The Merchant of Venice: A Modern Perspective

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The Merchant of Venice is a comedy. Comedies traditionally end in marriage, and on the way they examine the social networks in which marriage is involved: the relations among families, among friends, among parents and children, and what in Shakespeare's society were the all-important ties of money and property. Comedies also create onstage images of closed communities of right-thinking people, from which outsiders are excluded by being laughed at. If *The Merchant of Venice* has always seemed one of Shakespeare's more problematic and disturbing comedies, this may be because it examines the networks of society more closely than usual, and treats outsiders—one in particular—with a severity that seems to go beyond the comic.

In the interweaving of the play's stories we see a chain of obligations based on money. Bassanio needs money to pay his debts, and plans to get it by marrying the rich heiress Portia. To make money he needs to borrow money—from his friend Antonio, who borrows it from Shylock, who borrows it, according to the patter of his trade, from Tubal. Once Bassanio has won Portia she becomes part of the network, and the obligations become more than financial. She imposes on herself the condition that, before her marriage is consummated

Belmont and answer the riddle of the caskets, Portia must journey to Venice and answer the riddle of Shylock's bond. Antonio thus becomes "bound" (4.1.425) to the young doctor (Portia) who saved him, and the only payment the doctor will take is Bassanio's ring. Antonio now, in effect, has to borrow from Bassanio to pay Portia: it is at Antonio's insistence that Bassanio reluctantly gives away the ring. Yet the ring represents Bassanio's tie of loyalty to Portia, the husband's obligation to be bound exclusively to his wife; she gives the ring, as Shylock gives money, with conditions attached:

> Which, when you part from, lose, or give away,
> Let it presage the ruin of your love,
> And be my vantage to exclaim on you.
> (3.2.176–78)

The line of obligation runs, like the play itself, from Venice to Belmont, then from Belmont to Venice, and back to Belmont again. The ring exemplifies the paradox of marriage: it binds two people exclusively to each other, yet it does so within a social network in which they have inevitable ties with other people, ties on which the marriage itself depends. Portia and Bassanio depend on Antonio, who is Portia's chief rival for Bassanio's affection. The story of the ring is based on paradoxes: Bassanio, in giving it to the young "doctor," is betraying Portia at her own request, and giving her back her own. In the final scene Portia gives the ring to Antonio, who returns it to Bassanio, thus participating in a symbolic exchange that cements the marriage relationship from

her she is chafing at the way her father has denied her freedom of choice in marriage: "So is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father" (1.2.24–25). But by the end of that scene she is reconciled to her father's will when she hears that her unwanted suitors have departed rather than face the test; and of course Bassanio, the man she wants—the man who visited Belmont in her father's time (1.2.112–21)—is the winner. The will of the dead father and the will of the living daughter are one. Portia sees the value of the test from her own point of view when she tells Bassanio, "If you do love me, you will find me out" (3.2.43), and in the moment of victory he insists that to have satisfied her father's condition is not enough "Until confirmed, signed, ratified by you" (3.2.152). The dead father is satisfied, but theatrically the emphasis falls on the satisfaction of the living daughter.

In the story of Shylock and Jessica all these emphases are reversed. Jessica's loyalties are divided. She recognizes a real obligation to her father—"Alack, what heinous sin is it in me / To be ashamed to be my father's child" (2.3.16–17)—and she hopes her elopement will "end this strife" (2.3.20). For her it does (with reservations we will come to later); but Shakespeare puts the focus on the pain and humiliation it causes Shylock. The vicious taunts he endures from the Venetians identify him as an old man who has lost his potency, "two stones, two rich and precious stones" (2.8.20–21), and his cry, "My own flesh and blood to rebel!" draws Solanio's cruel retort, "Out upon it, old carrion! Rebels it at these years?" (3.1.35–36). While Portia's father retains his heartless. With the taunting of Shylock he goes further: the jokes of Salarino and Solanio, like those of Iago, leave us feeling no impulse to laugh.

This brings us to the problem of the way comedy treats outsiders, and to the cruelty that so often lies at the heart of laughter. Portia begins her dissection of her unwanted suitors "I know it is a sin to be a mocker, but . . ." (1.2.57–58) and goes on to indulge that sin with real gusto. The unwanted suitors are all foreigners, and are mocked as such; only the Englishman, we notice, gets off lightly. (His fault, interestingly, is his inability to speak foreign languages; in one of the play's more complicated jokes, the insularity of the English audience, which the rest of the scene plays up to, becomes itself the target of laughter.) Morocco and Arragon lose the casket game for good reasons. Morocco chooses the gold casket because he thinks the phrase "what many men desire" is a sign of Portia's market value. This is a tribute, but not the tribute of love. Arragon thinks not of Portia's worth but of his own. Besides, Morocco and Arragon are foreign princes, and Morocco's foreignness is compounded by his dark skin, which Shakespeare emphasizes in a rare stage direction specifying the actor's costume: "*a tawny Moor all in white*" (2.1.0 SD). Portia's dismissal of him, "Let all of his complexion choose me so" (2.7.87), is for us an ugly moment. The prejudice that is, if not overturned, at least challenged and debated in *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello* is casually accepted here.

