

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

THE MERCHANT  
OF VENICE

With Contemporary Criticism

Edited by JOSEPH PEARCE

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Bonifacio de' Pitati (1487–1553), *Justice*  
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Tradition is the extension of Democracy through time; it is the proxy of the dead and the enfranchisement of the unborn.

*Tradition may be defined as the extension of the franchise. Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death. Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our groom; tradition asks us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our father. I, at any rate, cannot separate the two ideas of democracy and tradition.*

—G.K. Chesterton

Ignatius Critical Editions—Tradition-Oriented Criticism  
for a new generation

## CONTENTS

Introduction by Joseph Pearce	ix
Textual Note	xxiii
<b>The Text of <i>The Merchant of Venice</i></b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Contemporary Criticism</b>	
<i>The Merchant of Venice</i> on Film James Bemis	119
The Family in <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> Raimund Borgmeier	141
Shakespeare's Italian Stages: Venice and Belmont in <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> Michael G. Brennan	153
Text as Test: Reading <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> Crystal Downing	167
The Hazard of Love Anthony Esolen	183
Breeding Barren Metal: Usury and <i>The Merchant</i> of <i>Venice</i> James E. Hartley	201
Law and Mercy in <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> Daniel H. Lowenstein	217
<i>The Merchant of Venice</i> and the Goods of Friendship Michael Martin	233
Contributors	251

## INTRODUCTION

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*The Merchant of Venice* was first registered<sup>1</sup> on July 22, 1598, but was probably written and first performed a few years earlier, perhaps as early as 1594 or 1595. It is likely that Shakespeare's initial inspiration for writing the play arose, in part, from the gruesome executions of two "traitors" on the orders of Queen Elizabeth. The first "traitor" was Roderigo López, the queen's personal physician, who was hanged, drawn, and quartered on June 7, 1594; the second was Robert Southwell, the Jesuit priest and poet who was hanged, drawn, and quartered on February 20, 1595. Whereas the former may have served as the inspiration for Shylock, the latter can be seen as a ghostly presence flitting through the play as an allusion to the deeper meanings to be gleaned from the drama.

Roderigo López, a converted Portuguese Jew, had been appointed personal physician to the queen in 1586. Two years later he became official interpreter to Antonio Perez, pretender to the throne of Portugal, after Perez had sought sanctuary in England from the clutches of his enemy, King Philip of Spain. In 1590 López seems to have become embroiled in a Spanish plot to assassinate both Antonio Perez and Queen Elizabeth. Although he protested his innocence, he was found guilty and was sentenced to death. At his execution a large crowd bayed for his blood and bellowed anti-Semitic abuse.

In the wake of López's trial and execution, the Admiral's Men, an acting company, revived Christopher Marlowe's *Jew*

<sup>1</sup>All plays had to be registered with the Stationers' Company, an organization of printers and publishers that held a monopoly of the printing trade in Tudor England.

of Malta as an entrepreneurial response to the tide of anti-Semitism that was sweeping through London. The play was a huge success, playing fifteen times to packed houses during 1594. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* in the same entrepreneurial spirit, seeking to cash in on the upsurge of anti-Semitism by writing his own play about a villainous Jew. Such a supposition is supported by the fact that many critics have identified “the Venesyon Comodye”, staged at the Rose Theatre in August 1594, with Shakespeare’s play. From a purely business perspective, it makes sense that Shakespeare might write a play for his own company of players, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, to compete with the success of the revival of Marlowe’s play by the Admiral’s Men. Even if “the Venesyon Comodye” has nothing to do with Shakespeare’s play but is merely a comedy set in Venice by an unknown playwright, it still seems likely that *The Merchant of Venice* was written as a response or reaction to López’s conviction for treachery. Such a view is supported by a clue embedded within the text of the play that seems to connect López to Shylock. In Act 4 of *The Merchant of Venice*, Gratiano describes Shylock as “a wolf . . . hang’d for human slaughter” (4.1.134),<sup>2</sup> which appears to be a pun on López’s name, the Latin for “wolf” being *lupus*. López was indeed hanged for plotting human slaughter, and it is difficult to conclude anything but the obvious with regard to the connection between the real-life Jewish villain and Shakespeare’s counterpart, especially considering that someone named Antonio is the intended victim in both cases.

Much more needs to be said about the alleged anti-Semitism of *The Merchant of Venice*, which has been greatly exaggerated.<sup>3</sup> First, however, let us look at the other real-life character who seems to have influenced the writing of the play.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from *The Merchant of Venice* are from the edition published by Ignatius Press: *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Joseph Pearce (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> The whole issue of anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice* is dealt with at considerable length in Joseph Pearce’s forthcoming book, *Seeing through*

There is an abundance of evidence to show that Shakespeare knew the Jesuit poet Robert Southwell prior to the latter’s arrest in 1592, and it is possible that Shakespeare might have been among the large crowd that witnessed Southwell’s brutal execution in 1595.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Shakespeare would have been writing *The Merchant of Venice* shortly after Southwell’s execution or, if we accept the earliest possible dates for the play’s composition, during the period in which the Jesuit was being tortured repeatedly by Richard Topcliffe, Elizabeth’s sadistic chief interrogator. It should not surprise us, therefore, that we see Southwell’s shadow, or shade, in Shakespeare’s play. It is present most palpably in the haunting echoes of Southwell’s own poetry, which Shakespeare evidently knew well and which he introduces into *The Merchant of Venice* on numerous occasions.<sup>5</sup> Take, for instance, Portia’s words after the Prince of Arragon’s failure in the test of the caskets: “Thus hath the candle sing’d the moth” (2.9.79). And compare it to lines from Southwell’s “Lewd Love is Losse”:

So long the flie doth dallie with the flame,  
Untill his singed wings doe force his fall.<sup>6</sup>

Not only does the phraseology suggest Shakespeare’s indebtedness to Southwell, but the very title of the poem from which the phrase is extracted suggests a connection to Shakespeare’s

*Shakespeare’s Eyes* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), and the issue of usury is discussed in James E. Hartley’s essay “Breeding Barren Metal: Usury and *The Merchant of Venice*”, pp. 201–16 below.

