



EVERYMAN

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

William Shakespeare

Edited by John F. Andrews
former editor of the Shakespeare Quarterly
Foreword by Kelly McGillis

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THE MERCHANT OF VENICE



THE EVERYMAN SHAKESPEARE

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by Kelly McGillis

When I was asked to write this Foreword, I was in Washington's Shakespeare Theatre at the Folger, performing the role of Portia in Michael Langham's spring 1988 production of *The Merchant of Venice*. With the exhilaration and self-confidence that comes from hearing applause, I agreed wholeheartedly and with great enthusiasm to share my thoughts about the play. Now, more than two years later, with my vivid memories of the experience fading, I am acutely aware of how much more I'd like to know about the comedy, not to mention the works of Shakespeare generally.

I'm reminded of my first exposure to the mysteries of this brilliant playwright during my days at the Juilliard School's actor-training programme in New York, and I feel as if I am back at the beginning, understanding little or nothing at all. I suspect that it is at least partly for this reason that people in the theatre are drawn to Shakespeare: because no matter how well we think we've managed to get inside a particular character or play, another look will tell us just how much we have yet to grasp. This is the wonder of this immortal genius, and it is from the viewpoint of an actress who stands in awe of him that I return to *The Merchant of Venice*, as if for the first time, now.

I've been asked what I found most challenging about playing Portia. I think that one of the greatest difficulties the part presents is that of portraying a girl who is transforming herself into a woman. Portia starts out in the play confined by the restrictions of her dead father. Through the casket sequences she begins to flower as an autonomous personality. By the Trial Scene, and even more by the last scene in the play, she's a woman who takes

control. But she does so with a great sense of humour, with a spritely charm and lightness.

Portia is the ultimate good girl. She's impish, and in the first scene in which we see her she is openly questioning the will of a father who has deprived her of the ability to choose her own husband. By the end of the scene, she is convinced that her wise father truly loved her and meant well by what he did, and so she decides that it would not be right to rebel against the conditions he's imposed upon her. (One of the touches I enjoy in the play, by the way, is that Portia's problem is not unique: it has a parallel in Jessica. In her case, a living father's intolerable domination forces a daughter who feels unloved to flee rather than remain obedient.)

Some people believe that when Bassanio comes to woo Portia, she gives him an unfair advantage over the other suitors. I disagree. In my view, Portia wouldn't do that; she wouldn't disobey her father. But Nerissa has fewer scruples about helping Bassanio find the way to Portia's heart, and in Michael Langham's directing of that scene the song that hints at the lead casket was presented as Nerissa's idea, not Portia's.

I came to the Trial Scene with an open mind. I rehearsed it many different ways, trying to figure out whether Portia knew exactly what she was going to do before she showed up in the Venetian courtroom. I tried to ask questions of the playwright, to explore what choices the scene leaves open to the actress playing Portia. Even though everybody I knew of who had done the scene or commented on it was convinced that Portia had everything worked out in advance, I wasn't so sure. I was curious to find out what would happen if she didn't know what she needed to know – what it would be like for her to discover it right there. For me it made the scene more immediate. And even though the director's eventual decision was to present Portia as a trial judge who proceeded from a well-planned script, I continued to feel that there might be some degree of spontaneity and improvisation in Portia's approach to the courtroom situation.

I don't see Portia as out to get Shylock. She's horrified by what he plans to do, and she knows she has an ace in her pocket – the

law – that will enable her to prevent him from carrying out his designs. But she doesn't want to have to play her ace, and she hopes that Shylock will relent without being compelled to do so. She'd much prefer to have Shylock change his mind. But he just keeps on pushing for justice. Portia gives him every opportunity to avoid the trap he's putting himself into. Several times she asks him, 'Are you sure? Are you sure?' But he refuses to listen, and eventually she has to teach him a lesson about what justice really means.

In the Folger production, Michael Langham omitted the lines in which Antonio says that Shylock must convert to Christianity if he wishes to retain his means of making a living. In my opinion this was a good cut, given the differences between the beliefs that prevailed in Shakespeare's society and those that audiences bring to the theatre today. It seems to me that to make Shylock become a Christian in a modern production of *The Merchant of Venice* is to imply that he behaves as he does, not because he's a vengeful man, but because he's Jewish. I'd hate to have a performance of the play give the impression that all Jews are like Shylock, and that the only cure for such behaviour is a new religion.

