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The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare

VOLUME 21

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
EDITED BY JOHN DOVER WILSON

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Cambridge New York Melbourne Madrid Cape Town Singapore São Paolo Delhi

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108005937

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2009

This edition first published 1926, 1968
This digitally printed version 2009

ISBN 978-1-108-00593-7

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

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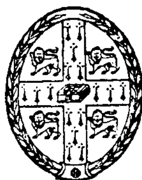

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by
Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521094887

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First published 1926
*Reprinted 1953, 1962
First paperback edition 1968
Reprinted 1969
Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2009

* Places where editorial changes or additions introduce variants from the first edition are, when possible, marked by a date [1952, 1962] in square brackets.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-07545-9 hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-09488-7 paperback

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THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

I

For the text of this play we have pretty plain sailing; being left with three not very dissimilar versions amid which to steer, and now enabled by labour and ingenuity of previous students to arrange them strictly in order of merit. They are two Quartos and the 1623 First Folio. The whole question of the provenance of the text, as we have it, will be found very fully discussed in a subsequent *Note on the Copy*: but the conclusion comes very simply to this. There were two Quartos, both dated 1600, from either of which the 1623 Folio might have derived its authority: but one of these, and the one long taken as the better and called the 'First Quarto,' is now ascertained to have been fraudulently ante-dated on the title-page by Jaggard, who issued it as one of a series in 1619. So we come back for primary reliance on what is generally known as the 'Second' or 'Heyes' Quarto, the title of which is reproduced in facsimile on p. 1.

II

With the 'sources' of *The Merchant of Venice* we have (historically) even less reason to worry ourselves. The play includes three plots derived from old story and interwoven or adjusted by Shakespeare as best he could contrive. But these three plots—or two and a half of them—are to be found in *Il Pecorone* (or 'The Gaby'), a book of tales by one Ser Giovanni, supposed to have been compiled in 1378 but not published until 1558[1].

[1] An English translation by W. G. Waters was published in 1897, doubtless at the instance of the late A. H. Bullen. (London: Lawrence & Bullen.)

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Who this 'Ser Giovanni' was admits anyone who enjoys the licence of conjecture to any width of it. But no one who reads the following brief summary of the First Tale of the Fourth Day (it is worked on the Boccaccio-Straparola pattern) will need to seek further for the source of the *Merchant of Venice* save in excess of that pedantry which is but idleness of the mind. Put in brief, the story comes to this:

A youth of Venice, Giannetto, is financed by his godfather Ansaldo on three voyages supposedly to trade at Alexandria, but coasting off a mysterious port of Belmonte he learns from the master of his ship of a lady whose person and riches are to be won at a great peril and determines to try his fortune. The terms of the wooing are curious: he has to remain awake through the night, or he loses the lady and forfeits his cargo. He fails twice: but on the third voyage he succeeds through the warning of a waiting-woman that his wine has been drugged. He avoids the drug and wins the lady. But the trouble is that for this last voyage his godfather has only been able to furnish him by borrowing ten thousand ducats from a Jew, on the unholy contract that if the bond be not met by St John's Day, the creditor shall have, from whatever part of the body he chooses, one pound of Ansaldo's flesh.

In the wedding and the festivities that follow, the ingrate Giannetto forgets his godfather's deadly peril; until one evening, on the balcony with his bride, he watches a troop of craftsmen go by bearing torches and on a casual enquiry is told that they are marching to pay their vows at St John's Church on the festival of the Saint. Thereupon he remembers the forfeit and the peril, and is struck with an anguish of remorse.

His wife, extracting the story from him, gives him a hundred thousand ducats and bids him ride post to save his godfather at whatever cost; Giannetto does so: but arrives at Venice in a sweat only to find that Ansaldo,

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though on the hope of bidding him farewell briefly respited, is under the law of Venice a doomed man.

The Jew, who has conceded this remand, will have no further mercy. Not for a hundred thousand ducats nor for all the money that rich Venice can raise will he forgo his claim to carve the flesh of this Christian. He holds his bond, and the law of Venice is righteously strict.

Better wits are at work. Prompt upon Giannetto and his vain intercession there arrives at an inn in the city a young Doctor of Laws of Bologna, who is of course—let us call her by Shakespeare's name—Portia in disguise. The host informs her of this desperate affair which is the talk of the city. She commands these good Venetians not to be afraid; by some process has prosecutor and defendant haled into presence, and works the Jew's confusion much as it is worked in our play.