<sup>4</sup> For full details of the solid historical evidence for Shakespeare’s friendship with Robert Southwell, see chap. 9 of *The Quest for Shakespeare* by Joseph Pearce (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008), pp. 107–17.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted in this discussion of St. Robert Southwell’s influence on *The Merchant of Venice* to the diligent research of John Klause. See John Klause, “Catholic and Protestant, Jesuit and Jew: Historical Religion in *The Merchant of Venice*”, in *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity in Early Modern England*, edited by Dennis Taylor and David N. Beauregard (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), pp. 180–221.

<sup>6</sup> James H. McDonald and Nancy Pollard Brown, eds., *The Poems of Robert Southwell, S.J.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), quoted in Taylor and Beauregard, *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity*, p. 187.

theme that lewd love is loss. Arragon's love is lewdly self-interested, and his choice leads to the loss of his hopes to marry Portia. Shakespeare is not simply taking lines from Southwell; he is apparently taking his very theme from him.

In the final act, as Portia and Nerissa return to Belmont, they see a candle burning in the darkness. "When the moon shone, we did not see the candle", says Nerissa, to which the sagacious Portia responds: "So doth the greater glory dim the less" (5.1.92-93). Compare this to Southwell's "seeking the sunne it is . . . booteles to borrowe the light of a candle".<sup>7</sup>

It is also intriguing that an expression ascribed by the *Oxford English Dictionary* to Shakespeare's coinage was actually coined originally by Southwell, to whom Shakespeare was presumably indebted. The phrase is Shylock's "a wilderness of monkeys" (subsequent to "a wilderness of Tygers" in *Titus Andronicus*), which presumably owed its original source to Southwell's "a wilderness of serpents" in his *Epistle unto His Father*.<sup>8</sup>

If the foregoing should fail to convince the skeptical reader of Southwell's ghostly presence, the pivotal scene in which Bassanio triumphs in the wisdom of his choice to "hazard all he hath", i.e., lay down his life for his love, should prove sufficient to allay the most hardened skepticism. The Shakespeare scholar John Klause has shown how this scene resonates as an echo of Southwell's *Marie Magdalens Funeral Teares*, in which the saint is of a mind to "venture [her] life" for her love of her Lord. Klause shows many suggestive parallels between Shakespeare's scene and Southwell's earlier work, and yet nowhere is the allusion to Southwell more evident than in the exchange between Bassanio and Portia before Bassanio makes his choice:

<sup>7</sup>Robert Southwell, *Marie Magdalens Funeral Teares*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (Delmar, N.Y.: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1974), quoted in Taylor and Beauregard, *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity*, p. 187.

<sup>8</sup>Taylor and Beauregard, *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity*, p. 187. Southwell's *Epistle unto His Father* was written in 1588 or 1589, five years or so before Shakespeare used the similar phrase in *Titus Andronicus*.

Bassanio. Let me choose,  
For as I am, I live upon the rack.

Portia. Upon the rack, Bassanio! then confess  
What treason there is mingled with your love.

Bassanio. None but that ugly treason of mistrust,  
Which makes me fear th' enjoying of my love;  
There may as well be amity and life  
'Tween snow and fire, as treason and my love.

Portia. Ay, but I fear you speak upon the rack,  
Where men enforced do speak any thing.

Bassanio. Promise me life, and I'll confess the truth.

Portia. Well then, confess and live.

Bassanio. Confess and love  
Had been the very sum of my confession.  
O happy torment, when my torturer  
Doth teach me answers for deliverance!  
But let me to my fortune and the caskets.

Portia. Away then! I am lock'd in one of them;  
If you do love me, you will find me out.

(3.2.24-41)

Since this exchange between the lover and the longed-for beloved comes in the midst of an array of references to Southwell's poem, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it represents a clear allusion to Southwell's own recent experience "upon the rack" at the hands of a torturer seeking to force him into a confession of the alleged crime of "treason" with which he had been charged. Such a conclusion is reinforced still further when juxtaposed with Southwell's own words in his *Humble Supplication to Her Maiestie*:

What unsufferable Agonies we have bene put to upon the Rack. . . [One so tortured] is apt to utter anything to abridge the sharpnes and severity of paine. [Yet even an] unskillful Lay

man . . . [would] rather venture his life by saying too much, then hazard his Conscience in not answering sufficient.<sup>9</sup>

What else is Bassanio doing, as he ponders the choices presented to him by the caskets, if not venturing his very life in the choice of death (lead) over worldly temptations (gold and silver)? He is willing to "hazard all he hath", as the casket demands, if it is the only way to gain his love. The parallels with Robert Southwell's willingness to die for his faith, hazarding all he has in his willingness to lay down his life for his friends, is obvious. And it is made even more so by the way in which Shakespeare artfully intersperses phrases from yet another Southwell poem, *Saint Peters Complaint*, into the words that Portia sings as Bassanio prepares to make his choice.<sup>10</sup>

It has been necessary to commence our exploration of *The Merchant of Venice* with the role that the Jew and the Jesuit played in its inspiration because, as we shall see, many of the mistakes made about the play have been the result of seeing the Jew and not the Jesuit. So much of the nonsense written about this most controversial of Shakespeare's plays arises from the opening of the wrong casket by worldly minded critics. The truth of the play, and the key to understanding it, is not to be found in the golden gaudiness of a materialistic perception of its meaning but from the lead-laden truth of the play's underlying Christian message. If we wish to understand where Shakespeare is leading us, we have to take up our cross and follow him. In doing so, we will be led by him to a region where hazarding all we have is the path to perception.