Many people take this play to be the story of Shylock. I see it as much more evenly divided among the characters. It's named after the Merchant of Venice, and one could argue that it's his story if it belongs primarily to one person. For me, it's fundamentally a play about love and about sacrifice. You have echoes of love throughout, and the play ends, not with the courtroom, but with the lovers. The final scene takes place in Belmont with the lovers becoming reunited and reinstating their vows to one another. I'm bothered by productions in which the play stops abruptly after the Trial Scene. I think that does a disservice to the playwright. It is very unfair to characters other than Shylock, and to other relationships in the play, and it leaves the comedy with no resolution.

I'm sometimes asked if I think that Portia sees Antonio as a rival for the love of Bassanio. I don't at all. One of the wonderful things about Portia is that right after Bassanio picks the correct casket,

and then news comes from Venice about Antonio's plight, Portia tells Bassanio to return to Venice immediately. It's her wedding night, and that's tremendous self-sacrifice. It's not trite; she says what she means, because she fully understands how deep and important the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio is. Then, of course, she herself goes to the courtroom to save Antonio's life. After the trial, when Antonio comes to Belmont, she says, and means, 'Sir, you are very welcome.' I can't see why anyone would choose to play Portia as though she were jealous of Bassanio's love for Antonio, when the script shows so clearly that she's not.

Nowadays Antonio tends to be depicted as a man with a homosexual attachment to Bassanio. I have to say that I consider that a mistake too. In this play Shakespeare treats love in a very poetic way. He conveys a sense of the kind of love that transcends the physical, a selfless love that matters more than life itself. It's very demeaning to Bassanio and Antonio's love for each other for it to be reduced to an erotic relationship.

I really like this play. It's a great play for modern audiences. I find the characters inspiring – even Shylock, because it seems to me that he does learn something in the end about justice and mercy. But the person in *The Merchant of Venice* who has the most to say to me is Portia. I find that people respond to her; they like her, they admire her, and they learn from her.

I never cease to be amazed by Shakespeare's female characters. So many of them – Viola and Rosalind, for example – seem to me to be the very embodiment of womanhood. They are perceptive and intuitive. There are neither belittling nor pitying, and certainly not self-pitying. They make astonishing sacrifices, but they do so in an unassuming way that can make us overlook the fact that they really are bestowing great gifts. And perhaps the most wonderful of them all is Portia: an all-encompassing, all-embracing woman, a woman who exudes great love and great joy.

KELLY MCGILLIS played Portia in a 1988 production of the *The Merchant of Venice* at Washington's Shakespeare Theatre at the Folger. In 1989 she returned there to appear as Viola in *Twelfth Night*, directed by artistic director Michael Kahn. For the role of Viola in *Twelfth Night* she received a Helen Hayes Award. Earlier Miss McGillis had won plaudits for the role of Nina in a Kennedy Center production of *A Seagull*, directed by Peter Sellars. She is best known, however, for her work in such films as *Reuben, Reuben*, *Witness*, *Top Gun*, and *The Accused*. Currently she is producing and starring in a film of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO *The Merchant of Venice*

Background

Although *The Merchant of Venice* is not among the handful of Shakespearean tragicomedies we usually refer to as 'problem plays', it is a drama that has frequently occasioned controversy. It touches on sensitive issues – race relations, religious differences, and what our day calls human rights – and it does so in ways that mark it as the product of an era that now seems parochial, if not intolerant, in many of its social and political attitudes. Notwithstanding the play's many virtues, therefore – among them the fact that it can be shown to be ahead of its time in its approach to precisely those topics that are most likely to concern a twentieth-century reader or theatregoer – *The Merchant of Venice* is sometimes treated as a work of art from which modern audiences need to be protected.

However troubling such a stance may be, it is not altogether surprising, because, to borrow a remark from the most endearing drama critic in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 'there are things in this Comedy . . . that will never please' even those who regard it as one of Shakespeare's masterpieces.