Then, much as in our play, the grateful Giannetto visits her with the proffer of a hundred thousand ducats for her conduct of the case. Portia will take no fee at all save—on an afterthought—'that ring on your finger.' Giannetto is loth to part with it, but in the end does so. Thereupon follows the *éclaircissement* we expect. 'Sir, husband, where is my ring? You have given it to some other woman, to some sweetheart of Venice.' 'I have given it to no woman but to a grave young Doctor of Law.' 'I say you had better have abode in Venice to take your pleasure with your wantons. I hear they all wept when you left them.'

Giannetto burst into tears and, greatly troubled, cried, 'You swear to what cannot be true': whereupon the lady, perceiving from his tears that she had struck a knife into his heart, quickly ran to him and embraced him, laughing heartily the while she showed him the ring and told him everything[1].

[1] The story has been epitomised at greater length and in his own great manner by Dr Johnson, to whose edition we refer the reader.

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From this epitome the reader can draw no other conviction but that Shakespeare or (to speak cautiously) some earlier playwright on whose work Shakespeare improved, took two of the three inwoven plots of the *Merchant of Venice*, (*a*) the pound-of-flesh business, and (*c*) the ring imbroglio, straight out of this selfsame tale in *Il Pecorone*. As for the intermediate (*b*) or casket-plot, a brief reflection will convince him that this too—the lover's testing—is implicit in the same original, though, clearly for dramatic purposes, it had to be altered. The original here is in fact at least as old as the story of Odysseus and Circe. A mariner enters a strange port. The Lady of the Land, a witch, espies his anchoring from her palace windows of *Belmonte*—περισκέπτῳ ἐνὶ χώρῳ, a place of wide prospect. The usual or typical story tells of an adventurer from the sea who is entertained and taken to bed by the enchantress, on the terms that if he fell asleep in the night, he is turned into a swine or some other beast or forfeits his manhood or, at any rate, his cargo, and to ensure his default he is given a night-draught of drugged wine. But clearly this story of

> magic casements, opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas, in faëry lands forlorn

cannot be presented dramatically. And so our playwright, whoever he was, cast back to medieval legend for another old lover's test, which he could easily borrow from the *Gesta Romanorum*, or indeed from anywhere—the test of the three Caskets. More shall be said presently upon this ages-old tradition of the suitor's choice which, usually a matter of triads, haunts mythology and fairy-tale wherever we explore them; as does the luck of the youngest of three brothers, and the enchantress and the Laidly Worm who is transformed into a lovely bride by a kiss. The reader will have noted that in the story of the Lady of Belmonte in *Il Pecorone* she is, as

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though it were taken for granted, thus transformed. From a witch she turns, at touch of lip, to a devoted and capable wife.

III

So here one has three motives which mingle well enough in a medieval tale but do not consort at all as themes for a drama. We need raise here no question of a Shakespeare who wrote from another man's work, or revised or re-revised it. Inquisition by Shakespearian scholars on the lines to-day being followed will assuredly lead, or help to lead, to a clearer text. But the plays remain, for truly critical purposes, as we have them: and anyone who, with a tolerable ear, has listened to Shakespeare's music all his life, may be excused for example for doubting if more confident men be really able to sift out Shakespeare from Fletcher in *Henry VIII* or *The Two Noble Kinsmen*—and still, all debts acknowledged, one must affirm that the Shakespeare a reader or a man in the theatre enjoys, and the only one on whom a critic can employ his skill to help towards judgment and enjoyment, is the Shakespeare we have and not any guessed partitions of him. To put this particularly of the *Merchant of Venice*, everyone knows that Stephen Gosson writing in 1579 in his *Schoole of Abuse* and referring to some plays above any moral reproach, mentions one called by him *The Iew*, 'showne at the Bull' and 'representing the greedinesse of worldly chusers and bloody minds of Usurers'; and that a deal of speculation has been spent upon Shakespeare's indebtedness to this old play; and Gosson's description of it may be taken, even probably, to cover the casket-scenes and Shylock's bond in some 'original' derived from *Il Pecorone*. But what can that speculation, however likely, amount to for any purpose but to employ idleness? We have the *Il Pecorone* tale; and *The Merchant of Venice* in which Shakespeare made a drama of it, leaving to us, whatever

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reservations we make, a mightily effective play. It is also for those curious about his genius, a strangely intriguing play: for Shakespeare, more than any dramatist, could defeat definition among tragedy, comedy and romance. Years after this experiment he invited us to laugh at Polonius pulling his beard and solemnly differentiating 'tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited.' We are dealing with a dramatist who more than any other has overridden all these categories with a negligent smile, and that (be it remembered) through and after encounters at 'The Mermaid' with Ben Jonson, hectoring layer down of the law as derived from Aristotle and transmitted in practice through Seneca and Plautus[1]. We may therefore in dealing with *The Merchant of Venice*, as in dealing later with *Antony and Cleopatra*—in both of which plays we know, as accurately as may be, his sources—ask how he did it.