Before we follow Shakespeare to where he seeks to take us, let us take a short detour in the company of the critics. We will begin by taking a look at the literary sources for *The Merchant of Venice* and will continue by examining the way in which

<sup>9</sup>Robert Southwell, *An Humble Supplication to Her Maiestie*, ed. R. C. Bald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), pp. 34–35.

<sup>10</sup>For details of the similarities between Portia's song and *Saint Peters Complaint*, see Taylor and Beauregard, *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity*, p. 196.

the play has been perceived throughout the four centuries of its dramatic and critical history.

There is no single source for *The Merchant of Venice*, the plot of which seems to be a melding of three distinct stories: the story of the suitor and the usurer, the story of the caskets, and the story of the pound of flesh. It seems, however, that Shakespeare's principal source was *Il pecorone* (The dunce or The simpleton), a fourteenth-century story by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino. This is set in "Belmonte" and involves a quest by a suitor to win his mystical, otherworldly bride. As in Shakespeare's play, the suitor (Giannetto) receives money, in this case from his godfather, which has been borrowed from a Jewish usurer. Giannetto wins his bride with the assistance of the treachery of the lady's maid; the usurer demands payment, a lawyer intercedes, the lady appears in disguise, and the play ends with the business of the ring. It is, however, interesting that Shakespeare injects a specifically Christian morality into his recasting of the tale. Neither the hero nor the heroine is particularly devout in *Il pecorone*, and they choose to affront Christian morality by casually fornicating prior to their marriage. In comparison, the chastity of Portia and the chivalry of Bassanio stand in stark contrast to the moral obliquity of their literary prototypes, indicating Shakespeare's conscious decision to "baptize" his hero and heroine with Christian virtue.

Although the bare bones of much of the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* is to be found in *Il pecorone*, there is no trial of the suitors by means of the caskets in the earlier tale. This aspect of the drama might have been derived from any of several well-known versions of the casket story, such as John Gower's *Confessio amantis*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, or the anonymous *Gesta Romanorum*. In any event, as we have seen above, Shakespeare retold the casket story in his own inimitable fashion, injecting a Jesuitical metadramatic subtext into the tale.

The pound-of-flesh story was also widely known. Shakespeare might have read it in the anonymously authored "Ballad of the Crueltie of Geruntus" or in an "oration", recently translated from the French, entitled "Of a Jew, who would for

his debt have a pound of flesh of a Christian". It was also included in the *Gesta Romanorum*, suggesting that this might have been the single source for both the casket and the pound-of-flesh stories. An earlier version appears in the tale of the fourth wise master in the "Seven Wise Masters of Rome" in *The Thousand and One Nights*, but since the *Nights* were not translated from the Arabic until the early eighteenth century, this version was presumably unknown to Shakespeare.

There is also the beguiling possibility that Shakespeare might have derived his own plot from an earlier play called simply *The Jew*, which was described by the English satirist Stephen Gosson in 1579 as "representing the greediness of worldly choosers and the bloody minds of usurers".<sup>11</sup> This description would suggest that the earlier play had a version of both the casket and the pound-of-flesh stories, but since the play is no longer extant, any further speculation is fruitless.

Finally, of course, there is the presence of Christopher Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, which Shakespeare must have known very well. Although it seems likely that the successful revival of Marlowe's *Jew* in the wake of the López trial served as the motivation for Shakespeare's decision to write his own "Jewish" play, it would be a mistake to conflate the two plays. They have much in common, but it is in their differences, as distinct from their similarities, that we begin to perceive the injustice that has been done to Shakespeare's play by its critical misinterpretation over the centuries.

John Klause highlights "the moral vision of *The Merchant of Venice*, which is in some ways as idealistic as the ethos of Marlowe's play is cynical".<sup>12</sup> Whereas Marlowe made the antagonism between Christian and Jew the central element of his play, "cynically portraying Christian, Jew, and Turk as villains all",<sup>13</sup> the conflict between the two religions is very much a

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Gosson, *The School of Abuse* (1579), quoted in *The Reader's Encyclopedia of Shakespeare*, ed. Oscar James Campbell (New York: MJF Books, 1966), p. 522.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor and Beauregard, *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity*, p. 185.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

secondary theme in Shakespeare's play, subsumed within the main episodes of the story line and subservient to the dominant moral theme. Take, for instance, the three main points of dramatic focus: the test of the caskets, the test of the trial, and the test of the rings. The conflict between Christian and Jew is entirely absent from the first and last of these dramatic nodal points, and it is present as a foil and not as the focus of the trial scene.

The moral focus during the drama of the trial revolves around notions of justice and mercy, or questions concerning the nature of law and ethics, and not about the hostilities between gentile and Jew. These hostilities are present, of course, and even prominent, but they are present as *accidents*, philosophically speaking,<sup>14</sup> and are not *essential* to the moral thrust of the plot. Unfortunately, the expression of these hostilities has distracted most critics from the essential morality of the play in pursuit of the red herring of its accidental qualities. Uncomfortable with the invective leveled against Shylock, the critics have leapt to his defense, enthroning him as the play's down-trodden hero and as its principal focus. This is absurd. Shylock is entirely uninvolved in two of the three pivotal turns in the plot and is only marginally and implicitly involved in the play's climactic denouement. To make Shylock the hero or the principal focus is to miss the whole point of the play. The play, we should remember, is called *The Merchant of Venice*, the merchant in question being Antonio and not Shylock, and is not called *The Jew of Venice* as an echo of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*. Marlowe's play focuses on the Jew; Shakespeare's does not. In focusing too closely on Shylock, we lose the wider focus necessary to see the play as a whole.

This Shylockian heresy, to give it a name, is nothing less than a critical blindness. By way of analogy, let us look at two parallel characters in the works of Dickens that might be said to exhibit Shylockian attributes. The character of Ebenezer

<sup>14</sup> An accident, following the logic of Aristotle, is something that is irrelevant to the defining principle of a thing.



Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* is so much at the center of the story line that stage and screen adaptations have adopted the title *Scrooge*. Though something of the artistic integrity of the work is lost in such a use of literary or dramatic license, one's critical sensibilities are not overly affronted by such an imposition. Scrooge is the principal focus of the work and his becoming its eponymous hero seems understandable enough. If, on the other hand, screen adaptations of *Oliver Twist* had altered the focus of the story to such an extent that Fagin became the principal focus, we would immediately protest that an act of gross literary vandalism had been committed against the meaning and integrity of Dickens' novel. Since Fagin is not the principal character or focus but merely a powerful and integral part of the wider plot, we would be justifiably outraged at the grotesque parody of the original work inherent in such a shift of focus. And yet Shylock's role in *The Merchant of Venice* is much more akin to that of Fagin in *Oliver Twist* than it is to that of Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. It is, therefore, shocking that it has been the sad fate of *The Merchant of Venice* to suffer from the effects of the blindness of this Shylockian heresy on the part of those who have read the play and staged it down the years.

From William Hazlitt's critical inversion of the play's deeper meaning in his defense of Shylock<sup>15</sup> to Henry Irving's celebrated stage portrayal of a Jew who is "conscious of his own superiority in all but circumstance to the oppressor",<sup>16</sup> it has been the play's fate to have its heroes demonized and its villain lionized. Perhaps this is the price that Shakespeare had to pay for his pandering to the anti-Semitic prejudices of his audience in the wake of the López trial. If so, after two hundred years of "substance abuse", in which the substantial meaning has been abused by the elevation of the accidental, it is

<sup>15</sup> William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1881), pp. 189–95. The work was first published by the London publisher Taylor and Hessey in 1817.

<sup>16</sup> From a review of Irving's performance of Shylock at London's Lyceum Theatre published in the *Saturday Review*, November 8, 1879.

surely time to insist that Shakespeare's debt has been paid. His words, having been made a pound of flesh, must now regain the spirit that gave life to the flesh in the first place. It is assuredly time to see *The Merchant of Venice* as Shakespeare saw it, as a work overflowing with Christian morality. In order to do so, we must shift our attention from the play's villain to its heroes.

If Antonio is the eponymous hero of *The Merchant of Venice*, it is generally agreed that he is upstaged by the play's heroine, the fairer-than-fair Portia.

Among Portia's numerous admirers is Fanny Kemble, the celebrated Shakespearean actress and sometime critic, who waxed lyrical, elevating Portia's "wondrous virtues" until she seems a veritable icon of idealized femininity:

I chose Portia [as] my ideal of a perfect woman . . . the wise, witty woman, loving with all her soul, and submitting with all her heart to a man whom everybody but herself (who was the best judge) would have judged her inferior; the laughter-loving, light-hearted, true-hearted, deep-hearted woman, full of keen perception, of active efficiency, of wisdom prompted by love, of tenderest unselfishness, of generous magnanimity; noble, simple, humble, pure; true, dutiful, religious, and full of fun; delightful above all others, the woman of women.<sup>17</sup>

Such effusiveness is echoed by characters in the play itself, most particularly by Bassanio and Jessica, and is reinforced by the name assigned to Portia's home.<sup>18</sup> The atmosphere of

<sup>17</sup> *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1876.

<sup>18</sup> Although "Belmonte" is the setting for *Il peccatore*, the source play for *The Merchant of Venice*, it is significant that Shakespeare chooses to retain the name, signaling his desire that the allegorical allusions with which it is pregnant are given birth within his own play. For those seeking biographical connections with Shakespeare's Catholicism, it is noteworthy that Belmont was also the Hampshire home of Thomas Pounce (1539–1615), a cousin of Shakespeare's benefactor, the Earl of Southampton, who had been an actor as a young man but was imprisoned for his active Catholicism and became a Jesuit lay brother in prison. He was still a prisoner at the time that Shakespeare was writing *The Merchant of Venice*, and it is entirely feasible, given what we know of Shakespeare's own Catholicism, that this was a further reason for his retaining Belmont as the home of his heroine.

Belmont is so different from the worldly dross that preoccupies the residents of Venice that its literal meaning, "mountain of beauty", seems singularly appropriate. The perspective of life that we attain from the beautiful heights of Belmont, in the company of the "heavenly" Portia, is so different from the venality and vendettas of Venice. If Venice wallows in the gutters of life, Belmont seems to point to the stars, and to the heaven beyond the stars, and ultimately, suggests Shakespeare scholar Fernando de Mello Moser, to the Love that moves the heaven and the stars:

It is surely significant that Shakespeare kept the place-name of Belmont, implying Beauty and the Heights! Poetically and symbolically, Belmont stands for a state of overpowering Joy, a joy that grows with Love and through Love, and—as elsewhere in Shakespeare—is revealed and communicated primarily through the heroine. Because Shakespeare, different as he is from Dante in so many ways, is like the great Florentine . . . both seem to have experienced what may be described as the "Beatrician vision" . . . and Shakespeare, again and again, wrote about Love in terms that imply something more than merely human love, rather, beyond it, something like "l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stele".<sup>19</sup>

Fernando de Mello Moser's appraisal of the moral dimension of the play is as fresh and refreshing as it is rare and unusual. The problem that afflicts so much other Shakespearean criticism is that the so-called post-Christian age has lost the ability to see as Shakespeare sees, from the beautiful heights of Belmont. Lacking perspective, these critics are left with nothing but the perplexity that leads to apoplexy. They do not see Venice, as Portia sees it, from the heights of Belmont; they see only Belmont from the gutters of Venice. And from the gutters of Venice you cannot really see Belmont at

<sup>19</sup>Fernando de Mello Moser, *Dilecta Britannia: Estudos de cultura inglesa* (Lisbon, Portugal: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2004), p. 294. "L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stele" ("The Love that moves the sun and the other stars") is the final line and climax of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

all. You have to hike to the heights to get Portia's perspective, and the true perspective of Portia's character. The *bella vista* can be seen only from the summit, and the summit can be reached only through an understanding of Christianity and an appreciation and apprehension of the Christian imagination that Shakespeare shared with his audience.

