

...I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about t'expound this dream. (4.1.202-3)

'Rare' is a word Shakespeare uses for what is the finest, the most refined, the most exquisite of experiences. He knows that, like religion, what he's seen is inexpressible, and he proves that he's no ass by recognising that those who would try to explain the dream (Sigmund Freud take note) are fools.

#### Exercises

- 7.1 In what ways are the fairies the central figures of the play?
- 7.2 In what ways does the play deal with 'the lunatic, the lover and the poet'?

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### 8.1 Antonio's sadness

#### ► 'And mine a sad one' (1.1.79)

If *The Merchant of Venice* were a piece of music, it would open out of key. We pick up a conversation that's already under way; Antonio says that he doesn't know why he's so sad. The tone gives us his character: melancholic, brooding, puzzled, uncertain. It's a state he's resigned to; as he says, the world is:

A stage where every man must play a part,  
And mine a sad one.

(1.1.78-9)

#### Why is Antonio sad?

Antonio says he's yet 'to learn' (1.1.5) what's brought it on. He might be hedging, because as soon as he's alone with Bassanio he says:

Well, tell me now what lady is the same  
To whom you swore a secret pilgrimage,  
That you today promised to tell me of.

(1.1.119-21)

'Well' is the giveaway; it's an awkward way of introducing the topic that's gnawing at him – the man whom he loves has fallen for a woman.

At this point one thing is pretty clear to the audience:

- Antonio is unhappy because he fears he may lose his beloved.

### 8.2 Antonio's love

#### ► 'To suffer with a quietness of spirit' (4.1.11)

*The Merchant of Venice* has a different feel from Shakespeare's previous comedies; it's dark, troubled and emotionally intense. We are introduced to this world in the

downbeat opening and in the character of the Merchant himself – Antonio. Three things are important about him; they all concern his love for Bassanio.

### (1) *The strength of his love*

Although Shakespeare's comedies are all to do with love, not everyone loves with the same intensity. In some of the plays there are characters who are haunted by a love they can't control.

And so it is with Antonio. Because no one comments on the intensity of Bassanio's love for Portia, what Solanio says of Antonio's love for Bassanio:

I think he only loves the world for him

(2.8.50)

has considerable force.

### (2) *The extent of his love*

We don't see the real extent of his love till the trial scene.

Antonio's behaviour seems curiously passive, until we see that this is his big chance to show Bassanio how much he loves him. There is an almost desperate eagerness in Antonio's anticipation of the knife in his heart:

I do beseech you,  
Make no more offers, use no farther means,  
But with all brief and plain conveniency  
Let me have judgement and the Jew his will.

(4.1.79–82)

'Beseech' is strong and 'conveniency' quite extraordinary. The word means 'fitness' or 'appropriateness'; this, he says, is the right thing to do. Right because it will show finally and unambiguously how much Antonio loves Bassanio. In fact, it's not only the Jew's will, it's his as well.

This may make us feel uneasy. He shouldn't be so keen to throw his life away upon a pretty boy, who's the average Venetian yuppie.

But in his willingness to throw away his life he does show himself to be better than the man he loves. Bassanio chooses the lead casket upon which is written:

Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he has.

(2.7.16)

It's the right choice; he gets the girl. But did he 'give and hazard (gamble) all he has'? No. His hazard is actually financed by someone else's money – Antonio's! The only one who does risk everything in the game of love is Antonio; and he nearly loses it.

The final irony revealed in this scene is the very close link between Antonio and Shylock. Both are merchants and both lose what they love. Shylock, too, gives and hazards all he has – and he loses. The man who's lost his religion has lost

### (3) *The hopelessness of his love*

What Antonio wants is an unmistakable sign from Bassanio that he feels for him. The nearest he gets to it is the business of the ring; Antonio urges him to give it away (4.1.446), and Bassanio complies.

The irony is that the ring plot lands Bassanio entirely in Portia's power. Furthermore, it brims with bawdy innuendoes of a heterosexual kind. The play closes with overt anticipations of the sexual delight (the marriages are not yet consummated) in which Antonio will have no part. His ships have come home safely, but even for a merchant, some things matter more than money. He remains on stage, while the others go to bed.

## 8.3 Venice

### ► 'Like signors and rich burghers' (1.1.10)

Antonio is the key character – the Merchant of Venice. And what is Venice like? It is such a strong presence that we might almost call it a character.

### *Wealth and show*

Shakespeare's audience must have heard about this extraordinary city; Venice was wealthy, exotically full of foreigners, almost entirely dependent on trade, the centre of a huge empire and rich in works of art. In some respects it was the Hong Kong or Singapore of its day – tiny island states existing solely on trade. Something of this emerges in Salerio's opening speech:

Your mind is tossing on the ocean,  
There where your argosies with portly sail,  
Like signors and rich burghers on the flood,  
Or as it were the pageants of the sea,  
Do overpeer the petty traffickers  
That curtsy to them, do them reverence,  
As they fly by them with, their woven wings.