IV

He did it almost always, if one may use the term, with an instinctive economy. Chaucer has something of this gift in handling his 'originals,' but Shakespeare has it in a superlative degree. No one reading the *Life of Antony* in North's *Plutarch* alongside of *Antony and Cleopatra* can miss to marvel at the frugality of the converting touch. So we take it, understanding (as we have surely a right to do) that this overworked, constitutionally indolent man, apparently careless of his dramatic work,

[1] Cf. Meres, 'As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for Comedy and Tragedy among the Latines; so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage' (followed by a reference to *The Merchant*) with Polonius' apostrophe 'Seneca cannot be too heavy nor Plautus too light.'

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once done, just operated upon the story as genius suggested throughout.

Now the first, or Shylock-Antonio story, is evident Tragedy. The Merchant corresponds at every point to the Aristotelian demand upon a tragic hero. He is a good man who, not by vice, but through some error, comes to calamity. So, up to a point—a definite point—Shakespeare conducts his drama up towards pure tragedy. He opens upon Antonio's gloom and foreboding of some heavy fate, obviously meant to be communicated at once to the audience—

> In sooth I know not why I am so sad,
> 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

—this upon a broken line and a pause through which we follow his moving. And this actual business of tragedy persists, through revel and carnival and masquers, noise of hautboys, choosing of caskets—to music and the music of a right woman's voice confessing and surrendering to love, straight to the point where Portia asks

> Why doth the Jew pause?

If the Jew had not just been held at pause by that mastering question, if his hatred and revenge, racial and personal, had carried him an inch over that question, if, so to say, this very grand Hebrew had divorced his ducats from his daughter and cried out, 'Revenge I will have: afterwards tear me limb from limb,' under the law of Venice Portia's quibble had gone by the board, and the play must necessarily, from that instant, have reverted to the tragic conclusion its opening lines portend.

V

We must now consider Shylock: but we cannot consider him individually until we have laid our account

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with the attitude of our ancestors in Elizabeth's time towards the Jew in general, because that attitude differed so greatly from our modern tolerance. Legally, he was excluded from our country; and there is nothing like unacquaintance to foster hatred in general. The race has always, from Jacob's time, prospered on usury; and the Church backed, if it did not incite, the law, by its official execration of that practice as a sin against nature[1]. To be sure, a nation, prosperous as England was during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, exporting its wool to all known foreign markets and holding the most of the world's carrying trade on long voyages at sea, could not, and in fact did not, dispense with systems of credit and exchange. And even earlier, in the fourteenth century, we find a learned professor, Benvenuto da Imola, declaring—'he who practiseth usury goeth to hell, and he who practiseth it not tendeth to destitution.' Nevertheless, the enterprising English Merchant adventured under Canon Law, and after the way of men would relieve his conscience by putting his sin on a scapegoat. What scapegoat so obvious as the Jew, who notoriously bred money from money in Lombardy and elsewhere, and was a descendant of the murderers of Christ?

If we would put ourselves in the mind of the average spectator of the first performance of *The Merchant of Venice*, we can perhaps hardly fetch better illumination for ourselves than from the following passage of Thomas Coryate (1577?–1617), recounting how he, a visitor to Venice, found it neither improper nor impertinent to accost a Rabbi in the street, and suddenly to invite him to change his religion.

For when as walking in the Court of the *Ghetto*, I casually met with a certain learned Jewish Rabbin that spake good Latin, I insinuated myself after some few terms of com-

[1] See Dante, *Inferno*, XI, where the inhabitants of Cahors, notorious usurers, share the same circle with the men of Sodom.

