

INTRODUCTION

Date and Source

The magnificent sailing ships of the sixteenth century are an unseen presence throughout *The Merchant of Venice*. ‘Argosies with portly sail’ dominate the opening dialogue, and in the last scene our sense of an ending is satisfied by the news that three of Antonio’s ships ‘are richly come to harbour’. So it is highly fitting that the clearest indication within the play of the date at which it was written should be an allusion to a real ship of the period.

In June 1596 an English expedition under the Earl of Essex made a surprise attack on Cadiz harbour. The first objective was four richly appointed and provisioned Spanish galleons; worsted in the fight, these cut adrift and ran aground. Two of them, the San Matias and the San Andrés, were captured before they could be fired, and were triumphantly taken into the English fleet as prize vessels.¹ It is generally agreed that the San Andrés, renamed the Andrew, is the ship alluded to as a byword for maritime wealth at line 27 of the play’s first scene:

I should not see the sandy hourglass run
 But I should think of shallows and of flats,
 And see my wealthy Andrew docked in sand,
 Vailing her high top lower than her ribs
 To kiss her burial. (1.1.25–9)

The phrase ‘my wealthy Andrew’ is small but significant evidence that *The Merchant of Venice* was written not earlier than the late summer of 1596.²

The latest possible date for the play is only two years after this. As the first step towards publication, its title was entered in the Stationers’ Register on 22 July 1598. Some six weeks later, on 7 September, Francis Meres’s *Palladis Tamia* was entered in the same Register; a compact account of the state of English literature, it lists six comedies by Shakespeare, of which *The Merchant of Venice* is the last. Between them, these entries make clear both that the play was in the repertory of Shakespeare’s company, and that a manuscript of it had been sold for publication, by the late summer of 1598.

So the play could have been a new one in either the 1596–7 or the 1597–8 acting season. The ‘wealthy Andrew’ allusion does not clearly favour one date rather than the other, since, as John Russell Brown has shown, the Andrew was several times in the news and several times in danger of ‘shallows and of flats’ between July 1596 and October 1597.³ The fact that she was ‘docked in sand’ at Cadiz and that she nearly ran

¹ Sir William Slingsby, ‘A Relation of the Voyage to Cadiz’, *The Naval Miscellany I*, ed. J. K. Laughton, 1902, pp. 25–92.

² The allusion was identified by Ernest Kuhl in a letter to the *TLS* 27 December 1928, p. 1025.

³ Brown, pp. xxvi–vii.

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aground subsequently in the Thames estuary would make an allusion apposite enough in 1596. She was, however, rather more likely to have become a household name in the next year, when, after weathering the terrible storms of August which disabled her sister galleon, she served as a troop carrier in the Islands voyage. On her return in the storm-ridden month of October, Essex was unwilling to let her sail past the Goodwin Sands where, Shakespeare's play reminds us, 'the carcasses of many a tall ship lie buried' (3.1.4–5; compare 2.8.28–31). Essex had good cause to be apprehensive; the weather was such that it scattered and damaged a whole Spanish armada. Men's minds were a good deal occupied with 'peril of waters, winds, and rocks' in the autumn of 1597. And as the shareholders in the Islands voyage began to realise what a fiasco it had been, a play about failed maritime ventures would have taken on a sombre contemporaneity.

The strongest indication that the play originated in the theatrical season of 1597–8 comes, however, not from any internal allusion but from a proviso in the Stationers' Register that it should not be printed without the consent of the Lord Chamberlain – by which we may understand the agreement of Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. The most reasonable explanation of this safeguard is that the actors did not want the play to appear in print while it was still enjoying the success of a theatrical novelty.¹ Even if we had no objective evidence such as this of the play's date, 1597 would strike most readers of *The Merchant of Venice* as about right. The play's skilful blending of several plots, its enterprising and emancipated heroine and its supple, pellucid style all serve to link it to the group of mature comedies, *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598), *As You Like It* (1599), and *Twelfth Night* (1601–2). It has a strong affinity also, despite the difference in genre, with the *King Henry IV* plays (1597 and 1598): we recognise in the first words of Shylock and Falstaff the same new-found and boldly grasped power to individualise a character dramatically through the sounds, rhythms, idioms and images of prose speech.

