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INTRODUCTION.

I. THE PLOT.

In the days when Venice was the busiest and wealthiest city in all Europe, there lived in it a rich merchant named Antonio, who by means of several great ships of his own traded eastward as far as India, and westward as far as Mexico. This Antonio, at a time when all his wealth was at sea, wishing to furnish his young kinsman and dearest friend, a soldier and scholar called Bassanio, with means to pay his court to Portia, a lady of Belmont in Italy, borrowed the sum of three thousand ducats, for three months, from an enemy of his own, one Shylock, a Jew, on agreement that, if he failed to repay the sum in time, he should suffer the loss of a pound of his own flesh. On the selfsame night in which Bassanio, thus equipped, set sail from Venice, an acquaintance of his, by name Lorenzo, fled to the mainland of Italy with Jessica, Shylock's only child, carrying off also a quantity of his jewels and money. This loss so inflamed the Jew's malice, that when Antonio's ships failed to come home within the period of three months, Shylock flung him into prison and clamoured to the Duke for execution of the forfeit on his bond. Meantime Bassanio, by a right choice among three caskets respectively of gold, silver, and lead, having won Portia to wife, in the very hour of marriage heard of Antonio's danger, and, provided by Portia with three times the sum needed, sped to Venice. His intervention failing, Antonio was saved in extremity by Portia herself, who, in the guise of a Doctor of Civil Law, followed her husband into the Duke's Court of Justice. The trial over, they returned severally to

Belmont, Bassanio taking Antonio with him; there Portia, by means of a ring which in her disguise she had got from Bassanio, made clear to him who it was that had delivered his friend from death.

2. SOURCES OF THE PLOT.

Note.—This section is only for pupils who can read, or get somebody to read to them, at least a few extracts either from the authorities given below or from the abridgment in Furness' Variorum Edition. For others it will be unintelligible and useless.

1. Shakespeare did not as a rule invent the incidents which occur in his plays, but borrowed them, in outline at least, from Shakespeare's very various sources. Some of his plots are plots not original. founded on older plays, others on romances; several are taken from Sir Thomas North's version of a French rendering of *Plutarch's Lives*. Scholars have spent endless pains in tracking out the old plays and stories on which Shakespeare drew for material; a number of them were collected and published in the year 1843 by John Payne Collier, under the title of *Shakespeare's Library*.

2. In the case of *The Merchant of Venice*, the outline of the plot, as has been given above, was found by Capell as one of a collection of stories in an Italian book called *Il Pecorone*, written by a certain Ser Giovanni Fiorentino, and printed in 1378. A modern translation of it is given in the second volume of Collier's *Shakespeare's Library*; but no translation of Shakespeare's time has been discovered, and either such a translation once existed and has since perished, or else Shakespeare read the story in the original Italian. [For another possible alternative, see § 4, below.]

The story in *Il Pecorone* is, in main particulars, the same as that given above. We find in it a Venetian merchant fondly devoted to a young kinsman, and this kinsman in love with a fair and wise lady of Belmont, who is only to be won by the suitor who shall undergo successfully an extraordinary test; we have the same pledge with a Jew, made for the same purpose, followed by the lover's success and the

Main outline of *Merchant of Venice* derived from *Il Pecorone*.

merchant's bankruptcy, and later on by a trial in which the merchant's rescue is achieved, through just the same interpretation of the law, by the lady in the same disguise; and finally, on their return to Belmont it is by means of a ring, begged from her husband when in Venice, that she is able, after due banter and mystification, to prove her identity with the unknown lawyer.

There are minor differences: for instance, in the Italian story none of the names of persons are the same as Shakespeare's. The lover makes *three* voyages to Belmont; the sum borrowed is *ten* thousand ducats; when the marriage takes place the young kinsman forgets the merchant, and is only accidentally reminded of him just as the time allowed by the bond is on the point of expiring; and so on.

But, besides these slight variations, two important differences in incident are made by Shakespeare. First, he changes the method by which the Lady of Belmont is to be won, from its unsuitable form in *Il Pecorone* to that of the choice among three caskets; and secondly, he gives the Jew a daughter, whose elopement with a Christian forms an important part of the play.

3. The sources of these two variations must be looked for elsewhere. (i) The story of a choice among three vessels, respectively of gold, silver, and lead, with inscriptions somewhat similar to those in the play, and with a marriage depending on the right choice, occurs in the *Gesta Romanorum*, a Latin collection of mediæval tales, made in England probably about the thirteenth century. This collection was translated into English, became extremely popular, and was frequently printed in Shakespeare's time.¹ (ii) A story resembling in some points that of Jessica has been found in the *Tales of Masuccio di Salerno*, who flourished about 1470.

4. Scholars have proved that both the story of the Pound of Flesh, and the story of the Caskets, were widely popular, and that they occur in slightly different forms again and

¹ Any good library will possess the reprint of this collection, published by the Early English Text Society.

Sources of the main changes of incident.

again in European and in Oriental literature.¹ But it is certain, from accumulation of coincidences, that it was upon *Il Pecorone* and the *Gesta Romanorum* that Shakespeare drew for the plot of the *Merchant of Venice*. It has been conjectured, indeed, that Shakespeare did not use these sources at first hand, but that the two stories had already been combined to form a single play, and that it was this play that Shakespeare used as his material. This conjecture is founded on a reference which has been discovered in a book called *The Schoole of Abuse*, published in 1579, written by a certain Stephen Gosson, a student of Oxford. The book is an attack on the poets and playwrights of the time, and among the plays specially excepted from blame by the author is "*The Jew . . . shown at the Bull . . . representing the greediness of worldly chusers and bloody mindes of usurers*". This description is exceedingly short, but it is certainly apt enough if it refers to the combined tales of the Bond and the Caskets.

Two other possible references to this play of *The Jew* have been discovered: one in a letter of Edmund Spenser's, written about 1579, and another in a play called *The Three Ladies of London*, printed in 1584. These two references are, however, both slight and doubtful, and since not a line of the play itself survives, the conjecture that Shakespeare founded *The Merchant of Venice* upon it must remain conjecture only, though an extremely probable one. Even granting its truth, we only set *Il Pecorone* and the *Gesta Romanorum* one step further back in the pedigree of the plot, for that they are in the direct line of its ancestry cannot be doubted.