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pliment into conference with him, and asked him his opinion of *Christ*, and why he did not receive him for his Messias; he made me the same answer that the *Turk* did at *Lyons*, of whom I have before spoken, that *Christ* forsooth was a great Prophet, and in that respect as highly to be esteemed as any Prophet amongst the *Jews* that ever lived before him; but derogated altogether from his divinity, (and would not acknowledge him for the *Messias* and Saviour of the world, because he came so contemptibly, and not with that pomp and majesty that beseemed the redeemer of mankind.) I replied that we *Christians* do, and will even to the effusion of our vital blood confess him to be the true and only *Messias* of the world, (seeing he confirmed his Doctrine while he was here on earth, with such an innumerable multitude of divine miracles, which did most infallibly testify his divinity.) Withal I added that the predictions and sacred oracles both of *Moses*, and all the holy Prophets of God, aimed altogether at *Christ* as their only mark, in regard he was the full consummation of the law and the Prophets, and I urged a place of *Esay* unto him concerning the name *Emanuel*, and a virgin conceiving and bearing of a son; and at last descended to the persuasion of him to abandon and renounce his Jewish religion and to undertake the Christian faith, without the which he should be eternally damned. He again replied that we Christians do misinterpret the Prophets, and very perversely wrest them to our own sense, and for his own part he had confidently resolved to live and die in his Jewish faith, hoping to be saved by the observations of *Moses*' Law. In the end he seemed to be somewhat exasperated against me, because I sharply taxed their superstitious ceremonies. For many of them are such refractory people that they cannot endure to hear any terms of reconciliation to the Church of Christ.

If we consider the above, it will not astonish us that Antonio, a Christian gentleman, found it not incompatible with ordinary good manners to spit at a Jew on the Rialto.

Nay more, the Church held it right to proselytise Jews and bring them to the Christian fold even by force. The reader will doubtless recall Browning's *Holy-Cross Day*, written around the historical fact that the Jews in Rome

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were forced to attend an annual Christian sermon down to the nineteenth century; and this fact will cast a light back upon the alternative penalties pronounced by the Courts in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, and in the *Merchant of Venice*.

In Marlowe's play the State of Malta levies its tribute to the Turks by mulcting the Jews on the following conditions: (*a*) every Jew must hand over one-half of his estate, or (*b*) straightway become a Christian; or (*c*) if he refused either of these terms, his whole estate must be forfeited. Let this be compared with the penalties imposed on Shylock in Act 4 of our play.

We have said enough to indicate the general attitude of Christians towards Jewry, though perhaps this enmity is better indicated in its grudging and gradual relaxation as Browning suggests this in his *Filippo Baldinucci on the Privilege of Burial*—dated by him 1676, a hundred years or so later than *The Merchant*:

> 'No, boy, we must not'—so began
> My Uncle (he's with God long since)
> A-petting me, the good old man!
> 'We must not'—and he seemed to wince,
> And lost that laugh whereto had grown
> His chuckle at my piece of news,
> How cleverly I aimed my stone—
> 'I fear we must not pelt the Jews!'

This above all should not be forgotten, that the Plantagenets who all along protected, by special enactments, their financiers, the Jews, were compelled by popular hatred to banish them from the realm, never to return until re-admitted under Oliver Cromwell. But there seems in 1594 to have been a particular recrudescence of this general hatred over one Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese of Jewish descent, physician to Queen Elizabeth, accused of plotting against the life of Her Majesty and of the Pretender to the throne of Portugal, one Antonio. The trial of this Lopez aroused wild

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popular excitement, fomented by Essex and his party. The poor man was tried in the Guildhall, Essex presiding; he was condemned; hanged, drawn and quartered in June, 1594. Sir Sidney Lee was the first to suggest this Lopez as the original of Shylock. Dr Furness has followed up this suggestion in his *Variorum* edition; and the textual editor (see note on copy, p. 117) has added further confirmation by pointing out the pun on Lopez = Lupus = Wolf in Gratiano's address to Shylock:

> thy currish spirit
> Governed a Wolf, who hanged for human slaughter,
> Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
> And whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed dam,
> Infused itself in thee; for thy desires
> Are wolvish, bloody, starved, and ravenous.

On all this we have here but three remarks to make.

In the first place, Gratiano's words may easily have been an interpolation by an actor making a topical hit after June, 1594; or indeed, Shakespeare may possibly have been responsible for the insertion. He was after all a working dramatist, and we know that he often played up to his audience while despising himself for doing so.

> Alas, 'tis true I have gone here and there
> And made myself a motley to the view,
> Gored mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear,
> Made old offences of affections new.