The same confidence shows itself in Shakespeare's handling of his main source. Like several other of his romantic comedies, the mood and atmosphere of which it presages, *The Merchant of Venice* is based on an Italian *novella* or short story; in this case the tale of Giannetto of Venice and the Lady of Belmont, which forms part of the collection called *Il Pecorone* ('the big sheep', or simpleton – the English equivalent would be 'the dumb ox') written in the late fourteenth century by Ser Giovanni of Florence and published at Milan in 1558. No Elizabethan translation is known, but as several modern ones are available only a brief synopsis is attempted here.²

A rich merchant of Venice called Ansaldo adopts his orphaned godson Giannetto. When the young man wants to join in a trading expedition, Ansaldo provides him with a splendid ship and rich cargo. On the voyage out, Giannetto is diverted to the port of Belmont, whose Lady has let it be known that she will marry none but the man who is able to spend a successful night with her; those who fail this test must be prepared to lose all they possess. She for her part makes sure of her suitors' failure by giving them

¹ See Textual Analysis, p. 184 below.

² Translations are given in Brown, pp. 140–53; Bullough, pp. 463–76; T. J. B. Spencer, *Elizabethan Love Stories*, 1968, pp. 177–96.

drugged wine. Giannetto falls for the trick and duly loses his ship to the Lady. He returns to Venice where he hides in shame; but Ansaldo seeks him out and, on being told the ship has been lost at sea, equips his godson for a second voyage. Everything, not surprisingly, happens exactly as it did the first time. To finance a third voyage, Ansaldo now has to borrow beyond his means, so he pledges a pound of his flesh to a Jew in return for a loan of ten thousand ducats. This time, a 'damsel' warns Giannetto not to drink the proffered wine, and he is able to win the Lady. He lives happily as the Lord of Belmont, and does not think about the bond until the day of reckoning comes round. Then he tells the Lady of Ansaldo's plight and she sends him off to Venice with a hundred thousand ducats. The Jew, however, is not to be deflected from his murderous intentions. The Lady herself now arrives in Venice, disguised as a lawyer, and having failed to persuade the Jew to accept ten times the sum lent, takes the case to the open court. There she tells the Jew that he is entitled to his forfeiture, but that if he takes more or less than the exact pound, or sheds a single drop of blood, his head will be struck off. Unable to recoup even the original loan, the Jew in rage tears up the bond. The grateful Giannetto offers payment to the lawyer, who asks instead for his ring, which he yields after much protestation of his love and loyalty for the Lady who gave it him. In company with Ansaldo, Giannetto now returns to Belmont, where he gets a very cool reception. Only when the Lady has reduced him to tears by her reproaches does she tell him who the lawyer was. Finally Giannetto bestows the obliging 'damsel' on Ansaldo in marriage.

This synopsis highlights the differences as well as the similarities between Ser Giovanni's story and Shakespeare's play. Clearly the flesh-bond plot is virtually the same in both. So is the affair of the ring, though Shakespeare handles this with a lighter touch, omitting the sentimental reflections with which Giannetto relinquishes the keepsake, and doubling the entertainment of the ending by involving Gratiano and Nerissa in its contretemps. That Shakespeare read Ser Giovanni's story, either in the original or in a very faithful translation, is put beyond doubt in any close comparison of the two works. Shakespeare seizes upon all the vivid details of the Lady's intervention to save Ansaldo – her taking the bond and reading it, her conceding its validity so firmly that the Jew approaches the merchant with his razor bared, her dramatic last-minute halt to the proceedings. Generations of actors who have never read *Il Pecorone* have instinctively felt it right for the thwarted Shylock to tear up his bond. One puzzling feature of the play, the discrepancy between Bassanio's long sea voyage to Belmont and Portia's headlong coach ride to the Venetian ferry, is cleared up in the Italian source: 'Take a horse at once, and go by land, for it is quicker than by sea.'¹

