money brought Harpagon to ridicule and isolated him from the rest of his world. Refusal to compromise with social hypocrisy did the same for Alceste while *Tartuffe* was bound by religious hypocrisy. But Shylock's mania is of a different order for his miserliness is not the most significant thing about him. Money is all important to him because it is his vocation but so is his religion. First he retorts:

*you take my life
 when you do take the means whereby I live*

(IV, i, 373-3)

but when he is both stripped of his assets and forced to become a Christian, he pronounces himself dead. He threatens no revenge, like Malvolio on his final exit but quietly withdraws, saying that he is "not well", to the accompaniment of a sneering remark by Gratiano.

The worlds of Venice and Belmont which provide contrast in the play set off Shylock's rigidity against Portia's flexibility. She changes from one identity to another and moves from her fairy-tale existence in Belmont to the realities of the Venetian legal code and back again with poise and elegance. Bassanio does the same, though more clumsily, burdened with the ring which his wife-in-disguise gave him. Antonio realises that he is an unwilling actor

*I hold the world but as the world Gratiano,
A stage, where every man must play a part,
And mine a sad one*

(I, i, 77-9)

to which Gratiano replies:

*Let me play the fool,
With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come,
And let my liver rather heat with wine
Than my heart cool with mortifying groans.*

(79-82)

This image was one of Shakespeare's favourites and persisted to the last play, when Prospero likens "this insubstantial pageant" of the theatre to the creation of his magic island and both to the deceptive "real" world.¹² It is the comedian's way out of the realm of tragedy. Hamlet and Macbeth try to take it — the first because he has lost faith in what his senses tell him, the second because he is unable to deny its truth — but neither succeed in escaping from the trap laid by appearance disguised as reality or its converse. Antonio is a potentially tragic figure but the world does not treat him harshly for long and all comes right in the end. Bassanio makes a right choice of casket and is saved — not for him "the world still deceiv'd with ornament." He is a creature of fancy, not of reason, as the song suggests, and his place is in Belmont, not in the law-court. His performance in the Duke's court when he tries to repay the money, twofold, even tenfold if need be, and thinks that this may alter Shylock's legal claim places him in the world of fancy. Portia-Bellarion corrects him:

*It must not be, there is no power in Venice
Can alter a decree established*

(IV, i, 214-5)

she announces.

This Bergsonian rigidity marks everything Shylock touches. The decree cannot

be altered but it can be circumvented by a literal interpretation in certain cases. Shylock fails to perceive the possibility of a loophole. He is armour-plated but none the less vulnerable. He can feel nothing but hatred, rooted in his role as the Jew seen through Christian eyes, obsessed by his desire for revenge, the outcast from Christian society, yet able, or so he thinks, to use its laws to serve his own ends.¹³ Like Alceste, he cannot compromise, and is brought down to ridicule, saved from full condemnation by the audience because he is a man whose determination has to be admired, even though it be directed towards a bad end. This much he has in common with Iago — the tragic and comic merge in him but, like Falstaff, he is not comic in himself,¹⁴ nor the cause of laughter in other men.

NOTES

1. All quotations and textual references to **The Merchant of Venice** relate to the Arden edition, ed. John Russell Brown (London 1977).
2. For an account of Shakespeare's source-material (i.e. *Il Pecorone*) see Geoffrey Bullough, **Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare's Plays** (London and New York 1957 8 vols), but a summary is given in Brown, *ed.cit.* introd. xxvii-xxxii.
3. Brown, *ed. cit.*, introd. 1-1i
4. The argument that the song tells him which casket to choose is not justified by the content of the speech.
5. cf C.L. Barber, "The Merchants and the Jew of Venice: Wealth's Communion and the Intruder" in Alvin Kiernan ed., **Modern Shakespearean Criticism** (New York 1970), 204-27.
6. *villain* (by Bassanio I,iii,75; Solanio II, viii,4.)
dog (by Solanio II,viii,13; III,iii,18; Antonio III, iii, 6; 7; Gratiano IV,i,28)
devil e.g. (by Laun. Gobbo, II,ii,23;26; Salarino III,i, 30 Solanio III,i,71)
wolf (by Antonio,IV,i, 73; Gratiano, IV,i,134;138)
cur (by Gratiano, IV,i 288)
faithless (Lorenzo II,iv,37)
wretch (by the Duke,IV,i,4)
7. cf Brown, *ed.cit.*, introd. x1ii-x1v.
8. As an example, may be cited the case of Joachim Gaunz, a mining expert from Prague and working in Bristol. A Hebrew speaker, he was denounced, arrested, sent to London and, by order of the Privy Council, deported because he was of the Jewish faith and unconverted. This was the normal application of the 13th-century statute forbidding Jews to live in England, later repealed by Cromwell. However, a converted Jew was left alone provided he did not draw attention to himself, and there was a home for converts in Chancery Lane. So far as Shakespeare's audience was concerned, the stage Jew (whom they had seen in Marlowe's **Jew of Malta**) was a creature of exotic tradition rather than of personal acquaintance. Marlowe's Jew, Barabas, attempts to poison a city full of Christians and ends up in a cauldron of boiling pitch — he and Shylock are poles apart as characters, though they both have deceiving daughters and both are converted, but it was generally understood that the apocryphal Jew hated the Christian and would go to any extreme to cause him harm. The model for both was medieval Christian tradition, not some live London example.
9. Barber, *op.cit.*, 217.
10. Brown, *ed.cit.*, introd., x1iii-iv and see also Marchette Chute, **Shakespeare of London** (London 1949).
11. cf n.8 *supra*.

12. **The Tempest** (IV,i, 148-58).
13. Comic resolution ensures individual release, which is also social reconciliation — a freeing from bondage. A normal society is not subject to the restrictions placed on it by eccentric individuals, e.g. practical jokers, nor is the normal individual tied by the whims of an eccentric society — this relationship is the key to tragi-comedy. Cf. Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy" (London 1948), Kierman, *op.cit* 65-73.
14. See Thomas F. van Laan, **Role-Playing in Shakespeare** (Toronto 1978) 60-71.