



Understanding Shakespeare

THE MERCHANT
OF VENICE

ROBERT A. ALBANO

UNDERSTANDING

SHAKESPEARE:

THE

MERCHANT

OF

VENICE

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of Venice***

Robert A. Albano

MERCURY PRESS

Los Angeles

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NOTE: All act and scene divisions and lines numbers referred to in this text are consistent with those found in *The Norton Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, editor).

INTRODUCTION

During the time that Shakespeare was writing his comedies and tragedies, audiences never knew quite what to expect from one of his plays. With other playwrights the title usually provided a strong indication of the contents, but not so with Shakespeare. In *Julius Caesar*, for example, Shakespeare inserts the assassination of his title character before the play is even half way over. The bard then proceeds to focus on the character of **Brutus**, who becomes the actual central protagonist of that play.

Shakespeare was inventive and creative in all of his plays, and part of that invention involved breaking the traditions and conventions that were often strictly adhered to by other playwrights.

In *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare similarly plays with the concepts and conventions regarding protagonists and antagonists; and like *Julius Caesar*, the title character is not actually the central figure of the play. In fact, Shakespeare's merchant, **Antonio**, is more of a plot device, a bit part, rather than a major role in the work. But unlike *Julius Caesar*, pinpointing the central figure of *Merchant of Venice* is somewhat trickier.

The first half of *Merchant* bears some similarity to *Othello*. In that tragedy the character of **Iago** dominates the action and actually is the

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character to whom Shakespeare gives the best speeches. Audiences are certainly far more interested and intrigued by Iago than they are by Othello. Yet Iago is the antagonist of the play, a devious and clever villain who dominates the play and manipulates the other characters in it. The character of Othello becomes, in a sense, Iago's puppet. Iago tugs on a string, and Othello is forced to move whether he desires to do so or not. In *Merchant* the villainous **Shylock** also intrigues the audiences and similarly manipulates the character of Antonio into taking action that runs contrary to his own beliefs. And just as Iago wishes to destroy Othello, Shylock desires to destroy Antonio.

But the second half of *Merchant* bears more similarity to *As You Like It*. In that comedy the wonderful female character named **Rosalind** takes command of the play and of the other characters in it. By disguising herself as a man, she sorts out the problems for all of the characters in the play, including herself: she creates order out of chaos. Shakespeare had a great deal of respect for the abilities and intelligence of women, and he certainly reveals that respect through the character of Rosalind. Indeed, many noted Shakespeare critics often rank Rosalind as one of his greatest creations, right alongside his greatest male characters, notably Hamlet and Falstaff. And because Shakespeare is

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noted and praised for creating outstanding **characters** that were far more developed and complex and realistic than any of those characters created by his contemporaries, the character of Rosalind is thereby particularly noteworthy. In *Merchant* the character of **Portia** becomes the commanding presence of the play and the one upon whom the men of the piece must rely to sort out their problems and to resolve all hostilities. And, like Rosalind, Portia disguises herself as a man; for the time of the English Renaissance was still primarily a man's world despite being ruled by a queen for nearly half a century. And like Rosalind, Portia reveals that she is every bit as capable as any man – and more capable than most – in functioning in that man's world; yet she never for a moment loses her own identity and charm as a woman.

Not surprisingly, because *The Merchant of Venice* does have these similarities to both one major tragedy and one major comedy, a number of Shakespeare scholars classify the play as a **tragicomedy** (tragic comedy). However, the play was classified simply as a **comedy** in the **First Folio** (a collection of Shakespeare's plays published in 1623). Shakespeare himself did not worry so much about categorizing his plays. A play with a happy ending, despite having serious or nearly tragic scenes occurring before that ending, was still

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a comedy. By definition, a tragedy, on the other hand, demanded that the protagonist must experience a tragic fall from his position of power and respect at the end of the tale. And even a Shakespeare tragedy could contain comic scenes before that tragic ending took place. However, today's reader should keep in mind that English drama was back then in a state of constant change and evolution. The rules and conventions recognized and established in one decade could be thrown out or turned upside down in the next decade. Less than two decades before *The Merchant of Venice* was first performed, another fine English poet, **Sir Philip Sidney**, in his *Defense of Poesy* (circa 1582) severely criticized the mixture of tragedy and comedy (the mingling of kings and clowns) in a play:

But, besides these gross absurdities, how all their plays be neither right tragedies nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in the clown by head and shoulders to play a part in majestical matters, with neither decency nor discretion; so as neither the admiration and commiseration, nor the right sportfulness, is by their mongrel tragi-comedy obtained. I know Apuleius did somewhat so, but that is a thing recounted with space of time, not represented in one moment; and I know the ancients have one or two examples of tragi-comedies, as

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Plautus hath *Amphytrio*. But, if we mark them well, we shall find that they never, or very daintily, match hornpipes and funerals.

However, Shakespeare and other playwrights quickly showed that Sidney's view was not entirely correct. One could, if one were a great playwright, quite elegantly and masterfully blend elements of comedy and tragedy together to create a splendid work of dramatic literature. A convention and insight that may have been reasonable and applicable to 1582 was no longer quite so relevant in 1596. Sidney established a convention, and later Shakespeare (among others) broke it.

These two aspects of *The Merchant of Venice* – the tragic and the comic – are also the result of the play having **two central plots** or stories. Shakespeare is not generally regarded by many critics as a creator of great stories because he borrowed extensively from other tales and historical events – in that sense, he was not entirely original. Rather these critics praise Shakespeare for (1) the magnificence of his **characterization** and (2) the beauty of his **poetry**. However, today's reader should not be so quick to dismiss the genius that underlies Shakespeare's **plots**. Although Shakespeare did indeed in many of his plays borrow from other **sources**, he took separate and diverse elements from those sources and weaved them

together in such a way as to create a new and wholly original work of literature. Shakespeare does not just insert a subplot that runs alternately with his main plot. Rather, the characters of one plot are also integral and vital to the other plot. Shakespeare's storytelling art involves the blending of two (and sometimes even more than two) plots in such a way that every scene and even every line becomes vital to the meaning and understanding of both plots and to the overall play. The result, then, is an entirely new plot (as in the case of a tragedy like *King Lear*) or at least a thoroughly revised plot (as in the case of *Merchant of Venice*) that is most assuredly creative in the sense of organization and integration.

In *The Merchant of Venice* the two connected plots or tales are, as critics refer to them, (1) the **winning-the-bride** story and (2) the **pound-of-flesh** story. However, for this particular play, Shakespeare owes a great deal of debt to an Italian collection of tales that appear in a book entitled *II Pecorone* (1378) by **Giovanni Fiorentino**. Both the first and second plots appear together in that collection (see the tale in the appendix). However, the two plots in the fourteenth century book are far less integrated and cohesive than they are in Shakespeare's play.

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