Even more important than these details is the emotional cast of the tale. Much is made of Ansaldo's generosity and long-suffering, and of his readiness to risk his life for his godson, whose shiftiness forebodes the difficulties that faced Shakespeare when he sought to make Bassanio an attractive hero. Ansaldo's behaviour after Giannetto's first two mishaps is described in language which recalls the Prodigal Son's father, and these resonances may have given rise to Gratiano's image of the 'scarfed bark' (all Giannetto's ships are gay with banners) setting forth 'like a younger or a prodigal'

¹ Bullough, p. 471.

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but returning ‘lean, rent, and beggared by the strumpet wind’ (2.6.15–20). The Jew in the Italian tale is a less realised character than the merchant, but as in the play his obduracy has a clear religious and commercial motivation: ‘he wished to commit this homicide in order to be able to say that he had put to death the greatest of the Christian merchants’.¹ Finally, there are enough close verbal parallels to prove conclusively that Shakespeare knew and made use of Ser Giovanni’s story.²

Not everything in the tale of Giannetto was to Shakespeare’s purpose. He forestalled the absurd match of the merchant and the damsel by having Nerissa marry Gratiano in Act 3. More importantly, the ribald story of the bed test, which makes nonsense of all the talk of the Lady’s generosity, is replaced by the highly moral tale of the three caskets, which has survived in a number of versions from the ninth century onwards.³ The medieval collection known as the *Gesta Romanorum* includes the story of a choice between vessels of gold, silver and lead which is made a test of marriage-worthiness – though of a woman, not a man. In translation, this forms part of a selection from the *Gesta Romanorum* published in London in 1577 and, with revisions, in 1595. We can be reasonably sure this last was the edition used by Shakespeare, because in its translation of the casket story there occurs the unusual word ‘insculpt’ which is also used by Morocco when he is making his choice of casket (2.7.57).⁴ Shakespeare handles the tale very freely, making the caskets the test for a whole series of suitors; this was a common romance pattern, which needed no specific model.

So far we have been assuming that Shakespeare was the first to substitute the story of the caskets for Ser Giovanni’s tale of the drugged wine. This assumption grows into a near certainty when, on subjecting the play to close scrutiny, we discover residual traces of the story that Shakespeare cut out. Among the loose ends is Bassanio’s impecunious state at the beginning of the play, which leads the audience to suspect him of wooing Portia in an attempt to mend his fortunes; in the *novella* it is the Lady herself who is responsible for Giannetto being penniless, as she has already seized the ships and cargoes from his first two ventures. Indeed Bassanio’s argument that the best way to find a lost arrow is to send another after it, which is almost too much for Antonio’s patience, would be nearly valid in the context of Giannetto’s triple attempt. In Antonio’s expression ‘secret pilgrimage’ (I.I.II9) there is a vestige of the secrecy with which Giannetto hid his quest from his trading companions; and Bassanio’s costly gifts are likewise a reminder of the high price Giannetto paid for his first two voyages. Perhaps too it was the recollection of the risk run by the Lady’s suitors that caused Shakespeare to invent such hard conditions for those who woo Portia, and, in his adaptation of the *Gesta Romanorum* tale, to change the inscription on the leaden casket from ‘Whoso chooseth me shall find that God hath disposed’ to ‘Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath’ (2.7.16).⁵

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 472.

² Bernard Grebanier, *The Truth about Shylock*, 1962, pp. 136–45, gives a full list. Some particularly interesting ones are noted in the Commentary.

³ Bullough gives examples, p. 458.

⁴ Brown gives the 1595 translation, pp. 172–4. Bullough prints an extract from an earlier version of the complete *Gesta Romanorum*.

⁵ See also Milton A. Levy, ‘Did Shakespeare join the casket and bond plots in *The Merchant of Venice?*’, *SQ* 11 (1960). 388–91.