In the second place it is just possible but no more than this that early in 1594 and before this interpolation Shakespeare was pleading very subtly for mercy on this man. It is observable that all Portia's pleas addressed to Shylock are Christian pleas, with which a Christian audience might be expected to sympathise, certainly not the Hebrew she addresses. This however can lead only to speculation. What concerns us is that Shakespeare had a chord in him which vibrated to music whenever

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he appealed to mercy as divinely tempering justice. Hear, for instance, Isabella in *Measure for Measure*:

> *Angelo.* Your brother is a forfeit of the law,
> And you but waste your words.
> *Isabella.* Alas, alas...
> Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once,
> And He that might the vantage best have took
> Found out the remedy: how would you be,
> If He, which is the top of judgement, should
> But judge you, as you are?

But, most important of all, Lopez was a particular man, and died long ago. Whatever kind of man he was, he was not Shylock, who is an immortal universal creation and lives yet.

VI

Now for the individual Shylock, who in our opinion has been over-philosophised and over-sentimentalised, we may start upon the simple, obvious text that Shakespeare (who, in an age when Jews were forbidden this country, had probably never met with one in the flesh) makes him an intelligible if not a pardonable man; a genuine man, at any rate, of like passions with ourselves, so that we respond to every word of his fierce protest:

> Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?

—makes him entirely more human than the conventional Jew of *Il Pecorone* or than the magniloquent monster created by Marlowe—makes him, up to the moment of his defeat by a woman's art, the tall dominating man of the play, tall as Coriolanus and nearer to us than Coriolanus in his scorn, sense of injury and motive of revenge. That Shakespeare knew Marlowe's play well seems a certain supposition, even if he had not so plainly 'bor-

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rowed' Marlowe's *scène à faire* in which Abigail lowers the treasure to her father from the convent window[1]. The 'alternative' sentences, too, pronounced in the end upon Barabas and upon Shylock, with the choice allowed, surely suggest imitation. But, anyhow, Shakespeare must have been well acquainted with Marlowe's play.

How, then, does Shakespeare do it?—how contrive to make Shylock sympathetic to us as Barabas never is? Well, Marlowe's Jew, as Shakespeare's, has one only daughter who is the apple of his eye: and this Jew with one only daughter, ancient as balladry and repeated in *Ivanhoe* by Scott, whom we always find intimate in, not merely with, Shakespeare. His Isaac the Jew had one fair daughter, as had Jephthah according to Hamlet[2].

But here Shakespeare comes in. His audience, conventionally minded, may accept the proffer of the bond (Act I, Scene 3) as a jesting bargain made with bloodthirsty intent, to be blood-thirstily enacted; but a gentle Shakespeare cannot. There must be more incentive to hate, to lust for a literally bloody vengeance, than any past insults, however conventional, put upon him on the Rialto by Antonio, mildest of men, can dramatically supply. Sufferance is the badge of his tribe.

But he is a fierce Israelite and has an adored daughter. In the interim between the signing of the bond and its falling due this daughter, this Jessica, has wickedly and most unfilially betrayed him. Abigail in *The Jew of Malta* is a good girl, a true staunch daughter until she

[1] For this scene, and for once, Shakespeare borrowed without improving. There is in *The Jew of Malta* a real reason for this stealthy transportation. There is none in *The Merchant*. Jessica, already dressed for flight, might even just have walked downstairs and handed the money-bags to her lover.

[2] And we know now that Hamlet was jigging upon an actual ballad.

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learns that her father has coldly contrived to murder the man to whom she has given her heart. For her father's sake she becomes a pretended convertite and salves his hidden treasure. Later, when convinced that he has compassed her lover's destruction, she becomes a genuine convertite: but remains so true a daughter that she cannot expose her father's villainy. It is upon a wrong suspicion that he curses and poisons her with the whole nunnery: and so in Marlowe's play Barabas tails off from grand promise into a mere villain—despite all further sonority on the old trick—an abject, unmeet for human concern, almost a ghastly figure of fun.

Shakespeare makes other play with Shylock. The Jew of Malta's daughter was loyal and good: but Jessica is bad and disloyal, unfilial, a thief; frivolous, greedy, without any more conscience than a cat and without even a cat's redeeming love of home. Quite without heart, on worse than an animal instinct—pilfering to be carnal —she betrays her father to be a light-of-lucre carefully weighted with her sire's ducats. So Shylock returns from a gay abhorrent banquet to knock on his empty and emptied house.