From a worldly perspective, and particularly from a post-modern worldly perspective, the whole business of the caskets is nothing less than a denial of Portia's freedom to make her own choices. And from a feminist perspective, it is a patriarchal denial of a woman's right to choose. And yet this is not the way that Portia sees it. In an act of outrageous "political incorrectness", she *freely chooses* to do the will of her father. "I will die as chaste as Diana, unless I be obtain'd by the manner of my father's will" (1.2.106–8). In *freely choosing* this limitation on her freedom, Portia is not succumbing to a patriarchal imposition but is merely conforming her will to correct reason. Portia knows that to *choose* evil is not only wrong but irrational. And to be irrational is to be a slave to the "madness" of one's passions. Liberty and the libertine are at war with each other. This is one of the ironies and paradoxes at the heart of the whole drama and is the very gist of Portia's discourse on the importance of prudence and temperance in the face of unruly passion. By contrast, the world chooses as it has ever chosen, following its unruly passions and binding itself with chains of gold and silver. Enslaving itself to its selfishness, it remains bereft of the joy it has not chosen. In the eyes of the world, Bassanio's choice of the "lead" of voluntary poverty over the gaudy pomp of temporal riches is but foolish. Yet it is the worldly choosers, and not Bassanio, who leave empty-handed, bereft of the pearl of great price that is beyond the reach of gold or silver; and it is Bassanio, and not the worldly choosers, who achieves the joy of his heart's desire. Led by the light of his own humility, he sees beneath the superficial surface to the very heart of reality.

But is this serious moral meaning not negated by the seemingly frivolous form that Shakespeare adopts for the play as a

whole and the last scene in particular? Can a play that culminates in a riot of double entendres and sexual innuendo be taken seriously as a conveyer of any meaningful moral? Does the farce not remove the force of the morality? Does it not render any apparent moral null and void? Does it not perhaps even invert the moral, turning it into nothing more than an ironic sneer at convention? Such are the questions raised by some postmodern critics. Yet there is, for Portia, and for Shakespeare, no friction between the light of faith and the lightheartedness of humor. For the Christian, *joie de vivre* and *joie de foi* go hand in hand. They are very comfortable bedfellows. It is only the nonplussed nonbeliever who thinks that Christians need to "lighten up", whereas, in fact, the nonbeliever is far more uptight about the presence of morality than is the Christian about the presence of bawdy humor. "Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly", wrote G.K. Chesterton, whereas "the Devil fell by force of gravity." Nobody takes himself more seriously than the Devil, and this diabolical tendency is evident in those postmodern Shakespeare critics who, knowingly or unknowingly, are of the Devil's party. Such people take the jokes too seriously and the moral not seriously enough. This is a serious flaw that leaves those so afflicted utterly unable to read the Bard objectively.

The tragedy of the postmodern critic is that he cannot rise above the nihilistic sneer that is the nearest that the wingless humor of irony ever gets to laughter. Here we shall leave them, grounded in the gutters of Venice, while the true Shakespearean flies with Portia beyond the bounds of Belmont to the realm from whence all healthy Comedy finds its source.

## TEXTUAL NOTE

The authoritative text of *The Merchant of Venice* is the First Quarto, published in 1600. The Second Quarto is a pirated edition, published in 1619 but fraudulently dated 1600. The First Folio text, printed from the First Quarto, was published in 1623. Although there are some minor edits of the First Quarto in the First Folio, the two texts are substantially the same. This edition is based on the First Quarto, the earliest and most authoritative text.

The Text of  
THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The Duke of Venice  
 The Prince of Morocco } Suitors to Portia  
 The Prince of Arragon }  
 Antonio, a merchant of Venice  
 Bassanio, his friend, suitor to Portia  
 Solanio }  
 Gratiano } friends to Antonio and Bassanio  
 Salerio }  
 Lorenzo, in love with Jessica  
 Shylock, a rich Jew  
 Tubal, a Jew, Shylock's friend  
 Launcelot Gobbo, a clown, servant to Shylock  
 Old Gobbo, father to Launcelot  
 Leonardo, servant to Bassanio  
 Balthazar }  
 Stephano } servants to Portia  
 Portia, a rich heiress, of Belmont  
 Nerissa, her waiting-gentlewoman  
 Jessica, daughter to Shylock  
 Magnificoes of Venice, Officers of the Court of Justice, Jailer,  
 Servants to Portia, and other Attendants

The Scene: Partly at Venice and partly  
 at Belmont, the seat of Portia.

ACT 1

Scene 1. *Venice. A street.*

*Enter Antonio, Salerio, and Solanio.*

*Antonio.* In sooth,<sup>1</sup> I know not why I am so sad;<sup>2</sup>  
 It wearies me, you say it wearies you;  
 But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,  
 What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,  
 I am to learn;<sup>3</sup>  
 And such a want-wit<sup>4</sup> sadness makes of me,  
 That I have much ado to know myself.

5

*Salerio.* Your mind is tossing on the ocean,<sup>5</sup>  
 There where your argosies<sup>6</sup> with portly<sup>7</sup> sail  
 Like signiors<sup>8</sup> and rich burghers<sup>9</sup> on the flood,  
 Or as it were the pageants<sup>10</sup> of the sea,  
 Do overpeer<sup>11</sup> the petty traffickers<sup>12</sup>  
 That cur'sy<sup>13</sup> to them, do them reverence,<sup>14</sup>  
 As they fly by them with their woven wings.<sup>15</sup>

10

<sup>1</sup> *In sooth*: truly.

