

Merchant of Venice

INTRODUCTION

ENTRY of `a book of *The Merchant of Venice* or otherwise called *The Jew of Venice*' in the Stationers' Register on 22 July 1598 probably represents an attempt by Shakespeare's company to prevent the unauthorized printing of a popular play: it eventually appeared in print as *The Comical History of the Merchant of Venice* in 1600, when it was said to have `been divers times acted by the Lord Chamberlain his servants'; probably Shakespeare wrote it in 1596 or 1597. The alternative title±±*The Jew of Venice*±± probably reflects Shylock's impact on the play's first audiences.

The play is constructed on the basis of two romantic tales using motifs well known to sixteenth-century readers. The story of Giannetto (Shakespeare's Bassanio) and the Lady (Portia) of Belmont comes from an Italian collection of fifty stories published under the title of *Il Pecorone* (`the big sheep', or `dunce') and attributed to one Ser Giovanni of Florence. Written in the later part of the fourteenth century, the volume did not appear until 1558. No sixteenth-century translation is known, so (unless there was a lost intermediary) Shakespeare must have read it in Italian. It gave him the main outline of the plot involving Antonio (the merchant), Bassanio (the wooer), Portia, and the Jew (Shylock). The pound of flesh motif was available also in other versions, one of which, in Alexander Silvayn's *The Orator* (translated 1596), influenced the climactic scene (4.1) in which Shylock attempts to exact the full penalty of his bond.

In the story from *Il Pecorone* the lady (a widow) challenges her suitors to seduce her, on pain of the forfeiture of their wealth, and thwarts them by drugging their wine. Shakespeare more romantically shows a maiden required by her father's will to accept only a wooer who will forswear marriage if he fails to make the right choice among caskets of gold, silver, and lead. The story of the caskets was readily available in versions by John Gower (in his *Confessio Amantis*) and Giovanni Boccaccio (in his *Decameron*), and in an anonymous anthology (the *Gesta Romanorum*). Shakespeare added the character of Jessica, Shylock's

daughter who elopes with the Christian Lorenzo±±perhaps influenced by episodes in Christopher Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta* (c.1589)±±and made many adjustments to the stories from which he borrowed.

The Merchant of Venice is a natural development from Shakespeare's earlier comedies, especially *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, with its heroine disguised as a boy and its portrayal of the competing demands of love and friendship. But Portia is the first of his great romantic heroines, and Shylock his first great comic antagonist. Though the play grew out of fairy tales, its moral scheme is not entirely clear cut: the Christians are open to criticism, the Jew is true to his own code of conduct. The response of twentieth-century audiences has been complicated by racial issues; in any case, the role of Shylock affords such strong opportunities for an actor capable of arousing an undercurrent of sympathy for a vindictive character that it has sometimes unbalanced the play in performance. But the so-called trial scene (4.1) is unfailing in its impact on audiences, and the closing episodes modulate skilfully from romantic lyricism to high comedy, while sustaining the play's concern with true and false values.