We can no longer be expected to smile, for example, when Portia exults over the departure of a Moorish suitor and casts a slur on his swarthy complexion. We no longer react with automatic disapproval when we learn that a shrewd moneylender charges interest on his loans. We no longer think it a matter to be passed over lightly when we hear that a respectable Venetian merchant has scorned the 'Usurer' as a 'Cut-throat Dog' and spat upon his 'Jewish Gaberdine'. We no longer consider it laughable when the Jew's apprentice describes his master as 'the very Devil',

and when the old man's daughter spurns him and his religious heritage, elopes with a frivolous Gentile, and finances a lavish honeymoon with a casket of her father's treasure. We no longer delight in the derision the moneylender suffers when he laments the loss of his 'Ducats' and recoils at a report that the disrespectful Jessica has pawned a precious heirloom from her mother in exchange for a monkey. Above all, we no longer suspend our discomfort when we observe the proceedings of a kangaroo court in which the aggrieved Shylock falls victim to a clever 'Judge' who can manipulate the statutes of Venice at will, spring a defendant who has already entered a guilty plea, and convict and sentence the infuriated but law-abiding man who has come to the bar as plaintiff.

No, these are aspects of *The Merchant of Venice* that invariably raise questions in the minds of today's readers and playgoers. But the moment that causes us the most difficulty is one that was evidently meant to be viewed in Shakespeare's time as a display of compassion and generosity: the redeemed Merchant's pronouncement that he will spare his defeated accuser's life and forgive half his fine if Shylock will bestow his blessing on the daughter and son-in-law who have wronged him and forthwith 'become a Christian'.

No matter how the Trial Scene is staged, Antonio's proviso will almost inevitably impress a modern audience as evidence that 'the Quality of Mercy' is 'strained' in the courtroom of Shakespeare's drama. What was intended, no doubt, as a manifestation of Grace is more likely to strike viewers of our time as yet another instance of the kind of 'Christian Example' that has driven Shylock to insist upon his pound of flesh in the first place.

So why do we continue to read and stage *The Merchant of Venice*? And how do we deal with ethical and theological premises that unmistakably locate the work in an earlier and less pluralistic epoch of Western civilization?

The answer to the first question resides in the enduring power of the play itself, in Shakespeare's eloquent exploration of dilemmas so basic to human nature that they are unlikely to be completely

resolved by any conceivable advance in cultural understanding or social and political justice. The answer to the second question resides in us, in our ability to exercise the historical sensibility required to carry ourselves back, if only for the duration of the dramatic action, to the presuppositions of a theatre quite different from our own.

Comment on the Play

Despite the vividness of its characters and the urgency of the drives that motivate them, the story detailed in *The Merchant of Venice* has at least as much to do with the abstract realms of fairy tale and religious allegory as it does with the everyday affairs of getting and spending in a flourishing Renaissance capital. Thus, if Portia is on the one hand a flesh-and-blood woman with a real human being's aspirations and desires, she is at the same time a symbolic ideal and the object of a romantic and spiritual adventure with analogies to Jason's legendary quest for the Golden Fleece. Portia presides over a setting whose name means 'Beautiful Mountain', and one of the laws of Belmont – as fundamental to the workings of this locale in the play as the laws of profit and loss are to the Venetian Rialto – is that only a deserving suitor will be able to find the key to the casket that contains this 'wondrous' Lady's portrait.

'I stand for Sacrifice,' Portia tells the wooer she would choose if her dead father's will permitted. In so doing she compares herself to a mythical maiden about to be offered to the gods. It follows that the bold Bassanio must show himself to be the Hercules who can win her love by releasing her from captivity. Cultivated Elizabethans would have known that the mighty Alcides (Hercules) was sometimes likened to Christ in terms of the Redeemer's victory over the power of sin, and they would therefore have found it fitting that Bassanio sets Portia free by selecting the casket that represents a commitment to 'give and hazard all'.

Far from being the profligate spendthrift his initial request for venture capital might make him appear, Bassanio is compelled to

demonstrate that he is the only kind of man who could possibly qualify for the benefits of Belmont: not one who is drawn to Portia solely for 'what many Men desire' (like Morocco, who opts for the gold casket and wins only a death's head), and not one who is puffed up with a proud sense of his own deservings (like Arragon, who picks the silver casket and garners a fool's head), but one who can perceive the underlying value of a 'meagre Lead' container whose 'Outward Show' only seems to be at odds with the Lady whose 'Golden Locks' it holds.

Appropriately, the motto Bassanio chooses identifies him, like Portia, as one who stands for 'Sacrifice'. And it is also 'Sacrifice' that associates both lovers with Bassanio's friend and benefactor, Antonio.