<sup>2</sup> *sad*: melancholy.

<sup>3</sup> *I am to learn*: I have yet to learn; i.e., I do not know.

<sup>4</sup> *want-wit*: man out of his senses.

<sup>5</sup> *ocean*: a trisyllable (pronounced as if rhyming with "began").

<sup>6</sup> *argosies*: large merchant ships.

<sup>7</sup> *portly*: billowing, stately.

<sup>8</sup> *signiors*: wealthy, influential gentlemen.

<sup>9</sup> *burghers*: citizens of a town or city.

<sup>10</sup> *pageants*: costly scenes or festive public entertainment, as in the masques performed by the Elizabethan court.

<sup>11</sup> *overpeer*: tower over.

<sup>12</sup> *traffickers*: traders.

<sup>13</sup> *cur'sy*: curtsy; bow or dip (i.e., as ships moving on the waves or as is the fashion of courtiers).

<sup>14</sup> *do them reverence*: make a gesture signifying respect or deference.

<sup>15</sup> *woven wings*: i.e., sails.

4                                    *The Merchant of Venice*                                    1.1.                                    5

Solanio. Believe me, sir, had I such venture<sup>16</sup> forth,                                    15  
 The better part of my affections<sup>17</sup> would  
 Be with my hopes abroad. I should be still<sup>18</sup>  
 Plucking the grass to know where sits the wind,  
 Piring<sup>19</sup> in maps for ports and piers and roads;<sup>20</sup>  
 And every object that might make me fear                                    20  
 Misfortune to my ventures, out of doubt<sup>21</sup>  
 Would make me sad.

Salerio.                                    My wind cooling my broth<sup>22</sup>  
 Would blow me to an ague<sup>23</sup> when I thought  
 What harm a wind too great might do at sea.  
 I should not see the sandy hour-glass run                                    25  
 But I should think of shallows and of flats,<sup>24</sup>  
 And see my wealthy Andrew<sup>25</sup> [dock'd] in sand,  
 Vailing her high top lower than her ribs<sup>26</sup>  
 To kiss her burial.<sup>27</sup> Should I go to church  
 And see the holy edifice of stone,                                    30  
 And not bethink me straight<sup>28</sup> of dangerous rocks,  
 Which touching but my gentle<sup>29</sup> vessel's side  
 Would scatter all her spices<sup>30</sup> on the stream,

<sup>16</sup> *venture*: commercial speculation.

<sup>17</sup> *affections*: thoughts and feelings.

<sup>18</sup> *still*: constantly.

<sup>19</sup> *Piring*: peering.

<sup>20</sup> *ports and piers and roads*: places of anchorage.

<sup>21</sup> *out of doubt*: doubtless.

<sup>22</sup> *My wind cooling my broth*: refers to the popular saying "Keep your breath to cool your broth" (i.e., do not waste breath in unnecessary argument).

<sup>23</sup> *ague*: illness involving fever and shivering (for example, malaria).

<sup>24</sup> *flats*: shoals.

<sup>25</sup> *Andrew*: name of a ship, possibly given in memory of a Genoese admiral, Andrea Doria. It was also the name of a Spanish galleon captured by the English in 1596.

<sup>26</sup> *Vailing . . . lower than her ribs*: "bowing" her topmast and breaking up (as in a shipwreck).

<sup>27</sup> *kiss her burial*: pay respects to the place of burial.

<sup>28</sup> *bethink me straight*: immediately put me in mind.

<sup>29</sup> *gentle*: noble.

<sup>30</sup> *spices*: cargo (spices were common commerce between Asia and Venice at the time).

1.1.                                    *Act 1*                                    5

Enrobe the roaring waters with my silks,  
 And in a word, but even now<sup>31</sup> worth this,                                    35  
 And now worth nothing? Shall I have the thought  
 To think on this, and shall I lack the thought  
 That such a thing bechanc'd<sup>32</sup> would make me sad?  
 But tell not me; I know Antonio  
 Is sad to think upon his merchandise.                                    40

Antonio. Believe me, no. I thank my fortune for it,  
 My ventures are not in one bottom<sup>33</sup> trusted,  
 Nor to one place; nor is my whole estate  
 Upon the fortune of this present year:<sup>34</sup>  
 Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.                                    45

Solanio. Why then you are in love.

Antonio.                                    Fie, fie!

Solanio. Not in love neither? Then let us say you  
 are sad  
 Because you are not merry; and 'twere as easy  
 For you to laugh and leap, and say you are merry  
 Because you are not sad. Now by two-headed Janus,<sup>35</sup>  
 Nature hath fram'd<sup>36</sup> strange fellows in her time:                                    51  
 Some that will evermore peep through their eyes,<sup>37</sup>  
 And laugh like parrots<sup>38</sup> at a bagpiper;<sup>39</sup>  
 And other<sup>40</sup> of such vinegar aspect<sup>41</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *but even now*: i.e., just a moment ago.

<sup>32</sup> *bechanc'd*: having happened.

<sup>33</sup> *one bottom*: one source (here, one ship or group of ships).

<sup>34</sup> *nor is . . . year*: Antonio's wealth is not all risked at this one time.

<sup>35</sup> *two-headed Janus*: in classical mythology, Roman god with two faces (facing past and future), patron of doors and openings; also a reference to the classical masks of comedy and tragedy (one smiling, one sad).

<sup>36</sup> *fram'd*: framed.

<sup>37</sup> *peep through their eyes*: i.e., look through half-closed eyes (half-closed because of laughter).

<sup>38</sup> *like parrots*: raucously.

<sup>39</sup> *bagpiper*: Bagpipe music was considered melancholy.

<sup>40</sup> *other*: used in a plural sense.

<sup>41</sup> *vinegar aspect*: sour or bitter facial expressions.

