

Merchant of Venice.

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Works consulted:

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The Merchant of Venice opens with a street scene and the presentation of Antonio. He is a rich merchant, a man of peculiar characteristics. He is engaged in a vast commerce, which is constantly adding to his wealth. He is a warmhearted, easy going man, easily imposed upon, and willing to do any thing for a friend. When Bassanio comes to him to borrow money, he loans it to him without a murmur.

Bassanio is a young spend-thrift, noble, who, to preserve appearances, has lived far beyond his means. He is not vicious nor depraved but simply impractical.

He has borrowed often from Antonio, and feels somewhat delicate in asking for more money; but being in need of money, and knowing no other source, he goes to Antonio once more, telling him of his plans. He speaks of a lady at Belmont

who is fair, has many virtues, and is vastly rich. Saying that he aspires for her hand and telling Antonio "There are many who know her worth, and had I means to hold a rivals place."

Antonio is willing to loan the money, but all his ships are at sea and he is forced to borrow it or send a bond for Bassanio from a Jewish money lender Shylock, a man of a hard, grasping nature, ready to sacrifice any thing for money. He is usually pictured to us dressed in ragged, dirty garments, and some times as wearing three hats. When his only daughter, Jessica, is stolen from him, he is furious, not so much over her loss as that of the money and jewels that she had taken. Of this Jew they borrow three thousand ducats, Antonio giving bond for Bassanio, and pledging him self to allow the Jew

to cut a pound of flesh from nearest his heart if is not paid within three months.

Dassanio, having procured the money, proceeds to Belmont, and there finds a strange state of affairs; for although Portia appears to have many suitors, there are but few who care to take the risk incurred in becoming her suitor. On account of the peculiar will left by her father, three caskets had been prepared, one of lead, one of silver, and one of gold. In the lead one Portia's portrait was to be placed. The suitors must each choose a casket, and if it contained this portrait, he should have Portia for his bride. Before doing this however, he must take oath that if unsuccessful, he would never divulge which he had chosen nor ever to marry any woman.

Portia shows that she cares

nothing for these suitors, by the laughing remarks to her maid Nerissa and the way she describes them. But she at once becomes interested when her maid mentions Bassanio, and she even remembers his name, and where she first saw him.

Bassanio now appears in company with Gratiano, one of his companions, though ill bred. but not Bassanio's equal socially.

Portia at once falls in love with Bassanio, but tells him not to choose yet as, he may be unsuccessful, and she wishes to keep him near her as long as possible.

When Bassanio finally determines to learn his fate, he is successful and wins Portia. At the same time, Gratiano wins Nerissa, who had made this the test of his suit also.

They are scarcely married when word is received from Antonio

to come at once, that the money is due and the bond forfeited. Bassanio tells his wife of the circumstances, and she urges him to go at once. Take her wealth and save his friend. But no amount of money can turn Shylock from his cruel purpose. He hates Antonio because he is a Christian, and has insulted him, kicked him, and spat upon him in public places. He is as furious over the flight of his daughter. He shows his evil nature, and with all the devilishness of a hardened temper, filled with hatred, insists upon the literal fulfillment of the bond. He wants revenge. Antonio must pay all.

In the trial which is under the presidency of the Duke of Venice, Antonio and Shylock appear. Shylock is deaf to all entreaties, and refuses to accept even three times the money due. He takes his stand upon

his rights as a citizen of Venice, and his bond. The Duke and court would gladly save Antonio but they dare not. The law is plainly on Shylock's side; and for a mercantile city like Venice, it would be impossible to break or set aside one of their laws without ruining their prestige.

Before pronouncing the verdict, the Duke tells Shylock that he must await the decision of a learned doctor from Padua (a custom common in important cases). While Shylock in his hellish triumph, is whetting his knife to take his forfeit, Nerissa appears dressed as a lawyer's clerk, bearing a letter from Bellario the doctor at Padua, saying that he is unable to come, but has sent a young lawyer who is very wise and knows his opinion. Portia now enters disguised as a lawyer, and begins to plead with Shylock; but no

pleading can move him. Then she resorts to the quibble of the law, that the bond allows no flood, and if he draws but one drop of blood he will be severely punished. Shylock, when he hears this, is willing to take the money; but he has refused this in open court, and it is now refused him. He now attempts to leave the court, but Portia detains him, telling him that he is liable to the law as an alien attempting the life of a citizen of Venice. Shylock comes under this law, and under it his property is forfeited, one half to Antonio, and the other half to the state, while his life remains at the mercy of the Duke. Antonio gives his share to Lorenzo and Jessica, and at his entreaties the Duke spares his life and the other half of his property to Shylock, providing that he become a Christian, and

also that he will bequeath all his property to Lorenzo and Jessica when he dies. To this Shylock as a last resort reluctantly agrees.