In stories of Jewry, even when told by the Jews themselves, it is always a difficult business to separate out (*a*) racial pride, (*b*) intense family affection, and (*c*) lucre. No one, on the other hand, reading the *Paston Letters* can fail to see that marriage between English families in the fifteenth century was ordinarily a matter of prepared commercial arrangement. Quite apart from race we may say that matrimony down to Shakespeare's time was accepted among parents as very much more of a trade—of hard business—than our modern sentiment admits it, at all events openly, to be. But the racial pride of Shylock has fenced off his daughter fiercely from any intercourse whatever with the infidels: and her elopement with one of the most heartless fribblers on the list of Antonio's friends, which is to say much,

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and the 'gilding' of herself, as on an afterthought, with more of her father's ducats before she runs downstairs to the street, leaves us with no alternative. Shylock is intolerably wronged.

VII[1]

Let us turn aside for a moment to Antonio, and to consider his friends and associates taken as a lot. It may not be always true that a man is known by the company he keeps: and most of us have known some man or two or three, of probity and high intellectual gifts, who are never at ease save in company with their moral and intellectual inferiors, avoid their peers, and of indolence consort with creatures among whom their eminence cannot be challenged. Such a man is Antonio, presented to us as a high-minded and capable merchant of credit and renown, but presented to us also as the indolent patron of a circle of wasters, 'born to consume the fruits of this world,' heartless, or at least unheedful, while his life lies in jeopardy through his tender, extravagantly romantic friendship for one of them.

Now it may be that Shakespeare, in the first half of this play purposely, of his art, hardened down all these friends and clients of the Merchant. Even as in *Macbeth* he afterwards helped to throw up his two protagonists by flattening down (the honest, thinking Banquo once removed) all the subordinate persons into mere figures of tapestry. And, if intended, this disheartening of Venice does indeed help to throw up Shylock with his passion into high relief.

But, if so, surely it is done at great cost. It has happened to us (say) to have read or witnessed *The*

[1] Portions of this section, together with a few passages in sections VIII and IX, are taken, by kind permission of Mr T. Fisher Unwin, from *Shakespeare's Workmanship* (1918), a volume of lectures given at Cambridge.

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Merchant of Venice next after *As You Like It*; to have overed a stile on the fringe of Arden,

> So frolic, so gay, and so green, so green, so green

—so, so fantastically English and so heartsome withal—and step straight out of our native woodlands into the most romantic of Italian cities—steeped in romance she lies before us, sea-cradled, resplendent under southern sunshine. We are in Venice—with all Vanity Fair, all the *Carnival de Venise*, in full swing on her quays; grave merchants trafficking, porters sweating with bales, water-carriers, flower-girls, gallants; vessels lading, discharging, repairing; and up the narrower waterways black gondolas shooting under high guarded windows, any gondola you please hooding a secret of love, or assassination, or both—as any shutter in the line may open demurely, discreetly, giving just room enough, just time enough, for a hand to drop a rose. Venice again at night—lanterns on the water, masked revellers taking charge of the quays with drums, hautboys, fifes, and general tipsiness; withdrawn from this riot into deep intricacies of shadow, the undertone of lutes complaining their love; and out beyond all this fever, far to southward, the stars swinging, keeping their circle —as Queen Elizabeth once danced—'high and disposedly' over Belmont, where on a turfed bank

> Peace, ho! the moon sleeps with Endymion,
> And would not be awaked,

though the birds have already begun to twitter in Portia's garden. Have we not here the very atmosphere of romance?

Well, no....We have a perfect *setting* for romance; but setting and atmosphere are two very different things. Chaucer will take a tale of Boccaccio's and in the telling alter its atmosphere wholly: the reason being that while setting is external, atmosphere emanates from the author's genius, is breathed out from within.

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Now in the *Merchant of Venice*, barring the Merchant himself, a merely static figure, and Shylock, who is meant to be cruel, every one of the Venetian *dramatis personae* is either a 'waster' or a 'rotter' or both, and cold-hearted at that. There is no need to expend ink upon such parasites as surround Antonio—upon Salerio and Solanio. Be it granted that in the hour of his extremity they have no means to save him. Yet they see it coming; they discuss it sympathetically, but always on the assumption that it is his affair not theirs:

> Let good Antonio look he keep his day,
> Or he shall pay for this,

and they take not so much trouble as to send Bassanio word of his friend's plight, though they know that for Bassanio's sake his deadly peril has been incurred! It is left to Antonio himself to tell the news in that very noble letter of farewell and release:

> Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low, my bond to the Jew is forfeit, and since, in paying it, it is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared between you and I, if I might but see you at my death: notwithstanding, use your pleasure—if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter

—a letter which, in good truth, Bassanio does not too extravagantly describe as 'a few of the unpleasant'st words that ever blotted paper.' Let us compare it with Salerio's account of how the friends had parted:

> I saw Bassanio and Antonio part.
> Bassanio told him he would make some speed
> Of his return: he answered, 'Do not so.
> Slubber not business for my sake, Bassanio,
> But stay the very riping of the time.
> And for the Jew's bond which he hath of me,
> Let it not enter in your mind of love:
> Be merry, and employ your chiefest thoughts
> To courtship, and such fair ostents of love
> As shall conveniently become you there.'
> And even there, his eye being big with tears,

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> Turning his face, he put his hand behind him,
> And with affection wondrous sensible
> He wrung Bassanio's hand, and so they parted.

But let us consider this conquering hero, Bassanio. When we first meet him he is in debt, a condition on which—having to confess it because he wants to borrow more money—he expends some very choice diction.

> 'Tis not unknown to you, Antonio,

(No, it certainly was not!)

> How much I have disabled mine estate,
> By something showing a more swelling port
> Than my faint means would grant continuance.

That may be a mighty fine way of saying that you have chosen to live beyond your income; but, Shakespeare or no Shakespeare, if Shakespeare mean us to hold Bassanio for an honest fellow, it is mighty poor poetry. For poetry, like honest men, looks things in the face, and does not ransack its wardrobe to clothe what is naturally unpoetical. Bassanio, to do him justice, is not trying to wheedle Antonio by this sort of talk; he knows his friend too deeply for that. But he is deceiving *himself*, or rather is reproducing some of the trash with which he has already deceived himself.

He goes on to say that he is not repining; his chief anxiety is to pay everybody, and

> To you, Antonio,
> I owe the most in money and in love,

and thereupon counts on more love to extract more money, starting (and upon an experienced man of business, be it observed) with some windy nonsense about shooting a second arrow after a lost one.

> You know me well, and herein spend but time
> To wind about my love with circumstance

says Antonio; and, indeed, his gentle impatience throughout this scene is well worth noting. He is friend enough already to give all; but to be preached at, and

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on a subject—money—of which he has forgotten, or chooses to forget, ten times more than Bassanio will ever learn, is a little beyond bearing. And what is Bassanio's project? To borrow three thousand ducats to equip himself to go off and hunt an heiress in Belmont. He has seen her; she is fair; and

> sometimes from her eyes
> I did receive fair speechless messages....
> Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,
> For the four winds blow in from every coast
> Renownéd suitors, and her sunny locks
> Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
> Which makes her seat of Belmont Colchos' strand,
> And many Jasons come in quest of her....
> O my Antonio, had I but the means
> To hold a rival place with one of them,
> I have a mind presages me such thrift,
> That I should questionless be fortunate.

Now this is bad workmanship and dishonouring to Bassanio. It suggests the obvious question, Why should he build anything on Portia's encouraging glances, as why should he 'questionless be fortunate,' seeing that —as he knows perfectly well, but does not choose to confide to the friend whose money he is borrowing— Portia's glances, encouraging or not, are nothing to the purpose, since all depends on his choosing the right one of three caskets—a two to one chance against him?

But he gets the money, of course, equips himself lavishly, arrives at Belmont; and here comes in worse workmanship. For I suppose that, while character weighs in drama, if one thing be more certain than another it is that a predatory young gentleman such as Bassanio would *not* have chosen the leaden casket. Let us consider his soliloquy while choosing:

> The world is still deceived with ornament.
> In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt,
> But, being seasoned with a gracious voice,
> Obscures the show of evil? In religion,

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What damnéd error, but some sober brow
Will bless it, and approve it with a text.

One feels moved to interrupt: 'Yes, yes—and what about yourself, my little fellow? What has altered you, that you, of all men, suddenly use this sanctimonious talk?'

And this flaw in characterisation goes right down through the workmanship of the play. For the evil opposed against these curious Christians is specific; it is Cruelty; and, yet again specifically, the peculiar cruelty of a Jew. To this cruelty an artist at the top of his art would surely have opposed mansuetude, clemency, charity, and, specifically, Christian charity. Shakespeare misses more than half the point when he makes the intended victims, as a class and by habit, just as heartless as Shylock without any of Shylock's passionate excuse.