The most conspicuous problem, of course, is Shylock, and here we need to pause. *The Merchant of Venice* was written within a culture in which prejudice against Jews was pervasive and endemic. It can be argued that this goes back to the earliest days of Christianity, when the

sance Europe the prejudice bred dark fantasies: Jews were accused, for example, of conducting grotesque rituals in which they murdered Christian children and drank their blood. The story of a Jew who wants a pound of Christian flesh may have its roots in these fantasies of Jews violating Christian bodies. Shylock's profession of usury is also bound up with his race: barred from other occupations, the Jews of Europe took to moneylending. Antonio's disapproval of lending money at interest echoes traditional Christian teaching (Christian practice was another matter). Shylock's boast that he makes his gold and silver breed like ewes and rams would remind his audience of the familiar argument that usury was against the law of God because metal was sterile and could not breed. Not just in his threat to Antonio, but in his day-to-day business, Shylock would appear unnatural.

Prejudice feeds on ignorance; since the Jews had been expelled from England in 1290, Shakespeare may never have met one. (There were a few in London in his time, but they could not practice their religion openly.) Given that the villainy of Shylock is one of the mainsprings of the story, it would have been far more natural for Shakespeare to exploit this prejudice than resist it. Many critics and performers, however, have insisted that he *did* resist it. His imagination, so the argument runs, worked on the figure of Shylock until it had created sympathy for him, seeing him as the victim of persecution. The great Victorian actor Henry Irving played him as a wronged and dignified victim, representative of a suffering race. Shylock's famous self-defense, "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands . . . ?" (3.1.57–58), has been taken out of context and presented as a plea for the recognition of our common humanity. In context, how-argue for tolerance but to defend his cruelty: "The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction" (3.1.70–72). Gratiano's taunt, "A Daniel still, say I! A second Daniel!— / I thank thee, Jew, for teaching me that word" (4.1.354–55), shows that Gratiano, along with the word "Daniel," has also picked up from Shylock, without knowing it, the word "teach," and the echo is a terrible demonstration of the ways we teach each other hate so that prejudice moves in a vicious circle.

Does the play itself break out of this circle? There is little encouragement in the text to think so. In other plays Shakespeare casually uses the word "Jew" as a term of abuse, and this usage is intensified here. The kindest thing Lorenzo's friends can find to say about Jessica is that she is "a gentle and no Jew" (2.6.53). We are aware of the pain Shylock feels in defeat; but the play emphasizes that he has brought it on himself, and no one in the play expresses sympathy for him, just as no one—except Shylock—ever questions Antonio's right to spit on him. Given the latitude of interpretation, there are ways around the problem. Critics and performers alike have found sympathy for Shylock in his suffering, and have attacked the Christians' treatment of him. But these readings are allowed rather than compelled by the text, and to a great extent they go against its surface impression.

It has to be said that many people who normally love Shakespeare find *The Merchant of Venice* painful. It even has power to do harm: it has provoked racial incidents in schools, and school boards have sometimes banned it. One may reply that the way to deal with a work one finds offensive is not censorship but criticism; in any case

interpretations that control or resist the anti-Semitism in the text. At worst, it can be an object lesson showing that even a great writer can be bound by the prejudices of his time. To raise this kind of question is of course to go beyond the text as such and to make the problem of Shylock loom larger than it would have done for Shakespeare. In discussions of this kind, the objection "Why can't we just take it as a play?" is often heard. But we cannot place Shakespeare in a sealed container. He belonged to his time, and, as the most widely studied and performed playwright in the world, he belongs to ours. He exerts great power within our culture, and we cannot take it for granted that this power is always benevolent.

To return to the text, and to explore the ramifications of the figure of Shylock a bit further: Shylock, Morocco, and Arragon are not the play's only losers. The group, paradoxically, includes Antonio, who is the center of so much friendship and concern. In the final scene he is a loner in a world of couples, and the sadness he expressed at the beginning of the play does not really seem to have lifted. He resists attempts to make him reveal his secret; but when to Solanio's "Why then you are in love" he replies "Fie, fie!" (1.1.48) we notice it is not a direct denial. Solanio himself later makes clear the depth of Antonio's feeling for Bassanio: "I think he only loves the world for him" (2.8.52). In the trial scene Antonio tells Bassanio to report his sacrifice and bid Portia "be judge / Whether Bassanio had not once a love" (4.1.288–89). Antonio has not only accepted Bassanio's marriage; he has helped make it possible—yet there is a touch of rivalry here. In the trial his courageous acceptance of death shades into an actual yearning for it, and in the curtness as Shylock's "I am content" (4.1.410), and the same effect of closing off conversation. Whether we should call Antonio's love for Bassanio "homosexual" is debatable; the term did not exist until fairly recently, and some social historians argue that the concept did not exist either. Our own language of desire and love does not necessarily apply in other cultures. What matters to our understanding of the play is that Antonio's feeling for Bassanio is not only intense but leaves him excluded from the sort of happiness the other characters find as they pair off into couples. This gives Antonio an ironic affinity with his enemy Shylock: both are outsiders. Many current productions end with Antonio conspicuously alone as the couples go off to bed.