5. So far we have been dealing with the sources of the incidents only. Shakespeare owes nothing of his character-drawing to *Il Pecorone* or the *Gesta*. These possible proto-types of Shylock. old tales are tales of incident almost entirely, and the persons who take part in them are but slightly outlined, as slightly indeed as we find the characters in the *Arabian Nights*, the most famous of all collections of the kind.

¹ For details, refer to F. S. Boas, *Shakspeare and his Predecessors* (Murray, London, 1896), page 215, note.

(a) As to the character of Shylock, it has been supposed that its germ is to be found in Christopher Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta*, which was written about 1589 or 1590. It is agreed that Shakespeare owed much in a general way to Marlowe, and particularly in versification. It is quite certain that Shakespeare knew his *Jew of Malta*, an exceedingly popular play, repeatedly acted about the time when *The Merchant of Venice* was produced. Principal Ward, in his *History of English Dramatic Literature*, has collected a number of parallels between the two plays, to which may be added one that he does not notice. [See note on iii. 2. 239.]

But all the resemblances added together do not make the debt of Shakespeare in this case more than a very slight one. The stories of the two plays are completely different; and between the characters of Barabas of Malta and Shylock of Venice,—once granted that each is a Jew and a usurer, that each lives by the shore of the Mediterranean, and that each has an only daughter who is converted to Christianity,—there is only so far a parallel that they may be said never to meet. Charles Lamb has put the difference between them thus:

"Shylock, in the midst of his savage purpose, is a man. His motives, feelings, resentments, have something human in them. 'If you wrong us, shall we not revenge?' Barabas is a mere monster, brought in with a large painted nose to please the rabble. He kills in sport, poisons whole nunneries, invents infernal machines. He is just such exhibition as, a century or two earlier, might have been played before the Londoners by the Royal Command, when a general pillage and massacre of the Hebrews had been resolved on by the Cabinet."

(b) One other source of possible suggestion to Shakespeare must be mentioned. It had long been supposed that, except by travelling, Shakespeare could not have had any personal knowledge of Jews, since they had been banished from England in 1290, and did not receive formal permission to return until the time of

Dr. Roderigo
Lopez.

the Commonwealth. It has been proved, however, by Mr. S. L. Lee,¹ that Jews did find their way into England in Tudor times, and that in particular one named Lopez was for some twenty years, towards the latter end of the sixteenth century, a prominent figure in London and at Court. He was one of the first physicians of his day, and had the Earl of Leicester and, later, the Queen among his patients. In 1594 he was hanged at Tyburn on the charge of conspiring with the King of Spain to poison, first, a Portuguese pretender named *Antonio*, and secondly—as was alleged—Queen Elizabeth herself. The history of Dr. Lopez must have been well known to Shakespeare, and may possibly have suggested other points besides the name of his enemy, Antonio.

6. To recapitulate: the main outline of the incidents of the play is taken from one of Ser Giovanni's tales in *Il Pecorone*, with two main changes, a substitution and an addition. The substitution occurs in the nature of the test by which the Lady of Belmont was to be won: this, namely the choice among three caskets, Shakespeare took from the *Gesta Romanorum*. The addition, the story of the Jew's daughter and her elopement, may be paralleled in a few points from a story of Massuccio di Salerno.

Lastly, while it is certain that in drawing the figure of Shylock, Shakespeare had in his mind—if only by way of contrast—Marlowe's *Barabas*, it is also established that he may very well have had personal, first-hand acquaintance with Jews in his own country.

3. CONSTRUCTION OF THE PLOT.

Content as Shakespeare was to take the main outline of his story from romances already existing, he was careful so to shape it in detail that it should work in with the temper and the motives of living men and women.

With him, a story was

“just a stuff

To try the soul's strength on, educe the man”.

¹ In *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Feb., 1880.

But in pitting his heroes and heroines against circumstance, he brought circumstance into relation with them and their surroundings. Improbable, for example, as a string of bare incidents, the story of the Pound of Flesh becomes manifestly true in relation to Shylock and Antonio. In the play, the bond appears no longer as a chance contract between strangers, but as a plan for revenge imposed by one bitter enemy on another in the guise of a ‘merry sport’, which, in the nature of the case, will never come to serious execution. The Christian merchant, fresh from denouncing interest, cannot draw back from a bond in which—to please him—no mention of interest is made. Moreover, he had only just pledged ‘his purse, his person, his extremest means’ to his dearest friend to help him to win the heroine of the caskets; generosity, therefore, will not allow him to hesitate. Finally, the Jew's ferocity in afterwards exacting forfeit is made comprehensible by the loss of his daughter and his ducats. With such wonderful skill has this part of the story been handled, that readers are finally almost divided in sympathy between Antonio and his would-be murderer.

The riddle of the caskets is similarly humanized. It becomes part of a scheme designed by a dying father for the protection of an only child, a girl of incomparable beauty, heiress to great riches. So formidable, therefore, are the conditions imposed, that all but the most earnest suitors are repelled from even an attempt at the enterprise (i. 2. 107), and, over and above the father's inspired assurance (i. 2. 26) that it would never be solved by anyone who did not ‘rightly love’, the lottery constitutes a real test of insight and devotion.

The stories of the Bond and the Caskets, thus transformed, are most artfully interwoven throughout (compare i. 2. 100; ii. 8. 39; ii. 9. 100), and at one point with notable skill. In *Il Pecorone*, as mentioned above, the successful suitor forgets his merchant friend for some time after marriage; but Shakespeare makes the bad news from Venice arrive before the wedding, so that the Trial of

Modifications of
the stories of the
Bond,

And of the Cas-
kets.

Blending of these
two stories.

the Caskets is, as it were, carried on into the Trial of the Bond, and Bassanio and Portia are not fully man and wife until after they have rescued the friend whose devotion had made their union possible.

Shakespeare's introduction into the play of yet a third story,—the Elopement of the Miser's Daughter,—far from unduly complicating the plot, serves to knit together more closely its different events and characters. Shylock is thereby brought into fresh relations with Antonio and his friends. Even Launcelot the clown is no unimportant link in the action. As servant first to the Jew and then to Bassanio, as go-between for Lorenzo and Jessica, and finally by his appearance at Belmont, he passes from one group to another, and makes a fantastic cross-thread in the embroidery of the plot. So dependent are the three stories upon one another—from the first scene, in which they are all set going, to the last, in which they are all combined and concluded—that if Antonio had not signed the bond, Bassanio could not have gone a-wooing; if Bassanio had not won Portia, there would have been no one to save Antonio; if Lorenzo and Jessica had not wandered to Belmont, Portia could not so readily have quitted Belmont for Venice.

It is by this vital interdependence of feelings and fortunes among the persons of the Drama, not by any abstract idea or moral common to all the parts, that 'unity of action' is secured by Shakespeare. A useful mechanical help to a study of the method by which Shakespeare interlaces the various threads of interest in the play, is to make a list of the scenes, entering opposite each the place where it is laid, and the persons who take part in it. Inspection of such a list will show that the action passes constantly from Belmont to Venice and back again. By these transitions the different 'intrigues' of the plot are kept moving, and, further, the effect of lapse of time is produced. It is one of the cleverest points in the stage-craft of the play, that the formidable period of three months is made to pass, and is felt to be passing,

The 'unity of action' in the Plot.

Management of time and place.

and yet we are nowhere conscious of a gap in the action.¹ This result is produced, as was pointed out by Professor Wilson in reference to *Othello*, by the use of 'double time'. That is to say, phrases implying short spaces of time in the future, are combined with others implying long spaces of time in the past, in such a way that both the continuity and the lapse of time are kept before our minds. Thus from i. 1. 70 and i. 3. 166 we should gather that Bassanio is to meet Lorenzo and Shylock again the same day; but from Jessica's words in iii. 2. 281 ff., and indeed from the very circumstances of the case, it is clear that a long interval must have elapsed between Acts i. and ii. So, again, from the last few lines of ii. 2. one would suppose that the farewell feast before Bassanio's departure is referred to, and that he starts that night; yet, a little while before (line 104), he had said "put these liveries to making", a matter requiring some time. No sooner has Bassanio started than the indications of the lapse of time become more frequent ("Let good Antonio look he keep his day", ii. 8. 25) ("Yet it lives there unchecked that", &c., iii. 1. 2), and from line 83 in the last-mentioned scene we learn that Tubal has been from Venice to Genoa and back since Jessica's flight; so that we are quite prepared to find that on the day of Bassanio's choice among the caskets he receives news that the bond is already forfeit. Yet, when we come to inquire minutely how and where Bassanio had spent the three months, we find—as we deserve—that the inquiry is futile. It is important, at the outset, to recognize that some lines of Shakespeare study lead to nothing; and to grasp the reason of their failure. They assume that the poet worked in a spirit which was, as a matter of fact, foreign to him. For the purposes of a play, matters of time and place are stage-properties of the same kind as paste-board crowns and paper trees. To make them 'real' in minute detail is to make everything round them false, just as to put a 'real' ring on the finger of a painted portrait destroys the truth of the picture.

¹ Vide Furness' brilliant note on 'Double Time', as used in this play and in the 'Agamemnon' of *Æschylus*. *Variorum Ed.*, 1892, pages 338 to 345.

Thus, to ask where Belmont precisely was, is to put a question which has no answer. Shakespeare has no further localized Belmont than to put it on the mainland of Italy, apparently on the sea-coast, at no great distance from Venice on one side and Padua on the other.

It is enough for a play that its indications of time and place should 'semlably cohere'. *The Merchant of Venice* will repay endless study as a piece of dramatic construction, not from any attempt which it contains at historical or geographical 'realism', nor from any symmetrical formula connecting its several parts, but from the perfect lucidity with which it sets forth how, at a crisis of their fate, a number of people became involved with one another, how they severally bore themselves, and how by the action of each the fortune of all was determined.

4. THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY.

Thoroughly to enjoy Shakespeare, it is necessary to become intimate with the people of his plays. Intimacy is impossible at second-hand; it must be gained for one's self and gradually, with Shakespeare's people as with others, by seeing what they do, by hearing them talk, and by noting what their neighbours feel and say about them; in a word, by living with them for a while. After the first reading of a play has given an understanding of its main outlines, it is well to take the chief persons separately, and to observe—

- (i) The precise share which so and so has in the action.
- (ii) Sayings of his which seem to tell most about him.
- (iii) Any noticeable opinions of him expressed by enemy or friend.

After bringing, in this fashion, our own notions to a point, we can enjoy the views of critics and commentators. A great delight waiting to reward anyone who will in this way make a careful analysis of *The Merchant of Venice*, is the reading of Mrs. Jameson's study of 'Portia' in her *Characteristics of Women*, and of Hazlitt's view of 'Shylock' in his *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*.

The following notes on the various characters of the play are not intended to supersede the student's own analysis, but to be read after such an analysis has been made, for the purpose of comparison. Where a blank has been left between brackets, the student is meant to fill in the reference to act, scene, and line, for himself.

I. (a) SHYLOCK was 'old' (iv. i. 168) at the time of the events which made him famous. We know a good deal of his history. He had wandered, in the way of his ^{His history and} trade, as far north as Frankfort [], ^{position in Venice.} but settled at Venice, whose laws, liberal as times went towards aliens, enabled him to follow his business securely. He had only one child, a daughter, called Jessica; his wife, Leah, must have died soon after the child's birth, for, while Shylock remembered her fondly, and treasured a ring she had given him when he was a bachelor [], Jessica never speaks in a way that suggests she had known her mother. Jessica kept house for her father with the help of a single servant, in a style—forced on her by Shylock—of the severest simplicity.

By trade he was a 'usurer', that is, he lent money out at interest. He had acquired great wealth, partly by knowledge of his business and of the commercial position of those with whom he dealt (i. 3), partly—as his enemies asserted—by taking advantage of his clients' weaknesses and mercilessly 'selling them up' if they were unpunctual in payment (iii. 3. 22). Devoted as he was to money-making, his race and his religion occupied quite as much of his thoughts. The Jews in Shakespeare's Venice were allowed a synagogue to worship in []; they were obliged to wear a distinctive dress, and, no doubt, lived (both by their own choice and by compulsion) in a quarter of their own. They were granted unusual privileges before the law: the Duke himself went in pursuit of Lorenzo and Jessica at Shylock's bidding [], and it was again the Duke in full court who would not wrest the law against the foreigner. But in matters of ordinary intercourse they had to endure, even at the hands of the noblest among the Christians, the bitterest

contempt and most intolerable personal insult []. To this Shylock¹ replied with a hatred all the fiercer for being concealed, and with an exclusiveness all the haughtier that he found himself despised by men whom he regarded as his inferiors in religion and in race. Shylock regarded his nation as 'sacred' [], and greatly esteemed his tribe; in imagination he was constantly back in Palestine, with the folk of his sacred Scriptures. He quotes Jacob, whose 'wise mother' [] gave him his position among the patriarchs, as an example of heaven-prospered trading; his servant he thinks of as the offspring of Hagar; pork reminds him of the conjuring of the prophet of Nazareth; in his enemy he sees a resemblance to the 'publicans' who had vexed the souls of his countrymen sixteen centuries before; his very oaths ("by Jacob's staff", "by our holy Sabbath", "cursed be my tribe") speak of his people and his faith.

(b) How ought we to feel towards Shylock? The vast difference of opinion on the point is reflected in the diverse interpretations of the character which have held the stage. In the last century Macklin laid stress upon his 'snarling malignity', and presented a frightful figure of devilish cunning and hatred—a combination of mere miser and murderer—which is described as follows by a spectator. "The first words which he utters are spoken slowly and deliberately: 'Three thousand ducats'. The *th* and *s* twice occurring, and the last *s* after the *t* have a lickerish sound from Macklin's lips, as if he were tasting the ducats and all that they can buy; this speech creates for the man, upon his first appearance, a prepossession which is sustained throughout. Three such words, thus spoken, and at the very first, reveal a whole character. In the scene in which he first misses his daughter he appears hatless, with hair all flying, some of it standing up straight, a hand's-breadth high, just as if it had been lifted

¹ A poem of Browning's is often a most helpful commentary to a play of Shakespeare's. To understand Shylock better, read Browning's *Holy Cross Day*, and *Filippo Balducci*.

up by a breeze from the gallows. Both hands are doubled up, and his gestures are quick and convulsive. To see a man thus moved, who had been hitherto a calm determined villain, is fearful."¹

On the other hand, in this century, Kean and Irving have followed out that view of his character which is summed up in Hazlitt's fine phrase: "He seems the depositary of the vengeance of his race". This view, extended so far as to make Shylock a martyr, has been wonderfully expressed by Heine (a Jew himself) in a superb criticism of the play, translated on pages 449-452 of Furness' *Variorum Edition*. A few sentences from it are given here. (Heine is visiting Venice.) "I looked round everywhere on the Rialto to see if I could find Shylock. I found him nowhere on the Rialto, and I determined to seek my old acquaintance in the synagogue. The Jews were just then celebrating their Day of Atonement, and they stood enveloped in their white talars, with uncanny motions of the head, looking almost like an assemblage of ghosts. There the poor Jews had stood, fasting and praying from earliest morning; since the evening before, they had taken neither food nor drink. Although I looked all round the synagogue, I nowhere discovered the face of Shylock. But towards evening, when, according to the Jewish faith, the gates of heaven are shut, and no prayer can then obtain admittance, I heard a voice, with a ripple of tears that were never wept by eyes. It was a sob that could come only from a breast that held in it all the martyrdom which, for eighteen centuries, had been borne by a whole tortured people. It was the death-rattle of a soul sinking down dead-tired at heaven's gates. And I seemed to know the voice, and I felt that I had heard it long ago, when in utter despair it moaned out, then as now, 'Jessica, my girl!'"

(c) Thus actors and critics differ as to the proportion in which hatred and pity and fear should be blended in our feelings towards Shylock. One error we must guard against from the first, that, namely, of supposing that Shakespeare meant

¹ Quoted, p. 374 of Furness' *Variorum Edition*, from a letter written in 1775 by Lichtenberg, a German visitor to England.

either to attack or to defend the Jews as a nation in the person of Shylock. Writing 'with a purpose'¹, in this narrow sense, is not in his spirit. A Jew came into the story, and Shakespeare has taken care that we should understand both him and those with whom he dealt. With modern Englishmen, among whom Jews take a foremost place for public spirit and generosity, the difficulty is not so much to be fair to Shylock as to conceive the feelings with which Antonio regarded him.

(d) To do so we must follow carefully the indications which Shakespeare gives us. Shylock was hated for four main reasons—his pride of race, his religious opinions, his mean and shabby habit of life, and his way of doing business.

1. As regards the first point, it is clear that the refusal of Jews in the middle ages to eat and drink with Christians, and their abhorrence of intermarriage with them, were not only bitterly resented, but further laid Jews open to horrible suspicions. The penalty for seclusion of life is unrefuted calumny.² The ghastly legend of St. Hugh of Lincoln was spread in various forms all over Europe, and in some parts is still believed. And even where the hatred for a people who kept so strictly apart did not take so hideous a shape, it appears in the not unnatural belief that Jews were an unkind³ and uncharitable race, who did not consider themselves bound by the same obligations of honour and good feeling towards Gentiles as towards one another. (Compare what Launce says in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*: "Go with me to the alehouse, if not thou art an Hebrew, a Jew . . . because thou hast not so much charity in thee as to go to the ale with a Christian"—with *The Merchant of Venice*, i. 3. 32, and ii. 5. 14.)

2. A very similar opinion arose in matters of religion.

¹ Mr. F. S. Boas' *Shakespeare and his Predecessors*, p. 226, in a most interesting study of Shylock, speaks of the speech in iii. 1. 44 as a 'majestic vindication of Judaism'. Should not this be 'of human nature'?

² Compare the stories told of the retirement of Tiberius, Frederick the Great, and our own William III.

³ This belief appears as early as Juvenal, cf. *Sat.* xiv. 103, 104.

In days when the story of the New Testament was chiefly known to people through miracle plays, the fact that St. Paul and St. John, and the founder of Christianity himself, had been Jews, became forgotten or overlooked. Even to those who could and did read their Bibles, the language of the Fourth Gospel, in which 'the Jews' are constantly mentioned in opposition to Christ (see St. John v. 15; vi. 41, etc.) might easily be misunderstood. Continual dwelling on the story of the crucifixion, without reference to the rest of Jewish history, led to a belief that the Jews were an exceptionally unfeeling and cruel race,¹ and their supposed hardness of heart passed into a proverb. (Compare Launce again in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, act ii. sc. 3, l. 12: "A Jew would have wept to have seen our parting"; and *Richard II.*, act ii. 1. 55, "Stubborn Jewry".) So that Antonio looks upon a piece of seeming kindness on Shylock's part as a sign that he may yet 'turn Christian' []. Conversely, the Jewish refusal of Christianity was regarded not as intellectual negation, but as a piece of the stiff-necked perversity with which their own prophets had charged them. It must also be remembered that religious intolerance was, in "the ages of conflict", almost universal, and was displayed by the Jews themselves on a great scale during that short period of their history when they had the power of the sword over aliens in race and religion.² Some of the beliefs and rites of mediæval Christianity appeared to Jews to be idolatrous and blasphemous, and towards them it was lawful and right in their eyes to feel a 'lodged hate' and 'a loathing'. (See page 411 of *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, by I. Abrahams; Macmillan, 1896.)

3. The widespread belief that Jews were miserly and squalid

¹ Is it not possible to see traces of this in the description of Shylock's conduct at the trial? Compare "I stand here for law" with "The Jews answered him, We have a law, and by our law he ought to die" (St. John xix. 7); and again, "My deeds upon my head" with "His blood be on us and on our children" (St. Matthew xxvii. 25); and again, "Would any of the stock of *Barrabas* had been her husband, rather than a Christian!"

² In this respect Shylock's spirit is far more truly representative than the 'undenominationalism' of Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*.

in their mode of life arose, no doubt, mainly from the fact that for many centuries it was as much as their lives were worth to give signs of superfluous wealth.

But this unlovely hardness of life was only assumed by compulsion. In reality, Jews have always been fond of a rich and even luxurious style of living. (See *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, chapters viii. and xvi.)

4. We cannot understand this ground of hatred against Shylock without remembering that both Jews and Christians were forbidden by their ecclesiastical law to take interest on money from those of their own faith. But Jews might take it from 'the stranger' (Deut. xxiii. 20), and so it came about that when commerce increased and loans began to be an essential part of its machinery, Jews naturally assumed the position of money-lenders. This consequence was hastened by the very persecutions to which they were subject. The cruel laws which in many places forbade their plying any trade or profession recognized among Christians (see chaps. xi. and xii. of Abrahams' *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*) drove them to usury. The necessity for having their property in such a shape that it could be easily 'lifted' in case of expulsion or attack, forced them to accumulate wealth in the form of gold and precious stones. Practice quickly made them experts at the financier's trade, and from their very position as aliens they were able to make that distinction between monetary and amicable relations without which extended commerce, as we know it now, is impossible. But the necessity for the trade did not make it popular, and the laws against usurers, by increasing the lender's risk, kept up the rate of interest, and aggravated the evil.

Shylock was thus one of a body who in religion and in society kept themselves aloof in repulsive isolation, who not only declined but abhorred the religious beliefs of their neighbours, and who, while taught by persecution not to show signs of wealth, were at the same time accumulating precious metals, and obtaining a great hold over individual Christians by their system of loans.

(e) In all this we see abundant explanation of such a feeling as is expressed in its most extravagant form in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*. The humanity with which Shakespeare draws the portraiture of Shylock is therefore all the more striking. The Jew's hatred for Antonio is not represented as mere 'motiveless malignity', but as the result of injured patriotism, of commercial jealousy [], and of resentment aroused by repeated personal insults.

He speaks with tenderness of a relic of his dead wife. It is not hinted that he used any further unkindness towards his daughter and his servant than to make their life extremely bleak and dull; to Jessica his tone is not harsh, and he trusts her—though with some misgivings—with all his keys. His fury over her robbery and desertion of him for the sake of a Christian lover is very comprehensible, and the frightful savagery with which it is expressed cannot fairly be taken literally, any more than Bassanio's willingness to offer Portia in sacrifice to save Antonio. Shylock's last reference to Jessica shows fatherly feeling [], and in Launcelot he recognizes kindness with appreciation [].

His great appeal to human nature [] is irresistible, though he fails to see its application to his own religious and racial exclusiveness.

(f) In summary, Shylock is a miser, but a miser possessing great strength of resolution and high powers of intellect. His main fault is not a want of feeling, but a misapplication of it. So far is he from being an insensible, flinty character, that he rather appears excessively passionate and irritable. His cruelty is not that of a cold heart, but the more terrible cruelty of perverted and outraged sensitiveness. It comes nearer the rage of Othello than the malice of Iago. And even at his worst, when every other feeling has been absorbed in the one longing to feel his knife in his enemy's heart, even then the concentration of his purpose, the clear force of his understanding, make him a figure terrible indeed, but not despicable. There wanted but another stroke to raise him to the dignity of possessing

"The unconquerable will
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield,
And what is else not to be overcome".

(g) But his spirit bends at last, and the tale ends without a tragedy. To think of his fate as hopelessly miserable is to force modern notions into our reading. We must remember that to Shakespeare's audiences, conversion, even though compulsory, would mean the possibility of salvation for Shylock. Since adherence to Judaism was thought to rest not on spiritual conviction but on obstinate temper, Shylock's becoming a Christian would be regarded as a recovery from sullenness. The remission of half his goods would appear generous. The absorption of so formidable an alien into the body of the community, the marriage of his daughter to a Venetian, and the ultimate diffusion of his wealth among those willing to make a cheerful use of it, would—in those days—seem the happiest solution possible of the difficulties and dangers raised by his existence.

After a study of Shylock and Jessica, it is interesting to go back to *Ivanhoe*, and to renew one's recollections of Isaac of York and Rebecca. In what points is the novelist's portraiture weaker than the poet's?

2. PORTIA, at the opening of the story, appears without father or mother, or indeed any relative nearer than her cousin [], the famous jurisconsult of Padua, Doctor Bellario. Of her mother¹ we hear not a word; it seems she must have died in Portia's infancy. Her father, a wealthy Italian noble, Lord of Belmont, had educated his only child with the utmost care, to speak Latin and French as well as Italian [], to understand law, and to manage the affairs of a great property. He lived long enough (i. 2. 97) to see her of a marriageable age, and to notice the passionate admiration roused in men of every kind by her high spirit, brilliant wit, and 'beauty

¹ Many of Shakespeare's heroines are motherless:—Isabella, Beatrice, Rosalind, Imogen, Miranda, Cordelia, Viola, Helena, Ophelia. He was interested, perhaps, rather in the relation of mother to *son*, and of father to *daughter*. Or he felt that—had their mothers been there—his maidens could never have fallen into so many perils and troubles.

like the sun', placed as these qualities were, in circumstances hardly less romantic and splendid than those of a princess of fairyland. But, before a marriage could be arranged, he was seized with mortal sickness. On his deathbed [] he willed that his daughter's hand should—under restriction severe enough to keep away mere adventurers—be won by a 'lottery'. This 'lottery', in so far as it was matter of chance, would be—so it was thought in those days—under the ruling of Providence, and so far as it was matter of choice, would be such as to test the insight and sincerity of her lovers.

Thus was Portia, hardly yet out of her girlhood, left heiress of Belmont. The fame of her person and character, her wealth, and the hazard by which she was to be won, drew suitors from many lands. She watched them come with amusement, and with keenest penetration, for she knew the points of a man. But she was loyal to her father's will, and to the oath (iii. 2. 11) which she had taken to fulfil it. Her loyalty was proof even against her own feeling that she had already seen (i. 2. 100), in a young Venetian, a scholar and a soldier, of gentle blood but no estate, the man to whom she could give the whole of herself.

This decisive sense of honour was blended in Portia with a trained intelligence and a sense of humour. It is this union of qualities which marks her action throughout. It enables her to see quite straight at moments of crisis, as when Antonio's letter comes on the eve of her marriage. By virtue of it she discerns in an instant a *cul-de-sac* from a path, and loses no time by trying impracticable ways. Her wit is equal to a thousand shifts, but her practised reason and her sound feeling show her the only right one. The end once in view, she adjusts the means to it, and sets all in motion with a quickness and a swing and a lightness of touch that stamp her an artist in action. Her alacrity is beforehand with danger, and she beats difficulty by power of combination. To her husband she gives herself with a generous completeness which, in one so clear-sighted, makes her words after Bassanio's choice the most moving thing of the kind in

Her loyalty to her father's will.
Clearness in thought and in action.

literature. Her solution of the problem of the bond, by a bold reduction to the absurd, is of a piece with that perfect *clearness* of character which appears in Portia sometimes as wit and grace, sometimes as courage, sometimes as penetrating insight.

This extreme *directness* in thought and action gives to Portia an almost formidable air, not diminished by the trained skill with which she approaches the discussion of an abstract principle. In these respects she is unlike many others of Shakespeare's women. It needs all her wisdom to keep her wit within bounds, and she is sometimes too unmerciful to affectation (whether in a Prince of Arragon or in one of her own pages) to be perfectly courteous. But the warmth and openness of her heart, and an extreme generosity of feeling, kindle her amazing cleverness into tact, and make her great gifts available for the ordinary offices of

life. Again and again she relieves embarrassment and meets a difficult moment with a grace so perfect as to show, besides dexterity, true goodness of nature (*e.g.* in her words to the Prince of Morocco when he makes apology for his complexion; or to Bassanio when, by a stinging pun, she draws attention from her own generosity in despatching him at once to the help of Antonio). Thus, although she could preach eloquently (iv. i. 178, ff.), and argue most forcibly, she knows that sermons and arguments are comparatively futile (i. 2. 14). Though from many indications we see she was sincerely religious, she would not be content with *only* praying when she could work as well (compare v. i. 31, with iii. 4. 30 to the end of the scene). And her delightful sense of humour saves her from any touch of self-conceit. Her spirit of comradeship and friendliness keeps her always human and kindly.

No analysis can explain the charm and power of a character like Portia's. We can perhaps best realize our feeling about her by the assurance we have that she would do nobly always, but that the full greatness of her qualities could only be shown in some crisis needing prompt and courageous

Portia is formidable;

but her friendliness saves her from pedantry.

Confidence roused by her high and noble spirit.

action. She had, indeed, along with all womanly virtues, a larger share than most women have of some qualities commonly considered masculine, which ought perhaps to be regarded as the common property of women and men:—the power to see all round a point of abstract theory, and the will to take and keep a direct line in practice. We feel certain that were Bassanio called away to the wars, and Belmont besieged by his enemy, Portia could with undismayed cheerfulness hold his house for him, command his men, keep them in heart with jests more humorous than Launcelot's, see that her children were in due order and attentive to their studies, and yet, all the while, have time to discomfit her domestic chaplain in quiet hours of chess and theology.

3. BASSANIO.—Bassanio's character is to be judged less from what he himself says or does than from the reflected picture which we get of him in the words and actions of other people. The two main points we know about him are that he is Antonio's chosen friend and Portia's chosen lover. Antonio—who knew all Venice—only loves the world for Bassanio's sake (ii. 8. 50), and for him Portia, courted by all nations and languages, would be trebled twenty times herself (iii. 2. 154). Nerissa lets us know that he is a scholar and a soldier, and that "he, of all the men that ever my foolish eyes looked upon, was the best deserving a fair lady". Gratiano 'must' travel with him, even at the cost of a more subdued behaviour. And Launcelot Gobbo, who was too lively a lad not to be an excellent judge of a man when he saw one, thinks his fortune is made when he gets into his service, poor though Bassanio was. When he appears in company, other folks pay him a kind of deference which is all the more striking that it seems unconscious, and has no possible motive but to express natural feeling. Thus even by his familiar friends he is addressed as 'My Lord Bassanio', 'Signior Bassanio'. He becomes, without effort, the centre of any group in which he finds himself. The secret of his power is also the explanation of the comparatively small show which his actual words

His force of character.

and deeds make in a representation of the play—for of all qualities his are the least imitable by an actor. These qualities are simplicity, directness, and courage, combined with a perfect ease and kindliness of bearing and manner. Heavily in debt, he takes neither of the two easy alternatives for the poor man,—an impracticable stiffness, or a conscious humility, but borrows from his rich friend and woos his wealthy mistress with such a natural and manly frankness as endears him further to them both. The enigma of the three caskets he solves because he ‘rightly loves’, and will hazard all to win. He has the gift, by nature and breeding, of doing and saying the right thing at the right time, the tact that is founded upon good sense and a kind heart.

Masterfulness. There is a fund of quiet masterfulness in his manner of giving orders: “You may do so; but let it be so hastened that supper be ready at the farthest by five of the clock. See these letters delivered; put the liveries to making, and desire Gratiano to come anon to my lodging” (ii. 2. 104). With what fine discretion he guides his words in checking the excitable Gratiano! How plainly his firmer will and clearer sense come out in contrast with that volatile but otherwise delightful character! The effect of the splendid simplicity of his qualities is heightened by the external magnificence of the rivals to whom he is preferred. Some have

His truth and strength of nature give him authority.

questioned Portia’s insight, and maintained that she ‘threw herself away’ on Bassanio. But indeed she, like the rest of the world, might have said to him much what Kent said to Lear, “You have that in your countenance which I would fain call master”. “What’s that?” “Authority.” It is just this ‘authority’, or unconscious control, which, in a man, is the supreme quality. Oliver Wendell Holmes says, in speaking of a similar choice: “It takes a very *true* man to be a fitting companion for a woman of genius, but not a very great one. I am not sure that she will not embroider her ideal better on a plain ground than on one with a brilliant pattern already worked in its texture. But as the very essence of genius is truthfulness, contact with realities (which are always ideas

behind shows of form or language), nothing is so contemptible as falsehood and pretence in its eyes. Now, ^{Portia’s choice of Bassanio.} it is not easy to find a perfectly true woman, and it is very hard to find a perfectly true man. And a woman of genius, who has the sagacity to choose such a one as her companion, shows more of the divine gift in so doing than in her finest talk or her most brilliant work of letters or of art” (from chapter xii. of *The Professor at the Breakfast-table*).

4. ANTONIO was one of the chief men of that great Mediterranean city, ‘whose merchants were princes, whose traffickers were the honourable of the earth’. ^{The spirit of Antonio’s trading.} Now and again in the course of the play, an odd term or phrase brings back the very look and colour of that old Venetian trading: ‘argosies’ that ‘richly come to harbour suddenly’, ‘pirates’ and ‘land-thieves’, ‘many a purchased slave’, ‘silks’ and ‘spices’, a ‘turquoise’ and a ‘diamond’ that ‘cost two thousand ducats’, ‘a beauteous scarf veiling an Indian beauty’, ‘parrots’ of ‘commendable discourse’, and ‘a wilderness of monkeys’. This last has a touch as of Sinbad himself in it, and, throughout, the commerce is not confined or sedentary; there is a whole volume of ‘voyages’ in the very names of the places from which Antonio’s tall ships carry their rich lading—

“From Tripolis, from Mexico, and England,
From Lisbon, Barbary, and India”.

The brisk movement of the piece appears in the medley of nations that find their way to Belmont—Neapolitan, Frenchman, Saxon, Spaniard, Englishman, and Moor. It has been objected to Bassanio that he makes love in the spirit of a trader, but it would be less misleading to say that Antonio trades in the spirit of a lover, like Jason and his Argonauts.

Magnanimity, indeed, is the inmost quality of the ‘royal’ merchant. He lives to do great kindnesses greatly,

"the kindest man,
The best condition'd and unwearied spirit
In doing courtesies, and one in whom
The ancient Roman honour more appears
Than any that draws breath in Italy" [].

He associates by preference, not with merchants, but with a soldier and a scholar like Bassanio, and his friends Lorenzo and Gratiano. He is well known at court. The Duke and 'the magnificoes of greatest port' [] are interested in his welfare. Consistently with this, he seems not to be greatly concerned with his merchandise except as the material of his bounty; he spends large sums in relieving poor debtors from difficulty (iii. 3. 23); and he plainly says no more than the truth in telling Bassanio that to question the heartiness of his affection would hurt him more than to waste the whole of his fortune [].

His spirit is serious and grave, subject to fits of melancholy, full of sensibility and tenderness. He is content to enjoy life through his friend (ii. 8. 50). He 'embraces heaviness, and tears come readily to his eyes. He can describe him as 'fawning' []. It is characteristic of him that he is sincerely resigned at the near prospect of dying; constitutional diffidence, perhaps physical weakness, make him feel that he is 'a tainted wether of the flock, meetest for death', one of 'the weakest kind of fruit' []. He rather discourages the attempts of his friends to save him (iii. 3. 19; iv. 1. 77), and is satisfied to think that Bassanio will live still and write his epitaph. It is in keeping with his quiet temperament that he should put aside, almost angrily, the notion of his being in love (i. 1. 46). He is a bachelor 'predestinate', and when we lose sight of him at Belmont it is with a feeling that his main interest for the future will be the duties of a godfather.

It shocks us to find Antonio treating Shylock with gross personal discourtesy. Nothing indeed could have expressed so vividly the feeling of the time towards a Jewish usurer, as insult and violence from the stately and amiable Antonio.

The historical explanation of this feeling is suggested elsewhere.¹

5. THE MINOR CHARACTERS.—1. Of the other persons of the play, *Jessica* and *Lorenzo* influence the story most. Jessica we are to think of as scarcely more than a child. Her mother had apparently been dead some years. Bright, winsome, and vivacious, Jessica feels she is not her father's daughter [], at least in 'manners'. Fond of movement and company, she saw no one at home but such as Tubal and Chus, grim men of business with whom her father talked of his design on the life of Antonio []. Such a scheme must have terrified her as much as his dislike of masques and fifes repelled her []. Out of Shylock's house she passes as flightily and almost as unfeelingly as a fledged bird that leaves the nest []. It is not 'her way' to scruple or reflect. She takes jewels and ducats as lightly as she goes herself; she had never seen any pleasant use made of either, and, if she thought at all, she may have thought her father would not miss what he never wore nor spent. She talks very much too freely to Launcelot Gobbo. Her natural recklessness of temper appears from the style in which she makes the money fly at Genoa. (What kind of sitting was it, at which she spent fourscore ducats?) It is exquisitely characteristic in her to buy a monkey for a pet; no doubt Lorenzo took care it was left behind in Genoa. On her first arrival at Belmont she becomes amusingly 'proper' and quiet. Portia was a revelation to her, and in her presence, as at the sound of sweet music, Jessica's 'spirits are attentive' and she cannot be 'merry'. Her words of enthusiastic praise to Lorenzo [] are the least inadequate that have ever been uttered about 'my Lord Bassanio's wife'. They show that she really is susceptible to strong feeling when she meets what is superlatively good. Possibly Lorenzo's confidence that she is 'true' as well as 'fair and wise' [] may, after all, be realized, if circumstances favour her.

¹ See page xx.

Her husband, though possessed of deeper feelings and of much more power of thought than Jessica, yet looks on life from much the same point of view. He is intensely alive to delight, whether in natural beauty or in music. But his taste is so sound that, even by moonlight, his is a 'waking bliss', full of 'sober certainty' as well as of the richest poetic rapture. Twice, in our short acquaintance with him, his sense of humour saves sentiment from extravagance or unreality (iii. 5. 58; v. I. 15). He is, as he admits, 'unthrift', and we may conjecture with much probability that his intimacy with Jessica began in visits to Shylock for severely business purposes. But the future of the pair in matters of finance is assured by the fact that they are to have a kind and careful trustee in the person of the Merchant of Venice himself.

2. Of the rest, *Gratiano* is talkative and gregarious to a fault, but he is excellent company and says some admirable things. There is, as Hazlitt says, a whole volume of philosophy in his sermon against silence [], and his words in ii. 6. 8 ff show imagination. A man of his qualities may be tiresome in a small party, but is invaluable in a company of a dozen or more, where his loquacity can be 'absorbed'. His wife will be the best possible match for him. Their conversation may indeed 'overlap' somewhat, for Nerissa has her own reflections on life and can 'pronounce them well' and 'in good sentences'. But they are both too good-natured for the house ever to be seriously 'unquiet' (iv. 1. 288).

3. On the Princes of Morocco and Arragon, see notes to the scenes in which they appear.

4. *Launcelot Gobbo* is the 'wag' of the piece. His humour consists chiefly in a misuse of long words and in the liveliest animal spirits. There is less wit in what he says than is the case with any other of the prominent 'clowns' or 'fools' in Shakespeare. He is ready for any mischief, 'a huge feeder', and so averse to 'working between meals' that Shylock has to employ three similes in two lines ('snail', 'drone', and 'wild cat') to express the

extent of his laziness. But even Shylock recognises that he is 'kind enough', and Bassanio takes to him immediately [].

5. The characters of *Salarino* and *Salanio* are not further defined than that they are Venetian gentleman, friends of Antonio and Bassanio, and full of the ordinary feeling of the time against Jewish usurers.

5. DATE OF THE COMPOSITION OF THE PLAY.

The Merchant of Venice was first printed in 1600, when it appeared by itself in two quarto editions, one, called the First Quarto, published by James Roberts, the other, the Second Quarto, by Thomas Heyes. It had been in existence at least two years before, for on the 22nd of July, 1598, it was entered in the Stationers' Register by James Roberts under the name of 'a booke of the Marchaunt of Venyce or otherwise called the Jewe of Venice'. And, in the same year, 1598, appeared the *Palladis Tamia* or *Wit's Treasury*, by Francis Meres, who names the following comedies of Shakespeare: 'his Gentlemen of Verona, his Errors, his Love labors lost, his Love labours wonne, his Midsummers night dreame, and his Merchant of Venice'.

So far as 'external evidence' goes, therefore,¹ we can be certain that the play was not written later than the end of 1597.

All attempts to fix the date more precisely than this rest upon unsatisfactory evidence. For instance, much use has been made of the fact that in the account-book of Philip Henslowe, proprietor of the theatre where Shakespeare's fellow-actors were playing between 1594 and 1596, we find under the date 25th August, 1594, a reference to the performance of a new play, the *Venesyon Comodey*. But there is no sort of proof that this is Shakespeare's play. Again,

¹ For the different kinds of evidence obtainable in settling the date of one of Shakespeare's plays, see the admirable summary in chapter iv. of Professor Dowden's *Shakspeare Primer*.

some have seen a close resemblance between Shylock's argument in the trial scene as to the treatment of slaves and the argument of a Jew contained in Silvain's *Orator*, which was published in 1596. But the differences are at least as striking as the resemblance.

In manner, *The Merchant of Venice* is near akin to *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*. With these plays of Shakespeare's 'middle' period, it has much more in common than with the earlier comedies mentioned along with it by Francis Meres. This is particularly conspicuous in the free employment of prose, even in scenes of serious interest, and in the easy and varied rhythm of the verse. We ought not perhaps to make much of the fact that it is the *last* in Meres' list. But on general grounds it seems safe to believe that *The Merchant of Venice* was written only a short time before the *Palladis Tamia* appeared, and that 1597 is therefore its probable date.

THE MERCHANT
OF
VENICE