Of course Antonio and Bassanio are very grateful to the young lawyer, and ask what they may do to repay him, and show their gratitude. The lawyer says that all he will ask is a ring that Bassanio wears on his finger, and the clerk demands the ~~one~~ worn by Lorenzo. They are loath to part with these rings as they are gifts from their wives and they had sworn never to part with them. But finally by the persuasion of Antonio, and the biting sarcasm of the lawyer, the rings are given them.

When they return to Belmont, Portia asks to see the ring, and when he tells her of his parting with it, she appears not to believe him, and pretends to be

very angry, upbraiding him and declaring that he has given it to some woman. This he emphatically denies. After teasing him for some time, she shows it to him, giving him a lecture and returning the ring, after which the play ends leading us to suppose that they enjoyed a peaceful and happy domestic life.

Bibliography.

We have no means of knowing when the play was written, but it was registered at the stationers in July 1598, but with the proviso that it be not printed without license. This was probably to keep the play out of print until the permission was given by the company to which Shakespeare belonged. It is probable from the style that it was written not long before 1598, though some suggest as early as 1594. In 1600 two copies were printed, and no more until 1623.

Sources of The Play

The play is composed of three principal subjects: the casket scene, the rings, and the pound of flesh. It was not original with the Author.

The pound of flesh is found in the *Ecce Romanorum*, but it is supposed that Shakespeare did not take it from this, but from an early Italian novel, *Giovanni*, written in 1378, and printed in 1500. In it are found all the points excepting the caskets. Giannetto the adopted son of a Venetian merchant, lands at Belmont and falls in love with a lady. His father gives bond for him to press his suit. He is fortunate and wins the lady, and on returning home, finds his father about to sacrifice the pound of flesh, the bond being forfeited. Giannetto's wife disguised as a lawyer, saves the father's life and obtains for a fee, her husband's ring

which she had given to him.

There is also an old ballad, "The Cruelty of Gernutus", which is probably older than the play.

The casket seen, which in substance was repeated in many different manners and is found also in the *Gesta Romanorum*, dates back to Medieval romance. The Emperor of Rome and the King of Naples, determined that to end a long strife, their two only children should wed.

The princess embarks for Rome, but is overtaken by a storm and the ship sinks. The princess is swallowed by a whale, but so wounds him with a knife that he is forced to seek the shore, where he is killed by a young knight, and the lady rescued. The Emperor wishing to test her worthiness, places before her three caskets, one of gold, one of silver, and one of

lead, the lead one being filled with gold and rare jewels, and gems. she chooses the lead one, and is married to the young prince.

It is only reasonable to suppose that Shakespeare procured the framework for his play from these.

Characters

Portia is one of the grandest of Shakespeare's characters; yet, in one place, she is not as strong as Lady Macbeth. In the case of the rings, it is not in keeping with her character, while in Lady Macbeth (Though entirely different kind of characters and dispositions, the pure and noble, the other ambitious and wicked.)

There is no flaw.

Atholock's character is nearly perfect. It is as strong if not stronger than Macbeth, or Claudio in Hamlet.

Dassanio as a lover is not the equal of Romeo, but on the whole is as strong a character.

Antonia considering his role is perfect. As a free hearted, generous man there are in none of Shakespeare's works that I have read, a better man, or one more willing to do any thing to help a friend, or one easier

led, unless it be Brutus, in Julius Caesar.

These are the only strong characters in the play. The rest are introduced only to help the play along, representing minor parts, and in some cases serving only to amuse the lower classes of the audience, or to relieve the intense excitement and high wrought feelings, caused by so much tragedy.

Analysis

The first act in scene, I, II, and III, presents Antonio, Bassanio and Shylock, also Portia and the Caskets. It is the preparation for the play, giving the characteristics of the persons. In scene I, Bassanio makes his request which is granted. The street scene in scene III, is simply to lead to the borrowing of the money, and to show the manner in which the Jews were treated. Scene II, prepares us for the way in which Bassanio shall woo, and win his wife.

Act II.

This act seems to have no importance until scene IV, except to show that Portia has many suitors who ranked high. To show Shylock's disagreeableness and to amuse the audience. The flight of Jessica shows us that Shylock's greed for money has replaced every emotion in his

heart: That he is more wrought up over the loss of the money than the loss of his daughter.

Act III.

The first part of the act prepares us for the fate that is in store for Antonio; that he must forfeit the bond. It is the sequel of the casket scene and the note from Antonio, and the latter part of the act leads us to the part that Portia intends to play in the next act. The court scene.

Act IV

Here is the sequel of the pound of flesh and the latter part of Act III, It brings out the strong points in Portia's character, defeats the plans of the villain and sees that justice is done. In the last also the rings are brought in to prepare us for the last act.

Act V

The last act finishes with the rings. It is humorous and

ends happily to ease the strong feeling and emotion that has been aroused by the rest of the play.

We see that the thread of the play is somewhat hidden, yet continuous. The three subjects of its composition are so mingled that each is necessary.

Antonio stands in the center of the actors: placed between the two extremes, Shylock and Bassanio. Portia is the principal person, and between her and Antonio stands Bassanio. Jessica, Lorenzo, Launcelot and others, are minor characters.