So from these Venetians we return to Shylock. He has, one must repeat, been over-sentimentalised and over-philosophised. Macklin or Charles Kean began it on the stage, and Irving completed what they began. But in literature we find it already running strong in Heine, himself a Jew. He tells how in a box at Drury Lane he sat next to 'a pale, fair Briton who at the end of the Fourth Act fell a-weeping passionately, several times exclaiming "the poor man is wronged!"' and Heine goes on to return the compliment in better coin with talk about 'a ripple of tears that were never wept by eyes...a sob that could come only from a breast that held in it the martyrdom endured for eighteen centuries by a whole tortured people.'

At this point it may be salutary to oppose sense to sensibility by quoting some less sympathetic observations by James Spedding.

The best contribution I can offer to this discussion is the expression of an old man's difficulty in accepting these new discoveries of profound moral and political designs underlying Shakespeare's choice and treatment of his subjects: I believe that he was a man of business,—that his principal

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business was to produce plays which would draw. I believe that he took the story of the caskets and of the pound of flesh because he thought he could combine them...into a good romantic comedy that was likely to succeed; and I think he managed it very well. But if, instead of looking about for a story to 'please' the Globe audience, he had been in search of a subject under cover of which he might steal into their minds 'a more tolerant feeling towards the Hebrew race,' I cannot think he would have selected for his hero a rich Jewish merchant plotting the murder of a Christian rival by means of a fraudulent contract, which made death the penalty of non-payment at the day, and insisting on the exaction of it. In a modern Christian audience it seems to be possible for a skilful actor to work on the feelings of an audience so far as to make a man engaged in such a business an object of respectful sympathy. But can anybody believe that, in times when this would have been much more difficult, Shakespeare would have *chosen* such a case as a favourable one to suggest toleration to a public prejudiced against Jews? A lawyer retained to defend a man who has kicked his wife to death will try to prove that his client was an injured husband, and had served her right, and this may succeed with a jury that have had experience of conjugal provocations. But if his business were to plead for a mitigation of the severity of the law *against husbands*, he would surely keep his injured friend's case as far out of sight as he could. I do not believe, in fact, that Shakespeare, either in choosing the subject or treating it, was thinking about Jewish grievances or disabilities at all either way. What he had to think about was, how he could introduce into a *comedy*, without putting everything out of tune, an incident so shocking, and a project so savage, that 'the imagination almost refuses to approach it.' And I think he managed this also very skilfully, by first depriving Shylock of all pretence of grievance or excuse, which was done by the offer of all the money due to him upon his bond, with twice as much more to compensate him for the very short time he had had to wait for it beyond the appointed day,—an offer which leaves him without any conceivable motive for preferring the pound of flesh except the worst,—and then dismissing him with a punishment very much lighter than he deserved.

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As the reader will have seen, we cannot agree with Spedding that Shakespeare deprived Shylock 'of all pretence of grievance or excuse.' On the contrary, we hold that in the abduction of Jessica Shakespeare deliberately gives him a real grievance and excuse, and that the offer of money, belatedly made, comes almost as an insult to his passionate resentment.

But surely, as these philosophers overlook, and as every author and every intelligent reader should know, how apt is creative genius to be carried away by a character it creates. Few of us doubt Spedding's assertion that Shakespeare intended to make Shylock such a cruel, crafty, villainous Hebrew as would appeal to an audience of Elizabethan Christians. The very structure of the plot shows this. But even as Don Quixote carried away Cervantes, and Pickwick Dickens, so Shylock takes charge of Shakespeare, no less imperiously than Falstaff took charge of him. The intelligence of his heart and springs of action once admitted, Shakespeare understands him in detail, down (as Hazlitt noted) to his Biblical language, as when he hears that Jessica has given in Genoa a ring to purchase a monkey, he breaks out with: 'Thou torturest me, Tubal—it was my turquoise—I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor: I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.'

VIII

We turn from Shylock to his antagonist, Portia, of whom in our opinion the critics in general have made too little. They have made, indeed, too much of her in the trial-scene, so that we usually picture her to ourselves as the slim figure of that scene dressed in doctor's robes: and this no doubt was in Hazlitt's mind, who found her something of a pedant. Something of a pedant in those surroundings she had to be, or pretend to be. But her real charm may be better studied in Acts 3 and 5.

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