

LITERATURE

THE PROBLEM OF ANTONIO

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Introduction

Of few Shakespeare plays, I suppose, does our experience vary so widely as with *The merchant of Venice**. We come to it, at school, as a simple melodrama. We may retain this interpretation into adult life, intellectualized as allegory: Justice versus Mercy is a respectable codification of the issues generated in the Trial scene¹. Or we can view the play as a potentially subversive study of human relationships mediated by money. It is a difficult play². Though it is not normally discussed in the context of *All's well that ends well* and *Measure for measure* (its dating is secure to about 1596), *The merchant of Venice* seems to belong to the world of the problem comedies.

The problems start with the title. Shakespeare normally identifies the play's protagonist by name in his title. To identify by category may pose a covert question. What sort of "Gentlemen" are *The two gentlemen of Verona*? Who is the real "Shrew" in *The taming of the shrew* — Katherina or Bianca? Here, one asks: who is the Merchant? Surely, Antonio: the cast list makes it clear that Antonio is "a Merchant of Venice", and Shylock "the rich Jew."

* References are to the New Arden edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. J. R. Brown (1961).

¹ This line is developed by Nevill Coghill (1948).

² Of recent years, assessments have ranged between two poles represented by Frank Kermode and A. D. Moody:

"It [*The merchant of Venice*] begins with usury and corrupt love; it ends with harmony and perfect love."

Frank Kermode (1961 : 224).

The opposite judgment stresses the central irony of *The merchant of Venice*:

"...the play does not celebrate the Christian virtues so much as expose their absence."

A. D. Moody (1964 : 10).

But it is reasonable to regard Shylock as a merchant of sorts. The parallelism, and confrontation of the two is evident throughout the play³. And Portia enters the Court of Justice with the striking question: "Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?" (IV, 1, 170). Its symbolic implications aside, the question suggests that Antonio and Shylock are not dissimilarly dressed. "Jewish gaberdine" notwithstanding (gaberdine is a material, and not a style) the visual distinction between Antonio and Shylock cannot be so apparent as to make the question superfluous. Thus the Trial scene presents a dramatic ikon that expresses the latent question of the title: who is the merchant of Venice? And what sort of person is he?

Our experience of the title, I suggest, is analogous to our experience of the play. The "obvious" reading fails to still our questions. In the theatre, we may participate readily in the excitements of the Trial, and respond to the almost unflawed lyricism of the final Act. But afterwards: commentator after commentator has written of the unease that the play leaves with him. The alien Shylock and the alienated Antonio; the patness, almost glibness, of the accord between Portia and Nerissa, and their forsworn men, so different from the conclusion of *Love's labour's lost*; Jessica, who has done so well out of robbing her father, whispering with Lorenzo of Cressida, of Dido, of Medea... These are shadows over the moon of Belmont. I think that we must plainly recognize that ambivalence is central to our experience of *The merchant of Venice*. I do not seek to explain away this ambivalence, to find a solution that smoothes away the difficulties. What I propose is to investigate, and try to define, some of the areas of difficulty in this play. And they all relate, as I see it, to the central figure of Antonio.

I

There are several ways in which one can analyse the structure of *The merchant of Venice*. I should prefer to conceive of the play's formal principle as a series of mutations on "venture". The words actually employed are "venture", "hazard", "thrift", "usury", "fortune", "lottery", "advantage". They recur throughout the Bond and Casket stories, thus binding the drama together. Suppose, then, we conceive of the play as a conjugation of the verb to gain. All the relationships in the play (with, I think, the sole exception of Old Gobbo and Launcelot) dramatize this verb. The nominal activity of the dramatis personae is, in considerable part, love. But whereas *A midsummer night's dream* analysed the fragility of subjective passion, *The merchant of Veni-*

³ This view of the play's construction is very convincingly elaborated by Graham Midgley (1960).

ce demonstrates the interconnexions of love and money. Thus "venture", together with its associated terms, bears a double implication. It is employed at face value, as a straightforward operation in the world of commerce. So Solanio in the opening dialogue: "...had I such venture forth..." (I, 1, 15). And it is freely employed in the context of love, as a metaphor. The point is sufficiently established with Bassanio's "I have a mind presages me such thrift/That I should questionless be fortunate" (I, 1, 175-176) and Portia's "Before you hazard... Before you venture for me..." (III, 2, 2... 10). That is to say, the ambivalence that we detect as the central experience of the play applies to its core of language: "venture" is both a literal term and a figure for human activity.

Now clearly, the terms "venture", "usury", "lottery" and so on are not synonyms, though they are manifestly related. It is not possible, within the limits of a single paper, to analyse the separate implications of these terms for each of the dramatis personae. What I propose here is to examine, as they bear upon Antonio, the intellectual and psychological aspects of the term. In this way we may focus the leading issues of the play, and perhaps arrive at a more precise judgment of it.

The intellectual implications of "venture" (as a literal term) are touched on, if not properly investigated, in the confrontation between Antonio and Shylock in I, 3. All arguments, it is said, are arguments about words. So it is here. There are two words that Antonio and Shylock apply respectively to their professional activities: "venture" and "thrift". These are both, in today's parlance, hurrahwords. (Bassanio even applies "thrift" to his project of marrying Portia, I, 1, 175). In the clash between Antonio and Shylock, "venture" and "thrift" are opposed to "usury" and "interest". These are boo-words, and Shylock's muttered "my well-won thrift,/Which he calls interest" establishes the antithesis. (I, 3, 45-46). The real question, naturally, is how far these emotive labels describe the same process.

The opposition is between "venture" and "interest". "Venture" applies to overseas trading with an apparent element of risk attached. "Interest" is a fairly safe means of ensuring steady profits, at home. At first sight, the two modes of profit-making are quite different. That is the line that Antonio takes. He holds to it stoutly when Shylock probes him:

Me thoughts you said, you neither lend nor borrow
Upon advantage.

I do never use it.

affirms Antonio. (I, 3, 64-65). Shylock then proceeds to the spun-out tale of Jacob's dealings with his Uncle Laban's sheep. (It is curious that this passage is often cut in performance: the metaphoric association of money-making and breeding is intellectually at the centre of the play.) He concludes with

This was a way to thrive, and he was blest:
And thrift is blessing, if man steal it not.
(I, 3, 84 - 85)

The implicit question is: isn't this a legitimate (if sharp) means of profit-making? But Antonio will have none of Shylock's attempt to annex his (intellectual, and thus moral) territory.

This was a *venture* sir that Jacob serv'd for,
A thing not in his power to bring to pass,
But sway'd and fashion'd by the hand of heaven.
Was this inserted to make interest good?
Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?
(I, 3, 86 - 90)

This is clear enough. A "venture" is morally defensible because it has an uncertain outcome, i.e. requires the decision of Heaven: it is, as we should say, something of a gamble. Whereas interest-taking, apparently, is stigmatized by the relative certainty of its profits.

But the matter isn't as simple as that. Antonio's position, that a "venture" is respectable because of the risk attached, is extremely feeble. Moral distinctions are not established by gradation of risk. Antonio's line sounds oddly reminiscent of the tendency, which J. K. Galbraith noted, for the chairmen of vast corporations, each possessing more stability than half the members of the United Nations, to laud the virtues of enterprise and competition, i.e. risk. The aim of commerce, in the past no less than now, has always been to reduce if possible to zero the uncertainties attendant upon money-making. But we ought to examine Antonio's claim in the light of the associations an Elizabethan would bring to it. For him, "venture" would connote the spectacular State/private-enterprise syndicates of the late sixteenth century: the voyages, part-war, part-exploration, part-trade of Raleigh, Frobisher, Fenton, and many others. This form of investment enjoyed the highest repute. The Queen backed such voyages; the Court backed them; the great City magnates backed them. The risks were admittedly substantial. But if only one ship in three returned home, the investor might show a sound profit. If the enterprise were lucky, a number of fortunes would be made. Fortunes could be lost, certainly — though not by any one man, unless he were exceptionally rash — and nothing afterwards matched the profits of Drake's voyage of 1577-81. That, however, was only the most spectacular of the ventures. Far less ambitious alternatives existed. By 1596, the merchants of Bristol had for years been making very considerable, steady profits from the imports of luxury goods from the Indies — spice, hides, sugar. To stress the element of "risk" in that context — a context of which the *Merchant's* original audience would be fully aware — would be rather naif. Furthermore, the element of risk would be minimized by spreading one's investment over a number of

ventures: this is the principle Antonio alludes to in "My ventures are not in one bottom trusted" (I, 1, 42). Given normal ventures in Tripoli, Mexico, England, Lisbon, Barbary, and India (III, 2, 267-268) one would have to be quite astonishingly unlucky to lose the lot. This is what happens to Antonio in Act III: quite. But it is hardly a convincing way of winning an argument in Act I.

So far I have considered only the surface meaning of "venture". But underlying the literal, or manifest meaning, is the metaphoric. This undercurrent of debate is obliquely hinted at by Shylock, and perhaps understood by Antonio. "Venture" as a *personal*, not financial gain, is the aspect I now consider.

The prevailing custom, in the Venice of the play as in England, was that money was lent gratis to friends and upon interest to strangers. That is a way of putting it. Another is to say that by lending out money gratis, one makes the recipient one's friend. It was, no doubt, a congenial way of cementing amity between the high-born and those, however cultivated, in trade. Shylock does not speculate overtly on Antonio's motives, but he records the fact:

He lends out money gratis, and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.
(I, 3, 39 - 40)

And Antonio's opening words to Shylock confirm this: it is a claim to moral superiority too strident to be called "effortless":

Shylock, albeit I neither lend nor borrow
By taking nor by giving of excess,
Yet to supply the ripe wants of my friend,
I'll break a custom:
(I, 3, 56 - 59)

A velleity of language is worth noting here. Is there not the merest trace of emphasis in "my friend"? Would not "a friend" be, fractionally, the expected usage? Granted, that would create a possibly undesired collocation, "a friend... a custom." But would not "a friend...my custom" be the natural way of ordering the phrase? These things are slight, but a gossamer can show the way the wind blows. One is entitled to speculate on the basis of the friendship between Antonio and his "most noble kinsman", Bassanio (I, 1, 57). The answer need involve no excess of cynicism. Still, a habit of pressing interest-free loans on one's friends does nothing to diminish the attraction of even the most civilized and charming of men. One might call Bassanio's friendship the interest on Antonio's loan.

When, therefore, Antonio interrupts Shylock's tale of Jacob, he exposes himself to a killing riposte:

Antonio. And what of him? did he take interest?

Shylock. No, not take interest, not as you would say
Directly int'rest.

(I, 3, 70 - 72)

"Directly int'rest": that is the play, in two words. The surface sense is obvious; the underlying meaning is marked. Shylock, the voice of Reality in this play, states obliquely but unmistakably that there is no such thing as an interest-free loan.

But if this is so, what is left of Antonio's position? Antonio is an intelligent man. He is compelled, by a freak of circumstances, to argue with a man whom he loathes and despises. He has to find one solid, intellectually valid reason to endorse the propositions: I am better than you, I am different from you. And he can find nothing better than the claim that ventures are "sway'd and fashion'd by the hand of heaven". Yet some ventures are, overall, virtual certainties; and for that matter difficulties may arise in gathering in one's interest on a loan. What, then, is left? Only a weak gibe, "Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?" The short answer is: yes. Shylock fashions his answer more elegantly: "I cannot tell, I make it breed as fast". And that pregnant phrase in effect concludes the debate. For the impersonal will of money is to breed; and Antonio has failed to demonstrate the moral superiority of his breeding methods. Moreover, he fails to take up the covert charge that there are more ways than one of accepting interest. The intellectual weakness becomes the psychological weakness, vis-à-vis Shylock. Hence Antonio, called upon to refute the Jew, can only reject him: "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose" (I, 3, 93). That is abuse, not argument. The fact is that Shylock has refuted Antonio's claims to moral superiority; and Antonio, I think, knows it.

Hence Antonio — disturbed, shaken, somehow aware of the weaknesses in his position — is in no condition to penetrate Shylock's design. Rather, he blunders forward into the trap. The bond is dangerous as well as ludicrous; yet Antonio cannot retreat without loss of face. For Antonio's own arguments and attitudes bind him to that position. He wants the money; he will not borrow at high interest, "giving of excess"; he must accept at face value Shylock's wish for friendship, dramatized in a spectacularly frivolous bond; to reject the Jew's proposal is to show signs of fear, to rate such a creature as capable of danger; he wishes, perhaps, to make an imposing gesture before his friend, Bassanio. It is a complex of motives, and we have not exhausted them.

II

So far I have analysed the implications of "venture" as a literal and metaphoric term: and I have suggested that on neither count can Antonio feel satisfied with the strength of his position. The sense of weakness, of having

been *refuted* as a man, is in my judgment a part of the situation of passivity and defeat that he reveals in the Trial scene. But there is more yet to sift. Using profits from overseas trading to buy friends does not, in itself, account for Antonio's depression, which in any case opens the play. What sort of man is Antonio, and why does he do the things he does?

The psychology of Antonio we can now examine more closely. On the evidence of Act I, scene 3, his conduct is characterized by a sense that the Other caricatures one's self. It is very important to Antonio that he should be un-Jewish, that no possible parallel should exist between his and Shylock's vocations. Hence he over-compensates, insists on distinctions that he dare not pursue, and is much ruder to Shylock than Bassanio (who is socially superior to them both). For it is above all necessary to Antonio to stand well with Bassanio. His whole pattern of conduct towards Bassanio, flamboyantly generous throughout, hints at a secret terror lest any should perceive the remotest resemblance between *his* relationships and a Jew's. For that might impair his understanding with Bassanio.

And here we have to reflect on another aspect of Antonio's relationship with Bassanio. The *fact*, presented by the play, is that Antonio's emotional life is fixed upon Bassanio. That is all. Yet critics have been ready to argue that the secret of Antonio's depression is his repressed homosexual desire for Bassanio⁴. The term "homosexual", nevertheless, limits, prejudices, and distorts the situation. One is immediately condemned to a laboured parade of the term's implications: that some degree of homosexuality is present in all, that thwarted homosexuality (if present) is not necessarily the key to Antonio's melancholy, even that Renaissance conventions made extravagant male friendships fashionable, and so on. It hardly seems worth while to elaborate the unprovable. Sartre seems to me relevant here: a homosexual, he has remarked, is a man who practises homosexuality. Anyone who does not, is entitled to the dignity of his choice. My own view is that Antonio's behaviour is consistent with an interpretation of repressed homosexual desire for Bassanio. But we ought not to attach the label "homosexual" as though it mastered and explained the situation.

What, then, is my explanation for the conduct of Antonio? I return to the key word "venture". That word has several near-synonyms in *The merchant of Venice*. None of them is the simple word we should use, in modern English, to express the essential psychological quality of the action. That word is *gamble*.

No one, so far as I know, has concentrated on the implications of *gamble* in the context of this play, though critics often use the term in passing to describe Antonio's reckless acceptance of the bond. Yet gambling is a pro-

⁴ See, for example, Midgley (1960); and John Wain (1964).

foundly significant human activity, which today possesses an extensive literature on its operations and psychology. The classic work on the subject is Edmund Bergler's *The psychology of gambling*⁵, which I now draw upon to substantiate my view of Antonio.

Many people indulge in a mild, occasional gamble. But Bergler's study is concerned with neurotic gambling. His central thesis is that the neurotic gambler plays to lose. "The unconscious wish to lose becomes... an integral part of the gambler's inner motivations." (p. 24). The mechanism of this impulsion to lose he analyses into three stages:

1) "Unconscious provocation of a situation in which they are rejected and defeated."

2) "Attack, full of hatred and seemingly in self-defense, aimed at their self-constructed enemies".

3) "Self-pity, and the enjoyment of unconscious psychic masochistic pleasure". (p. 31).

Psychic masochism "denotes the unconscious craving for defeat, humiliation, rejection, pain". (p. 24). It constitutes the consummation of the process, and the objective of the gambler.

Now this, which is a generalized structure of the gambler's psychology, fits Antonio very well. Indeed, one could argue that the play's opening line, "In sooth I know not why I am so sad" reveals not so much depression as that ennui which, we are told, is the classic state of the gambler before a hazard. But let us consider the three phases of the mechanism.

1) "Unconscious provocation of a situation..." Antonio's fortunes are extraordinarily extended, even in Act I. Salerio and Solanio both feel he *ought* to be worrying more about his ventures. Shylock, the auditor of the play's persons and values, states that "his means are in supposition" (I, 3, 15). Yet Antonio acts as a bottomless reservoir of funds for his friend; he is as extravagant a backer as Bassanio a spender. Over and above his ambitious trading ventures (none of which is local, and therefore presumably safer) Antonio pledges his person. He seems to court risks: perhaps out of a desire to hazard all for Bassanio, and by losing his principal — his body — gain a supremacy in Bassanio's affections. The motivation is not incompatible with my earlier suggestions. We have to read the sudden decision "Content in faith, I'll seal to such a bond" (I, 3, 148) from our experience of life, in which such critical decisions are made by the mind for causes which the intellect cannot compass. Here I stress the darker side of the mind, the self-destructive urge which impels the gambler to place his all, not a part, at hazard. Certainly Antonio has a responsibility for this difficulties, that does not square with his later adoption of the role of passive tool of fate.

⁵ Edmund Bergler (1958).

2) The "attack, full of hatred... aimed at... self-constructed enemies" clearly applies to Antonio's relations with Shylock. What is marked about Antonio is the extraordinary virulence of his hatred of Shylock. Of course, all the Christians loathe him. Salerio and Solanio jeer at him, Launcelot leaves his service, Bassanio can scarcely contain his distaste for him. But at least the Venetians (prior to the Trial scene) treat Shylock as an intensely unlikeable human being. Antonio treats him like a dog. "You spet on me on Wednesday last. /You spurn'd me such a day, another time/ You call'd me dog." (I, 3, 122 - 124). Is there not something pathological in the intensity of hate which Antonio brings to his dealings with Shylock?

3) "Self-pity, and the enjoyment of unconscious psychic masochistic pleasure". This, I suggest, is consistent with Antonio's behaviour following the bond-agreement. There are two reported passages. First, Salerio describes the parting with Bassanio:

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

(II, 8, 36 - 49)

Is there not here a somewhat feminine quality, a quality expressed commonly in the words: "Don't put yourself out on *my* account"? Antonio's is the unmistakable voice of the woman currently eclipsed by the more dashing rival, and determined to extract the utmost moral gratification from the situation. This is even more apparent in the letter Antonio sends Bassanio:

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

(III, 2, 314 - 320)

Even the syntax is feminine: the fluctuating "If... notwithstanding... if..." The "if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter" is especially revealing. It is almost coquettish. But it is also the voice of one thriving on rejection: really, is there any likelihood that Bassanio would *not* come?

What Antonio wants, in brief, is to suffer and to have Bassanio witness it. He says as much. "Pray God Bassanio come/To see me pay his debt, and then I care not". (III, 3, 315 - 316) The Trial scene finds Antonio fully resigned to the extremity of his sentence: there is no life-force left in the man.

I do oppose
My patience to his fury, and am arm'd
To suffer with a quietness of spirit,
The very tyranny and rage of his.

(IV, 1, 10 - 13)

It all comes down to the extraordinarily interesting and revealing metaphor that Antonio chooses to express his situation:

I am a tainted wether of the flock,
Meetest for death, —

(IV, 1, 114 - 115)

A wether, though scarcely any critic appears conscious of this simple fact, is a castrated ram. Wethers cannot breed. Hence, with a sad irony, Antonio refers back to his earlier exchange with Shylock:

Antonio. Or is your gold and silver ewes and rams?
Shylock. I cannot tell, I make it breed as fast, —

(I, 3, 90 - 91)

Antonio's financial operations have proven sterile. But surely the human implications of "wether" go beyond the allusion to trading methods. "Wether" offers a metaphoric comment on Antonio's situation that can accommodate the "homosexual" theory (if one wishes), or suggest something quite different. I do not pursue the speculation; but Antonio's sense of failure, his readiness — even longing — for death, are marked. Both as a man, and as merchant-venturer, Antonio is sterile. The metaphor dominates him.

So far, then, Antonio's conduct fits the generalized structure of the neurotic gambler. But we can do better than this. Bergler distinguishes several sub-categories of gambler, one of which seems strikingly applicable to Antonio. It is the passive-feminine male gambler. Bergler describes the type thus:

This type displays the characteristics of the classical gambler, with the addition of a tendency toward unconscious feminine identification. This identification makes it possible for him to enjoy, in defeat, the emotional sensation of being overwhelmed.

(p. 87)

As I have already suggested, there is a pronounced feminine quality in Antonio. "Passive-feminine" appears an ideal way of characterizing him. It is interesting that Bergler, discussing this type, raises the obvious possibility only to reject it:

This type of neurotic is often unjustly accused of being a homosexual pervert. He is not a homosexual, and never becomes one. The structure of perversion homosexuality is quite different.

(p. 87)

If the passive-feminine gambler is not a homosexual, then, what sort of relationship does he tend to form? Here again Bergler has a suggestive answer:

Passive-feminine gamblers consistently seek "stronger" partners. The women they choose to marry are shrews; the men they choose for their friends are "strong", "superior" characters, who exploit or dominate them. Submissive, always on the lookout for someone to admire, they are the typical followers. They are of course unconscious of all this, since lack of initiative and absence of normal activity are easily rationalized.

(pp. 87 - 88)

This applies exactly to Antonio and Bassanio. Bassanio, of course, is really a fairly tough character. His suppliant situations in the play should not deceive us. He is extraordinarily good at getting his own way, and reveals a basic shrewdness in the crisis of the Casket choice. Bassanio is the type of the aristocrat who exploits his charm to ensure that he is never on the losing side. What he risks is other people's money. Bassanio is one of life's winners; no wonder Antonio admires him.

Conclusion

Where, then, does all this leave us with the play? The problem of Antonio, the Merchant of Venice, appears to me the touchstone of a play in which personal and commercial values are intertwined. Antonio, the merchant-venturer, is the spokesman for an intellectual defence of capitalist trading; he notably fails to provide an adequate defence. Nor does he face up (at least consciously) to the oblique accusation that Bassanio's friendship is an indirect interest on his loans. Antonio also exhibits a recognizable (in twentieth century terms) neurosis, that of the passive-feminine gambler; this is the key to his conduct and personal relations. All these are aspects of *venture*. Lay them together, and the result is a formidable critique of social interaction, a critique all the more powerful for the restraint of its irony. Indeed, to term Shakespeare's iron objectivity "irony" is to raise in question the very meaning of the term. I have made no attempt here to assess Portia, or Shylock, or the minor relationships such as Jessica, Lorenzo, all of whom exhibit and develop some variation on "venture". A judgment on all of them, I contend, is contingent upon a judgment on Antonio and the relationships radiating out from him. On that, my case rests.

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