The play contrasts the different natures one, free and generous, and one hard and grasping.

showing how avarice may choke all that is good in a man and make a demon of him.

Criticisms.

This is one of the strongest of Shakespeare's plays. In it are pictured four strong characters, Antonio, Portia, Shylock, and Bassanio.

Antonio is a kind, warm hearted, generous man, who like many wealthy men of to day; are unhappy because they do not know what to do with themselves or their money. He often helps the poor. And it is not the man to give a subject a second thought.

Bassanio the happy go lucky, young spend thrift noble is always before us, spending his money with a lavish hand. Though he knows it is borrowed and that he may never be able to repay it.

Shylock shows himself a hard hearted wretch, yet we can hardly blame him for hating Antonio, especially for the insults that the merchants have heaped upon his race. But what hurts the Jew worst of all, is the fact

that Antonio lends his money gratis, and has brought down his high rates of usance and injured his business. The jew was found to hate the Christians for they looked down upon the Jewish race and despised them. In fact it has been only in the last two hundred years that the Jews have had any protection. We may have been too hard on Shylock. Yet there are some things in his character for which we can find no excuse. He is of a hard grasping nature, and would gladly barter his very soul for money. His only daughter, Jessica, has no place in his heart. He makes her life a hell until she is glad to flee from him and ashamed to be her father's child. This is a remarkable circumstance for the Jews are generally kind in their families, and rarely desert one of their own race. Being

brought up with no companion but her father and in the atmosphere of his greed for gold, she has no scruples in taking with her when she leaves, all the money and jewels possible, and this hurts Shylock worse than the loss of his daughter. He wishes her dead at his feet and the money in her coffin.

He shows his cunning when they come to borrow the money of him. He will take no interest, and only Antonio's bond, which in just shall be the forfeit of a pound of flesh. Mark the hellishness of this damnable plot, such as could only be hatched by one of his evil nature. His only thought is revenge.

Portia is one of the purest characters ever presented. She is left in a peculiar position by her father's will, which at first may seem to be the act of a fanatic; but he was well

aware that Portia with her wealth and beauty would be a prey to fortune hunters; so he devised this method to save her. Thinking that those unworthy would be attracted by the glitter of the gold and silver. Still, some unworthy suitor might have chosen the lead casket. There is no reason why he might not have reasoned as well as a worthy man. For rogues are often more cunning. It seems a poor way to protect her, although, of course, the oath kept away many who would try simply for love of adventure. Portia is determined to abide by her father's will, come what may. But when Bassanio comes to choose she is so fearful that he will make a mistake that she gives him a very broad hint.

Her character is shown most beautifully in the court scene. Undoubtedly she could have hired a lawyer who would have freed

Antonio and doubtless every print she made during the trial was a suggestion from her cousin; but it was through sentiment that she wished to do it herself, and also because she knew Antonio would be very grateful indeed to the person who saved him. In this trial she appears at her best and not for a moment is she anything but the good pure woman that she really is.

The fore thought that is used in leading Shylock on is something amazing. He refuses time and again, in open court, the money offered him. To that beautiful appeal for mercy he is deaf; he continues to fall into the traps laid for him, showing that he was over-matched in cunning. Portia allows him to whet his knife preparatory to taking his forfeit, thus permitting him to show the hellish intentions of a revengeful spirit. He is furious over the flight of his daughter; Antonio

must pay all. For once revenge has overreached his avarice.

When the verdict is finally ^x Shylock has not one friend. Thus we see how a greedy, avaricious disposition will degrade a man, the position it will place him in, the place that the Jewish people occupy to day.

After the trial, the lawyers and the clerk beg the rings from Bassanio and Gratiano; and when they return to Belmont, tease them unmercifully.

This is the only blot on Portia's character. After the manner in which she obtained the ring, making it impossible for him to retain it and his honor, surely could not be angry with him. Yet it does not seem as if she would have the heart to tease him so. Knowing the severe mental strain that he has been under for the last few days. Portia's appeal for mercy in the court room is one of the finest ever written, it is grand, sublime. The forgiving

spirit of Antonio seems to be a little over drawn. Although of a forgiving nature, he had a contempt for the Jews, and would scarcely do them a favor if he had no grudge against them. In addition Shylock had done him much.

The comparison of the right of the same action are here shown. In Portia's determination to abide by her father's will, and Jessica's flight from her father's house. In the one right is wrong, and in the other wrong is right.

Portia's part in the play acting as judge is one that would not be tolerated to day. It would cast a shadow upon her that would never be removed.

The play also severely criticizes the laws of Venice. Shylock was not denied the right to take forfeit. Had he been willing to sacrifice himself, there was no power to stop him. But he was not ready

to do this, and that is what Portia has foreseen from the first. But what points to a city that will allow the making of a contract, and then by a higher law forbid the fulfilment of it.

Yet we can safely say that, though the connecting links of the play lay very much hidden, the Merchant of Venice is the best and most complete play written by Shakespeare or any other writer.

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