(1.1.8–14)

Salerio develops a lengthy comparison (a conceit) between Antonio's impressive fleet of ships and the leading citizens of Venice, parading through the streets. The sails filled out by the breeze are like the pot-bellies of the proudly strutting gentlemen; and the small ships giving way (or lowering their topsails) are implicitly compared to those who show their respect to the 'signors'.

Venice was a place of pageants, festivals and carnivals, a city given to revelry and rich display. Something of that richness is present in 'woven'. Venice was itself a work of art, woven like the sails and fabrics for which it was so famous. And Salerio's poetry is like that; with sumptuous Venetian showiness, it weaves together the two striking yet complementary images of ships and proud citizens.

All this has an impact on the plot

## 8.4 Portia, wealth and wooing

### ► 'a lady richly left' (1.1.161)

#### *Wealth and wooing*

- in Venice you have to appear wealthy to woo a pretty girl, and a pretty girl is worth wooing because she's rich.

We have to accept that in Shakespeare's play wealth enters all areas of life. This is Bassanio's first report on Portia:

In Belmont is a lady richly left,  
And she is fair,

(1.1.161-2)

We can tut-tut all we like about the fact that riches are mentioned first, but it makes no difference; that's what love and marriage are like in Venice.

## 8.5 The spirit of enterprise

### ► 'had I such venture forth' (1.1.15)

#### *Venture*

Trade gives life in Venice a particular texture. In the first scene of the play, we hear two important words: 'venture' and 'hazard': 'Believe me, sir, had I such venture forth' (1.1.15). This is 'merchant-talk'; 'venture' means a commercial enterprise. The word is used three times in the first 45 lines of the play, and, significantly, Antonio uses it when he's talking to Shylock (1.3.88). *The Merchant of Venice* is about characters taking financial risks.

The word also has metaphoric force:

- financial ventures are a metaphor for the adventure of love.

This is surely the case with Antonio; the 'venture' of his fleets is a metaphoric anticipation of the nearly fatal one he makes when, for love of Bassanio, he signs the bond.

#### *Hazard*

The word 'hazard' appears in the first scene, where it has overtones of gambling (1.1.151). In Shakespeare it usually means any act which is a matter of risk, chance or danger. It's also, significantly, used to mean a venture. It occurs in *The Merchant of Venice* more times (eight) than in any other Shakespeare play.

The chief use of the word associates the bond plot with the casket plot. Portia says to the Prince of Morocco:

After dinner  
Your hazard shall be made.

(2.1.44-5)

Given the conditions of choosing (for instance, promising never to court another lady if one chooses wrongly), the casket is a hazard, because a great deal is risked. Love is like a risk undertaken in business.

## 8.6 Religion and love

### ► 'Become a Christian and thy loving wife' (2.3.21)

Another element that colours all life is the cultural and religious division between Christian and Jew.

#### *Jessica*

Jessica is very interesting in this respect. As the quotation above shows, to elope is to change your religion. She deserts both her father and the religion of her fathers. In this sense, no other heroine risks so much. In a city fiercely divided in this way (Christians spit at Jews - 1.3.111), religion is as much an element in love as is money. In the particular weave of this play, an elopement (a standard comic practice - see 5.6) is inseparable from the culture of religious division.

So though elopements are the stuff of comedy, this one doesn't feel blithe and care-free. When Jessica is about to descend in true elopement style from her balcony, she says:

For I am much ashamed of my exchange

(2.6.35)

The exchange (a financial word) could be her clothes (she's disguised as a page) or her theft, but equally possible is that it's the exchange of religion that troubles her.

## 8.7 The centrality of Shylock

### ► 'I am a Jew' (3.1.55)

In a play in which the whole of life is dyed by financial deals and religious divisions, Shylock has a central place. This is something the theatre has long recognised; it's the plum part, which every Shakespearean actor must play. It's probably the major prose part in Shakespeare. Like Richard III, it's also one of the great villain roles.

However, unlike Richard, the demands made on the actor are numerous and diverse. It's not clear in the text (and certainly not in our present cultural climate) whether Shylock should be played to arouse hostility or pity or both.

#### *Shylock and the plot*

We must remember how the plot of the play works. Act 1, Scene 3 establishes a long-standing mutual hatred between Antonio and Shylock. We hear about this before Shylock offers the terms of the bond.