These traces of the story in its original form imply that Shakespeare made his own adaptation of the story direct from the *novella* and did not, as was long supposed, rework a play in which the flesh-bond plot and the casket plot had already been welded together. Lost source plays are, however, persistent ghosts in Shakespearean scholarship, and the one that haunts discussions of *The Merchant of Venice* has proved particularly hard to lay. It even has a name. The sometime actor Stephen Gosson, in his attack on the immorality of the stage which was published in 1579, exempted from his censure two plays which had been acted at the Red Bull. One of these, *The Jew*, he describes as representing ‘the greediness of worldly choosers, and bloody minds of usurers’.¹ This has been taken as proof that a play combining the casket story with that of the pound of flesh already existed in the 1570s, so that Shakespeare had only to re-write it for a new generation of playgoers twenty years later. But it is difficult to see how a play containing the casket story could be said never, in Gosson’s phrase, to wound the eye with amorous gesture. Moreover the art of interweaving two or more stories in the manner of Italian intrigue comedy was still unknown to the English stage of the 1570s. Nor is there any need for Gosson’s words to refer to a double plot: they can simply mean ‘the greediness of those who choose the wordly way of life, such as bloody-minded usurers’; Morocco and Arragon, whatever their short-comings as suitors, hardly deserve to be called ‘wordly’.² In short, while a play about a Jewish moneylender existed some twenty years before Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, we have no proof whatever of the two plays being connected, whereas the text of Shakespeare’s comedy offers ample evidence that he himself inserted the casket tale into the story of Giannetto.

The flesh-bond story has a long ancestry as a folk tale,³ and Shakespeare is likely to have known other versions beside Ser Giovanni’s. The ballad of *Germutus*, a very basic version which involves only the Jew, his merchant victim from whom he obtains the bond as ‘a merry jest’, and a judge who, at the moment the Jew is ready ‘with whetted blade in hand’ to claim his due, intervenes to tell him the pound of flesh must be exact and bloodless, is undated; the phrases quoted are just as likely to have derived from Shakespeare’s play as to have contributed to it.⁴ Another version could have been read by Shakespeare shortly before he wrote *The Merchant of Venice*: this is the English translation of Alexandre Silvayn’s *The Orator* (1596), in which a brief narrative ‘Of a Jew, who would for his debt have a pound of the flesh of a Christian’ is followed by the Jew’s appeal against the ‘just pound’ judgement, and the Christian’s speech in reply. One of the Jew’s arguments is that there are worse cruelties than exacting a pound of flesh – for example, keeping one’s victim in ‘an intolerable slavery’. Shakespeare perhaps picked up the idea and put it to better use in Shylock’s ‘You have among you many a purchased slave . . .’ (4.1.90–8). Certainly the tone of Shylock’s retorts at

¹ Stephen Gosson, *The School of Abuse* (1579), ed. E. Arber, 1906, p. 40.

² The case against *The Jew* as a source has been forcefully put by E. A. J. Honigmann, ‘Shakespeare’s “lost source-plays”’, *MLR* 49 (1954), 293–307.

³ L. Toulmin Smith, ‘On the bond-story in *The Merchant of Venice* and a version of it in *Cursor Mundi*’, *New Shakespeare Society* (1875), 181–9; J. Lopez Cardozo, ‘The background of Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*’, *English Studies* 14 (1932), 177–86; M. J. Landa, *The Shylock Myth*, 1942, pp. 18–31; Grebanier, *Truth*, pp. 97–145.

⁴ Brown gives *Germutus*, pp. 153–6.

