

## BETWEEN FANTASY AND REALITY: *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

*The Merchant of Venice* was first published in 1600; but the earliest reference to the play is an entry in the Stationers' Register of books in 1598: 'a book of *The Merchant of Venice* or otherwise called *The Jew of Venice*'. So although the play was probably written around 1596-7, it seems to have acquired an alternative title early on; and this probably reflects a theatrical response, attention shifting from the nominal hero, the Merchant Antonio, to the apparent villain, the Jew Shylock. It is a shift that has been sustained in the centuries since. But that alternative title may be a conscious allusion to another theatrical title: Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (date uncertain, but before 30 May 1593, when Marlowe was murdered). Interest in the Jews was stirred up by the execution in June 1594 of Roderigo Lopez, a Jewish physician accused of plotting to poison the Queen. In response to this topical interest, *The Jew of Malta* was revived at the Rose theatre in June and July 1594. This play was certainly the most immediate influence on *The Merchant of Venice*: it sets three distinct racial and religious groups against one another, Jews, Christians, and Turks; all three reappear in *The Merchant*, and their values are compared and contrasted in both plays.

*The Merchant* is a complex mingling of fantasy and reality. Both the main stories it uses, the Bond of Flesh and the Three Caskets, were long familiar in myth and legend. The number three frequently occurs in folk-tale material, as in the three riddles of Turandot, or Lear's three daughters. Shakespeare seems to have taken the pound of flesh story from *Il Pecorone* ('The Simpleton') by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino (1558), and the caskets from the *Gesta Romanorum* (revised English translation, 1595, conveniently for the play). But a now lost play, *The Jew*, was said in 1579 to expose both 'the greediness of worldly choosers' and 'the bloody minds of usurers'; so the Belmont and Venice plots may already have been combined on the stage' and may therefore have provided an immediate theatrical model as *The Jew of Malta* so clearly did.

Stories from myth and folk-tale are not of course necessarily distanced or remote: they survive because they tell continuing and basic human truths. Hence part of the power (and enduring popularity as well as controversy) of *The Merchant of Venice*. But Shakespeare has

intensified that power in the strong vein of reality with which he has dramatized the stories. On one level, Portia is a heroine of romance; but she is also very tough-minded, both in her dismissal of her Moorish suitor and in her turning the tables on Shylock in the trial scene. Her love for Bassanio is passionately and lyrically expressed, but when she says 'Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear', her witty word-play brings the commercial values of Venice into the initially contrasted world of Belmont.

Both plots depend on money. Some idea of the financial scale on which the play operates may be gained from a simple comparison. Bassanio borrows three thousand ducats to pay for his wooing of Portia. That was roughly £700 in Elizabethan money. At about the same time as he wrote the play, Shakespeare bought New Place, the second largest house in Stratford, for £60. In modern money, Bassanio wants around £375,000 to finance his wooing expedition. This financial scale helps to sharpen our sense of the crisis facing Antonio. And there is another interesting glimpse of contemporary reality: usury – charging interest on loans – was forbidden to Christians, so the Jews were used for the purpose – and then reviled for it, as in the play. In fact, though the Jews were the financiers of Europe, very few lived in England; but Shakespeare did not need to look far for a model of a usurer: his own father John was twice prosecuted for violating the law by charging usurious interest. There may be fantasy in *The Merchant of Venice*, but reality too; and it is upon the balance between the two that the play depends.

At the heart of *The Merchant* is a tension between justice and mercy; but it is also about love, revenge, intolerance, and the nature of bonds, the obligations of one human being to another. Antonio, whose life is legally forfeit, admits that the Duke of Venice 'cannot deny the course of law'. The law *should* be impartial, a safeguard for every citizen. But the law also has to be interpreted: presiding at the trial, the Duke is scarcely impartial, expressing overt pity for Antonio and describing Shylock as 'a stony adversary, an inhuman wretch'. While Shylock is obviously more complex than that implies, he too *uses* the law in his attempt to kill Antonio. His legalistic stand is opposed by Portia's eloquent appeal for mercy; but when she repeatedly comes up against the stone wall of his insistence on the letter of the law, she responds in kind, turning the tables on him with a legal technicality, the drop of blood, and enforces the legal penalties he has incurred. When she asks Antonio

what mercy he can show Shylock, Antonio asks the court to spare Shylock the confiscation of his goods – but on condition that he leaves all his possessions to his hated Christian son-in-law and, most controversially of all, that he become a Christian. Is this mercy, or a form of revenge? Shakespeare's dramatization of the scene denies us any simple black and white resolution: his studied ambiguity here is the most extreme example of his balancing of issues throughout the play.

This tension between the theoretical impartiality of the law and the imperfection of its executants recurs in the treatment of bonds and their outcome. These are of two kinds: bonds of law and bonds of love. Characters enter into bonds for different reasons, but none turn out as expected. Antonio accepts Shylock's 'merry bond' in order to finance his beloved Bassanio's wooing of Portia, with near-fatal consequences to himself; Bassanio and Gratiano enter into the bond of marriage, symbolised by the rings which they then give away; Jessica breaks her bond with her father by marrying the Christian 'unthrift' Lorenzo and converting to Christianity: this last bond, especially, signals trouble ahead.

The final scene appears to begin with a lyrical celebration of their love – but the series of mythological love stories which they cite as precedents all ended in disaster. On a wider level, this final scene contains an astonishing contrast. Lorenzo famously celebrates the music of the spheres, something so spiritual that no earthly ears can hear it, as an image of harmony; but the play actually ends, not with harmony, but with a bawdy joke from the character who has consistently represented the most violent intolerance in the play. Here Shakespeare carries to an extreme the contrast between lyrical fantasy and a very down-to-earth reality. To borrow a phrase from Groucho Marx, 'the contrary is also true'.

ROGER WARREN