It's not clear whether he intends to insist on this (he does talk about 'merry sport' - 1.3.142), but when his daughter leaves and Antonio...

ahead. The trial scene won't work unless we believe that he will plunge his knife into Antonio. The plot, therefore, clearly establishes that Shylock was not prepared to do what Antonio did – show mercy.

### *Shylock and Antonio*

If Shylock is in the wrong about seeking revenge, Shakespeare shows that Antonio is guilty of hatred. Shylock accuses him of spitting; we are surely supposed to be shocked that Antonio doesn't deny this:

I am as like to call thee so again,  
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee, too.

(1.3.126–7)

Those lines show that:

- **this is not the sort of play in which the audience can unambiguously prefer one character to another; both Antonio and Shylock have very unattractive sides.**

### *Shylock's feelings*

Shakespeare gives Shylock the most moving speech in the play – 3.1.50–69:

Hath not a Jew eyes?  
Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimension, senses,  
healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the  
same winter and summer, as a Christian is?

(3.1.55–8)

It's a speech that lays bare the humanity we all share. It dwells on the basics of life – our bodies, senses and our very survival. If we are all brothers and sisters, then prejudice is wrong.

Shylock is a man of feeling. There's a moving moment in the trial scene when everyone (rather pompously?) is saying how much their beloveds mean to them, when Shylock bursts out with:

I have a daughter:  
Would any of the stock of Barabas  
Have been her husband rather than a Christian!

(4.1.292–4)

Those words awaken us to the grief for his lost daughter; we see his pursuit of Antonio in that light. His speech might make us balance the mixing of 'My daughter, O my ducats' that caused so much amusement earlier (2.8.15) to the hostile Solanio.

### *Shylock and religion*

Shylock introduces the religious dimension of their quarrel in Act 1, Scene 3. He talks at length about how Jacob thrived by questionable means.

It shouldn't be surprising, therefore, that he plays the trial scene in a religious way. Shakespeare presents Jews as living by the law; and it's the law that Shylock insists on. He won't or can't take notice of Portia's plea for mercy.

Here, however, we may feel that Shakespeare is against him. At one point he says:

My deeds upon my head!

(4.1.203)

Shakespeare's audience would surely recognise that as an echo of the account of the trial of Jesus, when the crowd shouts that punishment can fall upon them and their children (St Matthew 27:25). Is it fair to put him into the position of echoing those words?

His punishment is also religious – he must become a Christian. To many people having to change religion might seem slight, but Shakespeare grew up in a world in which religion was a vital issue. Thirty years before his birth, the Church of England came into being, and adherence to the Church of Rome became, in some cases, a punishable offence. We know that Shakespeare's father was fined for not attending church, so it's possible that they still adhered to the 'old religion', as Roman Catholicism was called. Did Shakespeare make the Christians impose this punishment because he knew from his father's case (and maybe his own) the agonies of being forced to conform to a religion in which one did not believe?

## **8.8 Portia and the outcome of the plot**

### ► 'O sweet Portia' (3.1.248)

From a dramatic point of view, it looks as if Portia is going to be a disappointment: for half the play the most she does is wittily mock her suitors (Act 1, scene 2) and, possibly, lead Bassanio to make the right choice of casket by having a song sung with lots of rhymes in it for 'lead'. Once, however, Antonio's plight becomes known, she emerges as the Shakespearean heroine who's inventive and enterprising.

### *Portia's speech on mercy*

She delivers the speech on mercy that's the necessary contrast to Shylock's insistence on law. We've been prepared for this earlier on. Act 3, Scene 4 opens with Lorenzo praising Portia for her elevated ideas of friendship. It's one of those scenes that opens when its events are already happening. What they've been doing is debating. One of the pastimes of courts was intellectual debate, conducted according to quite strict rules of rhetoric. They have been debating friendship, and Lorenzo has been impressed.

When, therefore she delivers the mercy speech (4.1.181–202), we know she's an accomplished speaker. The interesting issue is:

- **to whom is she speaking?**

Two audiences we can easily identify – the two groups who are impressed: the court and the audience. But she gets nowhere with Shylock, because the speech is intended for Christians. (See Illustration 4.)

### *Portia's strategy*

Her failure here leads to her next strategy – that of taking Shylock up to the line before defeating him. Some have found her 'playing' here disagreeable: why does she manoeuvre him into a position where he might even lose his life?



What's certain is her toughness. 'O sweet Portia!' No longer suffering from the bar of her dead father, she's independent and forceful. It's quite fitting that she ends the play having put her husband in the wrong (the ring plot). This marriage is going to be as interesting as Kate and Petruchio's or Beatrice and Benedick's.'

#### Exercises

- 8.1 Can you account for the very different reactions audiences have had to Shylock?
- 8.2 Examine the impact of money upon the plot and characters of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Illustration 4 *The Merchant of Venice*: the trial scene