The Merchant is presented from the beginning as a man whose lot is 'a Sad one'. We may be curious about the causes of his melancholy, and we may find it difficult to reconcile his spiteful treatment of Shylock with his otherwise charitable behaviour. However, we have to admire the seemingly unconditional magnanimity with which Antonio volunteers to 'give and hazard all he hath' to underwrite the love-quest of a soul-mate who is already deeply in debt to him.

It is possible that we will think the Merchant imprudent in trusting all his resources to Fortune. Once the fickle goddess has exacted her terrible price, moreover, we may well wonder if Antonio's zeal for martyrdom isn't prompted in part by a desire to link Bassanio to himself in a timeless bond that will rival, if not surpass, the one that now ties Bassanio to Portia. When he is finally brought to the point of baring his breast to deliver the pound of flesh demanded by Shylock, however, there can be little doubt that Antonio's position is meant to remind us of the 'man of sorrows' (Isaiah 53:4) and his affirmation that 'greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends' (John 15:13).

In many respects Antonio's gesture of self-sacrifice is what differentiates the 'Spirit' of the Merchant of Venice, and of the play that bears his name, from the type of 'Law' embodied in an

adversary who would cut out his debtor's heart. 'I stand for Judgement,' proclaims Shylock at the beginning of the Trial Scene. He thereby defines himself not only in contrast with the 'Sacrifice' symbolized by Portia and Bassanio and now by Antonio, but also in distinction from those who acknowledge a need for Grace (a concept embedded in the very institution of sacrifice, as noted in such biblical passages as Psalm 51:17 and Hebrews 9:25–28). 'What Judgement shall I dread,' Shylock asks, 'doing no Wrong?' Then, disregarding Portia's gentle reminder of the warning implicit in Matthew 6:12, he proclaims 'My Deeds upon my Head; I crave the Law.'

These words turn out to be a snare, not only in light of the Christian doctrines that inform the play, but also according to the Hebraic teachings and rituals that Elizabethans would have seen as prototypes of the Sacrifice that fulfilled a Divine Law designed primarily to prove everyone guilty before God (Galatians 2–3). For Shakespeare's contemporaries it was a familiar message, one they heard repeated every Sunday and one that had figured in countless literary works and morality plays. Most of them would thus have seen Shylock not merely as a victim of injustice who errs by seeking to pervert the Law into an instrument of personal vengeance, but as a man naïve and presumptuous enough to believe himself capable of standing faultless before the supreme Court on the Day of Judgement.

For twentieth-century readers and theatre-goers, touched as we quite rightly are by the tormented outcry in Shylock's famous 'Hath not a Jew Eyes?' speech, it is difficult to see beyond the moneylender's downfall to the play's celebration of the power of Love, both human and divine, in the scenes that follow the trial. But it should not escape our notice that the comedy shifts in tone as the action transfers from the conflict-riven court of Venice to a magical moonlit light in Belmont.

Shortly after Shylock's departure, the disguised Portia requests Bassanio's wedding ring as a token of recompense for the extraordinary services of 'the learned Judge'. Bassanio at first demurs; when urged by Antonio, however, he realizes that he

must be willing to 'give and hazard all' for the friend who has wagered everything for him. Portia's little test is only a game, of course, and it brings some much-needed levity to the concluding movement of the play. At the same time it completes a triad by asking Bassanio to 'stand for Sacrifice' in a new way, risking the fortunes he has won in order to reciprocate the man whose sunken assets have made the wooer's success possible.

What is sometimes referred to as the Ring Plot places Bassanio's love for Antonio, to whom he is 'infinitely bound', on an equal plane with Bassanio's love for Portia, to whom he is also infinitely bound, and to whom, without yet realizing it, Antonio is now infinitely bound as well. By connecting and highlighting a circuit that links Bassanio to Antonio, and Antonio to Portia, and Portia to Bassanio, the epilogic sequel to the play's earlier trials encourages us to view all three relationships as aspects of the 'sweet Harmony' alluded to in Jessica and Lorenzo's reflections on the celestial Music of the Spheres. In the final analysis it turns Portia's ring into a metaphor of the higher love (*agape* in Greek, *caritas* in Latin) that transfigures and unifies the romantic love (*eros*) and brotherly love (*philia*) that have been vying for dominance in the preceding scenes.