That they'll not show their teeth in way of smile 55  
Though Nestor<sup>42</sup> swear the jest be laughable.

*Enter Bassanio, Lorenzo, and Gratiano.*

*Solanio.* Here comes Bassanio, your most noble kinsman,  
Gratiano, and Lorenzo. Fare ye well,  
We leave you now with better company.

*Salerio.* I would have stay'd till I had made you  
merry, 60  
If worthier friends had not prevented<sup>43</sup> me.

*Antonio.* Your worth is very dear in my regard.  
I take it your own business calls on you,  
And you embrace th' occasion<sup>44</sup> to depart.

*Salerio.* Good morrow, my good lords. 65

*Bassanio.* Good signiors both, when shall we laugh?<sup>45</sup>  
say, when?  
You grow exceeding strange.<sup>46</sup> Must it be so?

*Salerio.* We'll make our leisures to attend on<sup>47</sup>  
yours.

[*Exeunt Salerio and Solanio.*]

*Lorenzo.* My Lord Bassanio, since you have found  
Antonio, 70  
We two will leave you, but at dinner-time  
I pray you have in mind where we must meet.

*Bassanio.* I will not fail you.

<sup>42</sup> *Nestor*: in classical mythology, wise, solemn orator of the Trojan War.

<sup>43</sup> *prevented*: forestalled.

<sup>44</sup> *embrace th' occasion*: take advantage of the opportunity.

<sup>45</sup> *when shall we laugh?* when shall we laugh and be merry together?

<sup>46</sup> *strange*: like strangers.

<sup>47</sup> *attend on*: wait on, match.

*Gratiano.* You look not well, Signior Antonio,  
You have too much respect upon<sup>48</sup> the world.  
They lose it that do buy it with much care. 75  
Believe me you are marvellously chang'd.

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

*Gratiano.* Let me play the fool,  
With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come, 80  
And let my liver<sup>49</sup> rather heat with wine  
Than my heart cool with mortifying<sup>50</sup> groans.  
Why should a man, whose blood is warm within,  
Sit like his grandsire cut in alabaster?<sup>51</sup>  
Sleep when he wakes? and creep into the jaundies<sup>52</sup> 85  
By being peevish? I tell thee what, Antonio—  
I love thee, and 'tis my love that speaks—  
There are a sort of men whose visages  
Do cream and mantle<sup>53</sup> like a standing pond,  
And do a willful stillness entertain,<sup>54</sup> 90  
With purpose to be dress'd in an opinion<sup>55</sup>  
Of wisdom, gravity, profound conceit,<sup>56</sup>  
As who should say, "I am Sir Oracle,<sup>57</sup>  
And when I ope<sup>58</sup> my lips let no dog bark!"  
O my Antonio, I do know of these 95

<sup>48</sup> *respect upon*: concern for, mindfulness of.

<sup>49</sup> *liver*: considered by Elizabethans to be the seat of the emotions.

<sup>50</sup> *mortifying*: death-causing (according to the belief that the expenditure of breath shortened life).

<sup>51</sup> *alabaster*: stone used for graveyard monuments.

<sup>52</sup> *jaundies*: yellowing of the skin caused by an excess of bile pigments, associated by the Elizabethans with a troubled state of mind (bitterness, grief, resentment, etc.).

<sup>53</sup> *cream and mantle*: grow stagnant, build up scum.

<sup>54</sup> *entertain*: keep up.

<sup>55</sup> *opinion*: reputation.

<sup>56</sup> *conceit*: conception, notion.

<sup>57</sup> *Sir Oracle*: a mock title.

<sup>58</sup> *ope*: open.

That therefore only are reputed wise  
 For saying nothing; when I am very sure  
 If they should speak, would almost damn those ears  
 Which hearing them would call their brothers fools.<sup>59</sup>  
 I'll tell thee more of this another time;  
 But fish not with this melancholy bait<sup>60</sup>  
 For this fool gudgeon,<sup>61</sup> this opinion.<sup>62</sup>  
 Come, good Lorenzo. Fare ye well a while,  
 I'll end my exhortation<sup>63</sup> after dinner.

100

Lorenzo. Well, we will leave you then till dinner-time.  
 I must be one of these same dumb wise men,  
 For Gratiano never lets me speak.

106

Gratiano. Well, keep me company but two years moe,<sup>64</sup>  
 Thou shalt not know the sound of thine own tongue.

Antonio. Fare you well! I'll grow a talker for this gear.<sup>65</sup>

Gratiano. Thanks, i' faith,<sup>66</sup> for silence is only  
 commendable.  
 In a neat's tongue<sup>67</sup> dried and a maid not vendible.<sup>68</sup>

111

[*Exeunt Gratiano and Lorenzo.*]

Antonio. It is that—any thing now!

Bassanio. Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing,  
 more than any man in all Venice. His reasons are as  
 two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff; 116

<sup>59</sup> *If they . . . fools*: Cf. Matthew 5:22: "[W]hoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire."

<sup>60</sup> *Fish not . . . bait*: The fishing motif is taken further in the following lines.

<sup>61</sup> *fool gudgeon*: credulous person. A gudgeon is a small, easily caught fish.

<sup>62</sup> *opinion*: reputation.

<sup>63</sup> *exhortation*: strong encouragement or urging argument.

<sup>64</sup> *moe*: more.

<sup>65</sup> *for this gear*: because of what you just said.

<sup>66</sup> *i' faith*: a colloquial expression, literally, "in faith".

<sup>67</sup> *neat's tongue*: ox's tongue.

<sup>68</sup> *vendible*: sellable, i.e., marriageable.

you shall seek all day ere<sup>69</sup> you find them, and when  
 you have them, they are not worth the search.