Another character who is in low spirits at the end of some productions of *The Merchant of Venice* is Jessica. There is less warrant for this in the text, apart from her line "I am never merry when I hear sweet music" (5.1.77). Jessica is a significant case of a character who has broken the barrier between outsider and insider, joining a group (the Christians) to which she did not originally belong. She is welcomed, and seems at ease in her new world, but Lancelet Gobbo, the plainspoken and sometimes anarchic clown of the play, raises doubts about the efficacy of her conversion—she is damned if she is her father's daughter, and damned if she isn't (3.5.1–25)—and about its economic consequences: "This making of Christians will raise the price of hogs" (3.5.22–23). In a play in which money counts for so much, this is a very pointed joke. Lancelet uses his clown's license to raise the question of whether Jessica will ever be fully accepted in Christian society. (His own

Her uneasiness also makes a revealing contrast with Portia's attitude to *her* disguise, and suggests there may be a parallel between the two women. Given her easy dominance of every scene in which she appears, it may seem odd to think of Portia as an outsider. But she is a woman in a society whose structures are male-centered and patriarchal. She greets her marriage with a surrender of herself and her property to a man who, like her father, will have full legal control over her:

> Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours
> Is now converted. But now I was the lord
> Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
> Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,
> This house, these servants, and this same myself
> Are yours, my lord's. (3.2.170–75)

Yet she continues to dominate Bassanio, and more than that: like Jessica, she uses male disguise to enter another world, the exclusive male club (as it then was) of the legal profession. Unlike Jessica, she moves into this new world with confidence. Her mockery of swaggering young men as she plans her disguise is irrelevant to the story but seems to answer a need in the character to poke fun at the sex whose rules she is about to subvert. Not for the only time in Shakespeare, we see a stage full of men who need a woman to sort out their problems.

Portia may also be seen as bringing fresh air from Belmont into the sea-level miasma of Venice, and readings of the play have often been constructed around a sharp opposition between the two locations, between the values of Portia and the values of Shylock. Shakespeare, however, will not leave it at that: there are the caskets of Belmont. Portia calls Bassanio "dear bought" (3.2.326) and Shylock uses almost the same words for his pound of flesh, which is "dearly bought" (4.1.101). Shylock's proverb, "Fast bind, fast find" (2.5.55), could be a comment on the way the women use the rings to bind the men to them. His claim on Antonio's body is grotesque, but the adultery jokes of the final scene remind us that married couples also claim exclusive rights in each other's bodies. Marriage is mutual ownership, and Shylock's recurring cry of "mine!" echoes throughout the play.

The final images of harmony are a bit precarious. The moonlight reminds Lorenzo and Jessica of stories of tragic, betrayed love, in which they teasingly include their own. These stories are stylized and distanced, but not just laughed off as the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe is in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The problem of the rings *is* laughed off, but there is some pain and anxiety behind the laughter. The stars are "patens of bright gold" (5.1.67)—that is, plates used in the Eucharist which are also rich material objects. The play's materialism touches even the spiritual realm, and Lorenzo's eloquent account of the music of the spheres ends with a reminder that "we cannot hear it" (5.1.73). When Portia describes the beauty of the night, she creates a paradox: "This night methinks is but the daylight sick; / It looks a little paler" (5.1.137–38). So, as we watch the lovers go off to bed, we may think of their happiness, or of the human cost to those who have been excluded; we may wonder how much it matters that this happiness was bought in part with Shylock's money. A brilliant night, or a sickly day? We may feel that this is another harmony whose music eludes us. Or we may conclude that the happiness is all the more precious for being hard-won.

Further Reading

The Merchant of Venice

Auden, W. H. "Brothers and Others." In *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, pp. 218–37. London: Faber & Faber, 1963.

Auden classes *The Merchant of Venice* among Shakespeare's "unpleasant plays" because the attraction we feel toward the "romantic fairy story of Belmont" is constantly undercut by the historical reality of "money-making Venice." The presence of Antonio and Shylock reminds us that the utopian qualities of Belmont are illusory.

Barton, John. "Exploring a Character: Playing Shylock." In *Playing Shakespeare*, pp. 169–80. London: Methuen, 1984.

This discussion between Barton and two actors he has directed as Shylock centers initially on the question of the play's anti-Semitism. After agreeing that the play resists anti-Semitism, the two actors outline their different approaches to individual scenes, finding that the key to the role is to "play the inconsistencies."

Ben-Sasson, H. H. *The History of the Jewish People*, pp. 385–723. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976.

Ben-Sasson chronicles a thousand-year period of Jewish history, including the Middle Ages and the English Renaissance. Throughout this epoch, Jewish people lived under the rule of Christianity and Islam, monotheistic religions that, although they had developed out of