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the trial is sometimes very close to that of Silvan's Jew. 'A man may ask why I would not rather take silver of this man, than his flesh . . .' could well have prompted 'You'll ask me why I rather choose to have / A weight of carrion flesh than to receive / Three thousand ducats . . .' (4.1.40–2).¹

The ballad of Gernutus and Silvan's orations are more in the nature of passing influences than sources. A work which could have been of wider use to Shakespeare, in that it may have given him a lead-in to his elaboration of the flesh-bond plot by means of the duplication of lovers and the added story of Jessica's elopement, is a tale inset into the third book of Antony Munday's romance *Zelauto, or the Fountain of Fame* (1580). The dramatic liveliness of this tale has led to the suggestion that a play by Munday himself, based on an Italian original, lies behind it;² not necessarily a complete play, since the reason Munday was described by Meres as 'our best plotter' could be that he wrote play outlines, or *scenari*, which would have been sold to acting companies and worked up into full-dress dramas by their regular playwrights.³ The basic situation in the story is that Strabino loves Cornelia, the sister of his friend Rudolfo, who for his part falls in love with Brisana, the daughter of the rich old usurer whom Cornelia is in danger of being forced to marry. The two friends pledge their right eyes as a means of getting a large loan from the usurer, and buy a rich jewel by which they win the consent of Cornelia's father to her marrying Strabino. When the usurer, who has meanwhile agreed to Brisana marrying Rudolfo, discovers that he has been outbid as a suitor by his own money, he summons the young men before a judge and claims the forfeiture. Using the same religious argument as Portia, the judge urges him to show mercy. But he is deaf to entreaty: 'I crave justice to be uprightly used, and I crave no more, wherefore I will have it.'⁴ The friends call on their attorneys to speak for them, and Brisana and Cornelia, dressed in scholars' gowns, step forward. Brisana's arguments, which have to do with the failure to repay by a certain date, might be heard in any court; it is Cornelia who clinches the matter by stipulating that the usurer, in taking his due, must spill no blood. Realising that he is not going to get his money back, the usurer capitulates, accepts Rudolfo as a son-in-law, and declares him his heir.

Any influence Munday's tale may have had is secondary to Shakespeare's use of Ser Giovanni's story; Portia's plea is here, but no merchant and no Jew. What is interesting in Munday's story, apart from its tone (to which we shall return), is its reduplication of lovers, by which the usurer is given a son-in-law to inherit his wealth and the heroine a companion to help bring the trial to a happy end. If Shakespeare did, as is probable, encounter Munday's romance, these two characters underwent a second binary fission in his imagination, Rudolfo differentiating into Lorenzo and Gratiano, and Brisana into

¹ The relevant extract is in Brown, pp. 168–72, and Bullough, pp. 482–6. Winifred Nowotny has found traces of *The Orator* in other plays by Shakespeare, especially in trial scenes; see 'Shakespeare and *The Orator*', *Bulletin de la Faculté des Lettres de Strasbourg* 43 (1965), 813–33.

² Janet Spens, *An Essay on Shakespeare's Relation to Tradition*, 1916, pp. 23–4; Geoffrey Creigh, 'Zelauto and Italian comedy: a study in sources', *MLQ* 29 (1968), 161–7. *Zelauto* has been edited by Jack Stillinger, 1963; Brown gives an abridgement, pp. 156–68.

³ I. A. Shapiro, 'Shakespeare and Mundy', *S.Sur.* 14 (1961), 30–3.

⁴ *Zelauto*, ed. Stillinger, p. 176.

Jessica and Nerissa. In this way, the love interest was trebled. Furthermore, the addition to Shakespeare's play of the moneylender's daughter increased a strong theatrical influence to which we must now turn, that of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*.

Until the allusion to the Andrew was identified, *The Merchant of Venice* was usually dated 1594. It was known that anti-Jewish feeling was rife in that year because of the trial and execution of Ruy Lopez, a Portuguese Jew by birth and physician to Queen Elizabeth, who was convicted of attempting to poison both the Queen and an eminent Spanish refugee called Antonio Pérez.¹ Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* enjoyed a revival during Lopez's trial, and it has been suggested that Shakespeare wrote his play about a Jew to emulate the success of Marlowe's piece. The fact that *The Merchant of Venice* is now generally dated two or three years later does not of itself dissociate the play from the Lopez affair. But Shylock, unlike Marlow's Jew, bears very little resemblance to Lopez. He is neither a poisoner nor, before his final exit, a convert, and though the choice of the name Antonio could be a faint reverberation of the trial, it was a common Italian name which Shakespeare used for several more characters.²

