“背景中的文学”丛书

Understanding The Merchant of Venice

A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

《威尼斯商人》解读

[美] 杰伊·L·哈利奥 著
(Jay L. Halio)

中国人民大学出版社

Understanding The Merchant of Venice

A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

[redacted]

“背景中的文学”丛书

Understanding *The Merchant of Venice*

A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

《威尼斯商人》解读

[美] 杰伊·L·哈利奥（Jay L. Halio）著

中国人民大学出版社
·北京·

图书在版编目（CIP）数据

《威尼斯商人》解读：英文/[美]哈利奥著.
北京：中国人民大学出版社，2007
（“背景中的文学”丛书）
ISBN 978-7-300-08866-2

Ⅰ.威…
Ⅱ.哈…
Ⅲ.喜剧-剧本-文学研究-英国-中世纪-英文
Ⅳ.I561.073

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字（2008）第000415号

“背景中的文学”丛书

Understanding *The Merchant of Venice*

A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

《威尼斯商人》解读

[美]杰伊·L·哈利奥（Jay L. Halio）著

出版发行　中国人民大学出版社
社　　址　北京中关村大街31号　　邮政编码　100080
电　　话　010-62511242（总编室）　010-62511398（质管部）
　　010-82501766（邮购部）　010-62514148（门市部）
　　010-62515195（发行公司）　010-62515275（盗版举报）
网　　址　http://www.crup.com.cn
　　http://www.ttrnet.com（人大教研网）
经　　销　新华书店
印　　刷　河北三河市新世纪印务有限公司
规　　格　155 mm×235 mm　16开本　　版　　次　2008年9月第1版
印　　张　12.75　　印　　次　2008年9月第1次印刷
字　　数　221 000　　定　　价　29.00元

The "Literature in Context" Series

Understanding *The Old Man and the Sea*: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

Understanding *Jane Eyre*: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

Understanding *The Merchant of Venice*: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

Understanding *The Call of the Wild*: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

Understanding *Hamlet*: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

Understanding *A Tale of Two Cities*: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

Understanding *The Great Gatsby*: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

Understanding *Pride and Prejudice*: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

Understanding *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

Understanding *The Scarlet Letter*: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

Preface

When Barbara Rader first invited me to do this casebook on *The Merchant of Venice*, I was not sure I could or should accept her kind invitation. Although I had written and edited many books, including conventional casebooks—collections of essays by modern critics—I had never done the kind of book she proposed, especially one for high school students and teachers. But the more I thought about it, the more I found the invitation appealing. High schools, after all, are where many more students study and learn than in colleges and universities, where I have spent all of my professional life. It seemed like an opportunity to make a real difference in the way students and their teachers approach Shakespeare's most controversial play.

Although I had done a scholarly edition of *The Merchant of Venice* in 1993, I found—as scholars inevitably do when they restudy one of Shakespeare's plays—that there was still a good deal more to learn. I am grateful to the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, where most of the basic research was carried on, for once again affording me the use of their excellent resources and for the many kindnesses of their incomparable staff. I am grateful, too, to the University of Delaware for granting me a leave of absence to continue my research. Debts are also owed to Lynn Malloy, who succeeded Barbara Rader as managing editor for this

series at Greenwood Press, and to the general editor, Claudia Durst Johnson, for their many useful suggestions—and for their patience and understanding as I grappled with the, to me, new and sometimes baffling ways of approaching a work designed primarily for high school students and their teachers. I owe thanks also to that excellent high school teacher, Tom Lederer, for lending me many useful materials; to Georgiana Ziegler for checking several references for me while I was in residence at the University of Cyprus; and to Liz Leiba, who worked so diligently as copyeditor. Rebecca Ardwin, senior production editor, and Leanne Small, assistant manager, editorial administration, were most helpful in seeing this volume into print. To them I am very grateful as well. Any errors or oversights that persist are entirely my responsibility.

Finally, I dedicate this book to my aunt, Rae Russo, the last of my father's and mother's generation, whose pride in my achievements serves to inspire further efforts to become worthy of her feelings for me and my work.

Introduction

The Merchant of Venice is Shakespeare's most controversial play. Its alleged anti-Semitism continues to engage both literary critics and theatrical reviewers every time the play is staged or a new edition is published. Although Shylock appears in only five scenes, he dominates the action. Nonetheless, the casket scenes are also important and provide much of the play's color and suspense. In fact, the play raises many important issues today, perhaps even more than in the 1590s, when it was first produced and printed.

Among the many issues that merit discussion, besides the central one of anti-Semitism, are the relationships between parents and children (there are three sets of them in the play), particularly involving permission to marry, the position of women in society generally, justice and mercy, friendship, matrimony, and the various kinds of bonds that connect human beings with each other. Another important issue, one raised by the very existence of a moneylender, Shylock, in the play, is the problem of usury. Christian doctrine generally opposed lending money at interest and exerted tremendous political pressure to prohibit it in England during the sixteenth century. Venice, as a center of world trade during this period and a place where many tourists flocked, then as now, was an exotic and intriguing locale—as were other cities in Europe—that attracted the interest of playwrights and their audiences. These

focuses of concern and others, such as performing the play in the contemporary theater, will be treated in the ensuing chapters.

To present a historical context for *The Merchant of Venice* and its issues, a selection of excerpts from historical documents provides the substance of the material contained in this book. Elizabethans read and traveled a good deal and wrote about their travels. What they saw and how they reacted, especially to Venice and its people, may be typified in the accounts of two inveterate travelers, Thomas Coryat and Fynes Moryson, extracts from whose writings make interesting, vivid, and perceptive reading. How their accounts of Venice and Italy compare with Shakespeare's recreation of those places in *The Merchant of Venice* is very worthwhile exploring. Whether Shakespeare himself ever visited Italy, we do not know, but two of his plays, *Othello* as well as *The Merchant of Venice*, are set largely in Venice, and several of his other plays, such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, are set elsewhere in sixteenth-century Italy. Far-off Italy and her cities were literally wonderful places for Elizabethans to imagine, contemplate, or, like Coryat and Moryson, to visit. For many Britons and Americans today they still are; for no matter how much Venice and other Italian cities have changed, they still retain a good deal of the splendor and mystery that were admired in the Renaissance.

The position of women today is far different from what it was in Shakespeare's time, and to understand the differences we need to know more about how women were regarded. Since marriage, including elopement, is a major focus in *The Merchant of Venice*, we also need to learn what Shakespeare's contemporaries thought about it, how they arranged it, and what role parents played (or wanted to play). In addition, we can learn about what qualities in potential husbands and wives were stressed in the various handbooks on marriage that were published. A great deal was written about this important enterprise, because for a very long time, right up until World War II, marriage was permanently binding; at least, a divorce or annulment was extremely difficult if not impossible to obtain, unlike today. