

The most excellent  
Historie of the *Merchant*  
of *Venice*.

With the extreame crueltie of *Sbylocke* the Iewe  
towards the sayd Merchant, in cutting a iust pound  
of his flesh: and the obtaining of *Portia*  
by the choyse of three  
cheffs.

*As it hath bene diuers times acted by the Lord  
Chamberlaine his Seruants.*

Written by William Shakespeare.



AT LONDON,  
Printed by *I. R.* for Thomas Heyes,  
and are to be sold in Paules Church-yard, at the  
signe of the Greene Dragon.  
1600.

THEMES AND ISSUES

Bonds & bonding — Law & morality, justice & mercy  
Identity & prejudice — Merchants & gentlemen; social hierarchies — Fathers & daughters: obedience & rebellion

COMPOSITION DATE, SOURCES, CONTEXT

See Introduction to the Oxford edition.

Among the episodes from Shakespeare's life that *may* have been on his mind when writing the play are the death of his son Hamnet (August 1596), his father's being granted a coat of arms (October), and his buying the house of New Place in Stratford (1597). Of course, even if they were, it does not mean that they are actually relevant or productive for the study of the play...

## GENRE & THE ANTI-SEMITISM QUESTION

*MV* is ostensibly a comedy: no character dies, and the end of the play has to do with weddings (or their consummation). Nevertheless, critics have frequently commented on the dark, near-tragic aspect of many of the scenes. There are several examples of such generic ambiguity in the Shakespeare canon — *The Winter's Tale* (a tragicomedy) or *Much Ado About Nothing* are famous cases — but it is arguably more crucial here: the whole perception that we have of the play as light or dark comedy (or something in between) depends on the way the character of Shylock is construed as quasi-tragic hero or comic buffoon.

Although some passages, notably 3.1.51ff (“Hath not a Jew eyes?”, p. 161), are often quoted as a powerful indictment of racial prejudice, and Shylock has frequently been interpreted as the pathetic victim of anti-Semitism, it is highly plausible that Shakespeare intended him rather as a comic villain, a caricature of a Jew eliciting laughter and little pity from the audience: see the subtitle on the front page of the 1600 quarto edition emphasising “the extreame crueltie of *Shylocke* the Iewe”. That a villain, and the butt of ridicule, should have been given moving tirades that almost justify him is not unprecedented: Richard III, one of the most famous — and the most evil — villains even penned by Shakespeare (in 1592), is rather convincing when he explains why he has “determinèd to prove a villain”...

It is also worth noting that neither Shakespeare nor his audience were likely to have ever met a Jew: they had been expelled from England in 1290, and only a handful of converted Jews (or crypto-Jews) lived in London at the time: for an average Elizabethan Englishman, Jews were the absolute Other, even more so than Moors could be, and *Othello* is arguably much more of an appeal to universal humanity and tolerance than *MV* is (note also the treatment of Morocco in the play). Many actors have emphasised this otherness of Shy. through accent or dress, playing him as a markedly Oriental (Sephardic) or, more recently, Ashkenazi Jew.

Nonetheless, it is possible and legitimate to read the play as a criticism of racial and religious discrimination, whether that was what the author intended or not. In any case, it seems that our post-WW2 sensibilities make it necessary.

→ See n<sup>o</sup> 1, 5, 6–8, 10, 16–19, 26–28, 33, 34, 37, 39, 50; 11, 13, 45–47, 51

## THE SOCIAL (AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC) DIMENSION

Central both to the plot and to the relationships between the characters is the social hierarchy that is embedded in *MV*.

One immediately apparent opposition is that of Jews and Christians, and it is indeed presented as social as well as religious-ethnic (and ethnic). It is explicit in the trial scene (4.1.345–47) that Shy. is “an alien”, not “a citizen” of Venice: his status is comparable to that of a metic (μέτοικος) in ancient Greece. Furthermore, the difference between the two religious groups that the play puts forward is financial: Jews lend money at interest, Christians do not. Usury was traditionally seen as condemned by the Bible as well as Aristotle, but said to be allowed by the Torah — although only when lending to Gentiles. But lending at interest had been justified by Protestant authorities, including Luther and Calvin, and legalised in England by Henry VIII in 1545, provided that the interest rate was less than 10 % (and Shy. himself was no Antonio).