But if Ruy Lopez did not linger in Shakespeare's memory, Marlowe's Barabas certainly did. Shylock has learnt from Barabas how to respond to Christian contempt: Barabas finds it politic to 'Heave up my shoulders when they call me dog' (*Jew of Malta* 2.3.24)³ and Shylock submits with a 'patient shrug' to being called 'misbeliever, cut-throat dog' (1.3.101, 103). In both, this obsequiousness masks a fierce racial pride: Shylock recalls (1.3.81) the prosperity of Jacob with as much satisfaction as Barabas does the 'blessings promised to the Jews' (*Jew of Malta* 1.1.103). Like Barabas, he believes that without the divine seal of material prosperity, life is not worth living. To those who take away his wealth Barabas cries:

Why, I esteem the injury far less,
 To take the lives of miserable men,
 Than be the causers of their misery;
 You have my wealth, the labor of my life,
 The comfort of mine age, my children's hope;
 And therefore ne'er distinguish of the wrong

(*Jew of Malta* 1.2.146–51)

— a passion heard again from Shylock:

Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that:
 You take my house when you do take the prop
 That doth sustain my house; you take my life
 When you do take the means whereby I live.

(4.1.370–3)

¹ The possible connection between Lopez and Shylock was suggested by Frederick Hawkins, 'Shylock and other stage Jews', *The Theatre* 1 November 1879, and discussed by Sidney Lee, 'The original of Shylock', *Gentleman's Magazine* 246 (1880), 185–220. Lee mistook Antonio Pérez for Dom Antonio, pretender to the Portuguese throne. For Pérez see Gustav Ungerer, *Anglo-Spanish Relations in Tudor England*, 1956, pp. 81–174. Ungerer corrects Lopez's first name, usually given as Roderigo, to Ruy.

² See also R. P. Corballis, 'The name Antonio in English Renaissance drama', *Cahiers Élizabéthains* 25 (1984), 61–72.

³ Quotations are from Richard Van Fossen's edition, 1965.

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Despite such echoes of *The Jew of Malta*, *The Merchant of Venice* is a different kind of play and the product of a different kind of imagination. Marlowe's powerful and grotesque tragedy was so vivid in the memories of Shakespeare's audience that it must have presented itself to him as a challenge rather than a source. When he seems most dependent on it, closer examination often reveals that he is holding it at bay: that is, in the manner of painters – Francis Bacon, for example, 'quoting' Velázquez – he recalls the older work in order to show how far from it his own concerns lie. Marlowe's opening scene exuberantly celebrates the Jew's wealth of gold and silks and spices, in preparation for the portrayal of a world of materialist relationships. In Shakespeare's first scene, argosies with their cargoes of silk and spices are powerfully evoked, but they are made to appear an irrelevance to the world of feeling revealed in Antonio's sadness and his affection for Bassanio; they are the means by which Antonio may serve Bassanio's ends, whereas Barabas's wealth is an end in itself. This fruitful and creative resistance to Marlowe's play is most evident in the contrast between Jessica and Barabas's daughter Abigail. The scene in which the runaway Jessica throws down a casket of her father's jewels to her waiting lover deliberately recalls the night scene in *The Jew of Malta* in which the loyal Abigail extracts the sequestered treasure from her father's house and throws it down to him. Profound differences of character, tone, and circumstance in the two episodes are to make Shylock's 'My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!' (2.8.15) as ironic an echo of Barabas's triumphant 'O girl, O gold, O beauty, O my bliss!' (*Jew of Malta* 2.1.54) as is Marlowe's own use of the happy Ovidian lover's *Lente, lente, currite noctis equi* at the dire climax of *Doctor Faustus*. *The Jew of Malta* is not, in the conventional sense, a source of *The Merchant of Venice*. It is a persistent presence, which Shakespeare manipulates with confident skill.¹