Antonio. Well, tell me now what lady is the same  
 To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage,  
 That you to-day promis'd to tell me of? 120

Bassanio. 'Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,  
 How much I have disabled<sup>70</sup> mine estate,  
 By something showing a more swelling<sup>71</sup> port<sup>72</sup>  
 Than my faint means would grant continuance.<sup>73</sup> 125  
 Nor do I now make moan<sup>74</sup> to be abridg'd<sup>75</sup>  
 From such a noble rate,<sup>76</sup> but my chief care  
 Is to come fairly off from the great debts  
 Wherein my time something too prodigal  
 Hath left me gag'd.<sup>77</sup> To you, Antonio,  
 I owe the most in money and in love,  
 And from your love I have a warranty<sup>78</sup>  
 To unburthen<sup>79</sup> all my plots and purposes  
 How to get clear of all the debts I owe. 130

Antonio. I pray you, good Bassanio, let me know it,<sup>80</sup>  
 And if it stand, as you yourself still do,  
 Within the eye of honor,<sup>81</sup> be assur'd  
 My purse, my person,<sup>82</sup> my extremest means,  
 Lie all unlock'd to your occasions.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>69</sup> *ere*: before.

<sup>70</sup> *disabled*: constricted, reduced.

<sup>71</sup> *swelling*: extravagant.

<sup>72</sup> *port*: bearing, conduct of life.

<sup>73</sup> *grant continuance*: allow to continue.

<sup>74</sup> *make moan*: complain.

<sup>75</sup> *abridg'd*: reduced (the lavishness of his lifestyle).

<sup>76</sup> *noble rate*: lavish scale (of living).

<sup>77</sup> *gag'd*: gaged; engaged, pledged (financially).

<sup>78</sup> *from . . . warranty*: your love, in which I have full confidence, warrants me.

<sup>79</sup> *unburthen*: unburden.

<sup>80</sup> *it*: your plan or purposed enterprise.

<sup>81</sup> *if . . . honor*: if your plan is as honorable as you.

<sup>82</sup> *person*: reputation (as collateral).

<sup>83</sup> *Lie . . . occasions*: are completely available to you according to your necessities.



Bassanio. In my school-days, when I had lost one shaft,<sup>84</sup>

I shot his fellow of the self-same flight 141

The self-same way with more advised<sup>85</sup> watch

To find the other forth, and by adventuring<sup>86</sup> both

I oft found both. I urge this childhood proof,

Because what follows is pure innocence.<sup>87</sup> 145

I owe you much, and like a willful youth,

That which I owe is lost, but if you please

To shoot another arrow that self way

Which you did shoot the first, I do not doubt,

As I will watch the aim, or to find both 150

Or bring your latter hazard back again,<sup>88</sup>

And thankfully rest debtor for the first.

Antonio. You know me well, and herein spend but time

To wind about my love with circumstance,<sup>89</sup>

And out of doubt you do me now more wrong 155

In making question of my uttermost<sup>90</sup>

Than if you had made waste of all I have.

Then do but say to me what I should do

That in your knowledge may by me be done,

And I am prest unto it;<sup>91</sup> therefore speak. 160

Bassanio. In Belmont is a lady richly left,<sup>92</sup>

And she is fair and, fairer than that word,

Of wondrous virtues. Sometimes<sup>93</sup> from her eyes

<sup>84</sup> shaft: arrow.

<sup>85</sup> advised: careful.

<sup>86</sup> adventuring: hazarding (in an adventure).

<sup>87</sup> innocence: childlike faith or earnestness.

<sup>88</sup> Or . . . again: either regaining both arrows (loans) or at least recovering the second (arrow).

<sup>89</sup> spend . . . circumstance: expend unnecessary breath (words) in circumlocution, seeking to persuade me.

<sup>90</sup> making . . . uttermost: questioning that I will do all I can.

<sup>91</sup> prest unto it: ready for it.

<sup>92</sup> richly left: wealthy by inheritance.

<sup>93</sup> Sometimes: formerly, at a particular time in the past.

I did receive fair speechless messages.

Her name is Portia, nothing undervalu'd<sup>94</sup> 165

To Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia.<sup>95</sup>

Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,

For the four winds blow in from every coast

Renowned suitors, and her sunny<sup>96</sup> locks

Hang on her temples like a golden fleece, 170

Which makes her seat<sup>97</sup> of Belmont Colchis'<sup>98</sup>  
strand,<sup>99</sup>

And many Jasons<sup>100</sup> come in quest of her.<sup>101</sup>

O my Antonio, had I but the means

To hold a rival place with one of them,

I have a mind presages<sup>102</sup> me such thrift<sup>103</sup> 175

That I should questionless be fortunate!

Antonio. Thou know'st that all my fortunes are at sea,

Neither have I money nor commodity<sup>104</sup>

To raise a present sum; therefore go forth,

Try what my credit can in Venice do. 180

That shall be rack'd,<sup>105</sup> even to the uttermost,

To furnish thee to Belmont, to fair Portia.

Go presently<sup>106</sup> inquire, and so will I,

<sup>94</sup> nothing undervalu'd: not inferior.

<sup>95</sup> Cato's daughter, Brutus' Portia: daughter of Cato Uticensis, an honest tribune, and later wife of Brutus, conspirator against Julius Caesar.

<sup>96</sup> sunny: blonde. Elizabethans prized blonde (or red-golden) hair very highly.

<sup>97</sup> seat: residence, holding.

<sup>98</sup> Colchis': Colchis was a city at the eastern end of the Black Sea, where Jason sailed to steal the golden fleece.

<sup>99</sup> strand: shore.

<sup>100</sup> Jasons: In classical mythology, Jason was the hero of the Argonautic quest for the golden fleece.

<sup>101</sup> her: Portia (like the golden fleece).

<sup>102</sup> presages: foretells, promises.

<sup>103</sup> thrift: profit, prosperity.

<sup>104</sup> commodity: goods.

<sup>105</sup> rack'd: stretched, as on the rack.

<sup>106</sup> presently: immediately.