→ See n<sup>o</sup> 9; 52–54; 20–21; 23, 40

Wealth (or the lack thereof) obviously plays a major role in the play: some of the characters are indeed fabulously rich. We learn from 1.3.18ff and 3.2.266–7 that Ant. owns at least six ships: for perspective, one can compare that to the 130 ships composing the Spanish Armada in 1588, or the 200–250 ships on each side of the battle of Lepanto in 1571, then the largest naval battle ever. Six thousand ducats is such a sum that neither Ant. nor Shy. can have it ready in cash (see 3.1.79–80 and the note to 1.3.1 on ducats); but in 3.2.397 Por. offers to provide Bass. with twice that on the spot (4.1.83 seems to confirm that her next offers are less literal), which shows how “richly left” (1.1.161) indeed she is. What may not be as blatant to a modern reader is another dichotomy in the nature of wealth. Indeed, one can emphasise the contrast between the self-made men and those who have inherited their riches: on the one hand are Ant. and Shy., the trader and the banker (although one can note that he obviously married a rich woman: 3.1.114–15), on the other hand are Bass. and Por., the representatives of the gentry or aristocracy (the “magnificoes” of 4.1), whether still landed (Belmont) or impoverished. A reflection on the possibility or impossibility of social mobility, on the authority of time-honoured,

God-given nobility *versus* the value of wealth-producing financial activity, was highly relevant to Elizabethan England, when a modern, capitalistic economy was being born — and specifically to the son of a glover who had held political offices and been granted a coat of arms, and of a scion of one of the oldest families in England.

→ See n<sup>o</sup> 11, 17, 20–22, 36, 38, 42–43; 44; 52

### BONDS, BONDING & BONDAGE

Other hierarchies are manifest within the family (whether between father and child or between husband and wife), between generations (Bass. towards the older Ant.), or between master and servant. These hierarchies are voluntary or imposed, and can be read in terms of bonding and bondage. Besides, the “bond” that Shy. insists he will “have” is echoed in the rings in Act 5 or the oaths sworn by all the characters involved in the casket plot. All the characters are at some point bound one way or another, or several ways in succession: bound by a promise (the caskets, the rings, Shy.), by friendship (Ant.) or by love (the couples), legally (the loan, marriage, the trial), morally (Lancelot’s dilemma in 2.2) or literally bound (Ant. in shackles in 4.1), and one form of binding can lead to another.

Thus, some read *MV* as a reflection on the nature of the law — whether in the legal, moral, or religious sense of the word. The development of the English legal system had led to questioning the relationship between the letter and the spirit of the law (see the image of the lawyer as a quibbler, still prevalent today especially in the US); Renaissance Humanism had shaken the ideological certainties of the Middle Ages; the religious conflicts (barely past or already oncoming) may have shed a new light on the opposition between the Old Law and the New. So the play could reflect a pattern of oppositions between rigid, received and inviolable norms — the letter of the law, Justice (presented as a Jewish value: the law of talion), social and divine authorities, hereditary status, etc. — and more fluid ones fuelled by personal reflection — the spirit of the law, Mercy (as a core Christian value), self-worth, choice and reaching one’s own decisions, etc.

→ See n<sup>o</sup> 3, 4, 14–16, 21, 22, 31, 32, 48

### WEALTH, WIT & WISDOM: FINANCIAL, INTELLECTUAL & MORAL WORTH

In 1.1.167, Bass. extols Por.’s “worth”, by which he means her beauty, virtue, and material riches all at once; in 4.1, it will be her legal intelligence that will save Ant. She can be seen to embody the Renaissance ideal of the gentlewoman (as depicted e.g. in Castiglione’s *Il Cortegiano*). But it is worth noting that money plays mainly the role of a plot device in the play, and certainly does not, in itself, bring happiness. What we see happening on the stage is rather about intellectual and moral values.

The casket “lottery” is a case in point: it is ostensibly devised as a moral test or an ordeal (God, or Fortune, guiding the worthy pretender’s choice). And if Bass. succeeds, it is because while Morocco and Arragon approach the test in mundane terms, he — who initially needed money to keep up appearances — leads a reflection on deceptive appearances and humility, and therefore shows himself morally superior to the vainglorious snobs who failed before him. Similarly, it is in moral terms (mercy *versus* vengeance) that Por. approaches the trial in 4.1, and it is a moral lesson (be true to your word, and to your spouse) that she and Ner. teach their husbands in Act 5: “the value” (5.1.151) of the ring or the sum involved in the loan are irrelevant. It is nonetheless ironical — unless it is precisely the point — that it is Por.’s clever tricks (her disguise as Balthasar, her playing on the letter of the law, the trap she lays for Bass., and possibly the rhymes in the song in 3.2.63ff : signs of intelligence, not morality) that allow these moral messages to come across.