Some Attitudes and Assumptions Behind the Play

The Kenyan writer Karen Blixen once told the story of *The Merchant of Venice* to her Somali butler, Farah Aden, who was deeply disappointed by Shylock's defeat. He was sure the Jew could have succeeded, if only he had used a red-hot knife. As an African listener, he had expected a tale about a clever trickster in the Brer Rabbit tradition; Shylock let him down.² We can be as far off-course as Farah in our reading of the play if we do not pay some heed to the attitudes of its first audience: their range of expectations about comedy as a genre, and the assumptions they brought to a play set in Venice, to its portrayal of the law, of Jews, and of usury, and to its handling of the theme of love and friendship. Yet in our attempts to understand these background matters we need also to hold fast to the fact that Shakespeare's eminence makes him stand out from his background. The play is not made up of average Elizabethan preconceptions. It is made out of the life experience of a highly individual artist, and our sense of that individuality as we gather it from Shakespeare's work as a whole is an important part of our response.

¹ In 'Marlowe and Shakespeare', *SQ* (1964), 41–53, Irving Ribner argues strongly against *The Jew of Malta* being treated as a source. His characterisation, though, of the two plays as 'a tragedy of defeat and negation' and 'a comedy of affirmation' oversimplifies both plays.

² B. E. Obumsele, 'The background of modern African literature', *Ibadan* 22 (1966), 46.

KINDS OF COMEDY

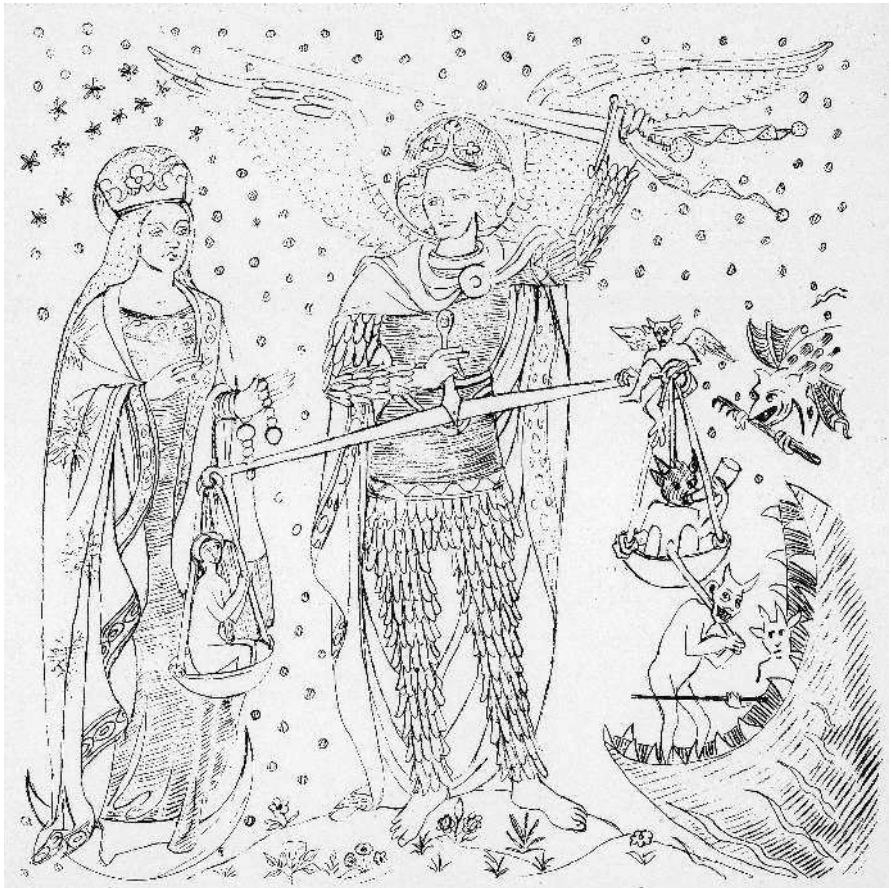
First and foremost *The Merchant of Venice* is a romantic play. The triumph of love and friendship over malice and cruelty is the theme of most medieval romances, of countless short stories of the Italian Renaissance, and, from the 1570s onward, of many English plays.¹ In comedies such as those of Robert Greene, love is an ennobling experience, far removed from the absurdities of courtship displayed in *Love's Labour's Lost* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Unlike these earlier Shakespearean works which have the flavour of Lyly's court comedies, *The Merchant of Venice* has the feel of a popularly romantic play intended primarily for the public stage. Only occasionally witty, it abounds in proverbial wisdom – 'good sentences, and well pronounced' (1.2.9). And whereas court entertainments were made up of 'happenings' that the dramatist could invent at will, plays in the popular romance tradition had a well-defined story line, and existed rather as narrations than presentations. Disguise, a very important element in such stories, is used to bring home to the audience the heroine's devotion and worth. Far-fetched as such devices may seem, popular stage romance was not experienced as fantasy, and to call *The Merchant of Venice* a fairy tale is to induce a dangerous condescension in the reader and a dangerous whimsy in the director. Romantic comedies could be set in real places, even (like Greene's *James IV*) portray historical figures. Although the Belmont of Ser Giovanni is the conventional court of medieval romance, complete with jousting and damsels, his Jew lives on the mainland at Mestre as most Venetian Jews did in the fourteenth century. Two hundred years later, a public theatre audience took Antonio's perils seriously as befitted members of a rival trading nation. Argosies did not only belong in story books: they sailed into Southampton Water.