In accordance with this pattern it is thematically fitting that Antonio – who sacrifices himself one last time in Act V to ratify the marital ties of Bassanio and Portia – should alone remain unwedded. But it is equally apt that at the end he profits from a 'strange Accident' that restores to him the 'Life and Living' he thought he had lost when all his argosies disappeared at sea. With this 'Manna' dropped from Heaven, he will now be able to return to the Rialto as a Merchant renewed. If he has been genuinely changed by what has happened to him, he may be inspired to work towards a more cohesive social order in Venice, perhaps even one that will include an offer of genuine fellowship to the alien who has been forced to the baptismal font.

Date, Context, and Sources

The Merchant of Venice was probably written in 1596 or 1597. The reference to 'my wealthy Andrew' in I.i.26 was almost certainly an allusion to the *San Andrés*, a richly laden Spanish galleon that an English expedition under the command of the Earl of Essex had captured in Cadiz harbour in June of 1596. After its induction into the Queen's fleet, the *Andrew* was several times endangered by 'Shallows' and 'Flats' of the kind Salarino refers to, and it was thus a continual reminder of the risks involved not only in military navigation but also in the kind of merchant voyaging that figures so prominently in Shakespeare's play.

For his portrayal of Shylock Shakespeare borrowed a number of details from Christopher Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* (circa 1589), and he was no doubt influenced as well by the 1594 execution of a Jewish physician from Portugal, Roderigo Lopez, who had been tried and convicted of taking part in a conspiracy to poison his most famous patient, Queen Elizabeth. The playwright also incorporated material from a number of literary sources, among them Richard Robinson's 1577 translation of the medieval Latin collection known as the *Gesta Romanorum*, Anthony Munday's 1580 prose narrative *Zelauto, or the Fountain of Fame*, and, most important, Giovanni Fiorentino's Italian novelle *Il Pecorone* (written in the fourteenth century but not printed in Italy until 1588). Fiorentino's narrative combined the essential ingredients of Shakespeare's plot: the bond secured by a pound of flesh, the quest for a wealthy lady in Belmont, the disguised legal authority who saves the life of her husband's benefactor, and the ring-test that concludes the action. The *Gesta Romanorum* provided the idea for the caskets that serve in *The Merchant of Venice* as the means of sorting Portia's suitors. And the *Zelauto* story seems to have been the origin of the stipulation in the Trial Scene that the plaintiff may claim his penalty but must do so without spilling any of the defendant's blood.

As usual Shakespeare adapted his sources freely. Among other things, he took a lady of Belmont who drugged the wine of her

wooters to keep them from winning her hand by bedding her successfully, and metamorphosed her into a chaste maiden who could be obtained only by the man who demonstrated his suitability for her love by a display of wisdom and virtue. Meanwhile, he drew upon a variety of biblical texts, exegetical commentaries, and dramatic antecedents to produce a play that is far more subtle, and far more nuanced psychologically, than any of the works that lay behind it.

John F. Andrews, 1993

THE TEXT OF THE EVERYMAN SHAKESPEARE

Background

THE EARLY PRINTINGS OF SHAKESPEARE'S WORKS

Many of us enjoy our first encounter with Shakespeare when we're introduced to *Julius Caesar* or *Macbeth* at school. It may therefore surprise us that neither of these tragedies could ever have been read, let alone studied, by most of the playwright's contemporaries. They began as scripts for performance and, along with seventeen other titles that never saw print during Shakespeare's lifetime, they made their inaugural appearance as 'literary' works seven years after his death, in the 1623 collection we know today as the First Folio.

The Folio contained thirty-six titles in all. Of these, half had been issued previously in the small paperbacks we now refer to as quartos.* Like several of the plays first published in the Folio, the most trustworthy of the quarto printings appear to have been set either from Shakespeare's own manuscripts or from faithful copies of them. It's not impossible that the poet himself prepared some of these works for the press, and it's intriguing to imagine him reviewing proof-pages as the words he'd written for actors to speak and embody were being transposed into the type that readers would filter through their eyes, minds, and imaginations. But, alas, there's no indisputable evidence that Shakespeare had any direct involvement with the publication of these early editions of his plays.

* Quartos derived their name from the four-leaf units of which these small books were comprised: large sheets of paper that had been folded twice after printing to yield four leaves, or eight pages. Folios, volumes with twice the page-size of quartos, were put together from two-leaf units: sheets that had been folded once after printing to yield four pages.