→ See n<sup>o</sup> 20, 22, 29, 38, 50; 48, 49; 12, 15



The casket test revisited: *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*

### (SELF-)IMPOSED IDENTITY

One other way to try and have a unified reading of *MV* is to approach it in terms of a reflection on identity. In 4.1.171 and *passim*, the protagonists are identified not by name but as roles: “the merchant” *versus* “the Jew”; in the same way, Por. is first introduced as an heiress — not only in stage directions (and stage prefixes, or the *dramatis personae*), as is the case with “Lancelot the clown” and many characters in other plays, but in the characters’ lines themselves. Nevertheless, they are not stock characters as was the rule in mediaeval morality plays — and as Por.’s pretenders are in 1.2, allowing for a comic list of national stereotypes —, but full-fledged protagonists. Still, their identities seem, in the other characters’ eyes, to be reduced to social positions, which they have more or less accepted, or take upon themselves in the course of the play.

One notable case is Shy., who may be construed as becoming the ruthless Jewish usurer others see in him as a consequence of that labelling — see the parallel with Richard III drawn above; many productions of the play have Shy. turn more and more “Jewish-looking” as the action develops: see 3.1.44–45, 67–68, and particularly 80–82. At the end of Act 4, a new identity is thrust upon Shy. with his forced conversion to Christianity, and the same could be said about Jessica. In a similar vein, some critics have explained Ant.’s melancholy in 1.1 as the manifestation of existential angst at being reduced to his social role as a merchant. Others, using (sometimes) deliberately anachronistic concepts, see Ant. as tormented by “the love that dare not say its name” (O. Wilde) for Bass. and thus having to hide his true identity as a homosexual (compare 1.1.46 with 3.2.4, both then being similar cases of denial). Those who favour the hypothesis that Shak.’s family were crypto-Catholics would say that this was a reflection of his own torments, and that the conflict between religions and the final forced conversion are then given added meaning (although this may not be entirely compatible with the Catholic Church’s continued condemnation of usury).

Another relevant element is Por. and Ner.’s disguise in 4.1 (even if cross-dressing was a commonplace device in comedies: see *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night* for other examples). For their voice to be heard, for their legal acumen to be allowed to exercise, they have to change their identity (albeit temporarily) and assume the status of males. As her female self, indeed, Por. can only move from being subjected to her father to being subjected to her husband, and can never be anything but “a golden fleece” — the source of her own melancholy in 1.2.1–2.

This functions on an individual but also a collective level, as witnessed by the Jews’ being perceived (by themselves as well as others) as a “tribe”, Shy. hating Ant. “for he is a Christian” (1.3.39), or the latter presenting the opposition of Jews and Christians in terms of “friends” and “enemies” (1.3.128–131). The play’s recurrent playing on the words or notions of “kind” and “kindness”, or “Gentile” and “gentle”, can be read within this general pattern.

→ See n<sup>o</sup> 1, 10, 15, 18, 24, 26, 33, 39, 41–43, 47, 50

In the end, we may go back to the play’s being a comedy, and ending on a wedding — or in this case, three weddings, one of them (Graz. and Ner.’s) apparently a mere gratuitous copy of the first (Bass. and Por.’s). This insistence on marriage may be a way for the playwright to put forward the idea of reconciliation and end his play on a scene of harmony, albeit partial and “dear bought” (3.2.311) (some modern productions close on Ant. and/or Jessica left alone on stage while the other characters enter Belmont). On the surface at least, and bitter as it may seem (to us modern readers at least), all is well that ends well: Shy. and Jessica are now Christians, Bass. has saved his friend and is as rich as becomes his birth, Por. has fulfilled her father’s will and married (having made sure on the way that her husband will never underestimate her), and Ant. was not punished for his generosity and friendship (and has, through his “conditions” at the trial, found surrogate children in Lor. and Jess., and who knows? given new meaning to his life). A new series of bonds has been forged.

→ See n<sup>o</sup> 35, 18, 28 but also 2, 41