Another kind of reality, that provided by the miracle play and the morality, gave further substance to much Elizabethan romantic comedy. Portia intervenes to save Antonio as providentially as the Virgin Mary, in continental miracle plays of the sixteenth century, came to the help of hero or heroine. The notion, traceable to the *Golden Legend*, that souls could be saved even when they were being weighed in the balance and found wanting persisted in several forms: didactically, in the fourteenth-century *Processus Belial*, in which the devil claims that in justice man is forfeit to him and confidently produces scales in which to weigh human sins, but is routed when the Virgin appears as an advocate calling on God to exercise his other great attribute of mercy;² visually, in many wall paintings, like the one in illustration 1, of the Weighing of Souls; dramatically, as when Mercy and Peace, in *The Castle of Perseverance*, plead successfully for man's soul before the judgement seat.³ This strain of underlying seriousness which *The Merchant of Venice* may owe to the miracle tradition was deepened when Shakespeare substituted the caskets for the bed test. Despite talk of Jason and Hercules, Bassanio's venture has more in common with the Grail story than

¹ See Leo Salinger, *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy*, 1974, pp. 28–59.

² J. D. Rea, 'Shylock and the *Processus Belial*', *PQ* 8 (1929), 311–15.

³ A. Caigner Smith, *English Medieval Mural Paintings*, 1963, pp. 58–63; Hope Traver, *The Four Daughters of God*, 1907. The part of an actor playing God in a morality about the debate of Justice and Mercy has survived in an Elizabethan MS. See *Malone Society Collections* 2, ed. W. W. Greg, 1931, pp. 239–50.



1 The Weighing of Souls. Wall painting in the church of St James, South Leigh, Oxfordshire. Drawn from the original by Caroline Sassoon

with the pursuit of the Golden Fleece: it is a test of moral worth, not of prowess or cunning. Moreover we are given a secure feeling, characteristic of romance, that the outcome is under the direction of benign powers; Portia's dead father acts much as the divinely directed Fortune of romance, exercising a protective role over his daughter such as she in her turn is to exercise over Antonio.

Elsewhere, the play relies on a very different set of theatrical expectations, those brought to Italian comedy as it had been naturalised by Gascoigne, Munday, Shakespeare himself in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and possibly several of the writers of comedy named by Meres. Munday's *Zelauto* has the spirit of this Italian comedy; even if it does not have a theatrical source, it represents another aspect of Renaissance fiction which is close in temper to the imbroglios of comedy, the 'merry tale'. Like such stories, Italian Renaissance comedies and their derivatives in France and England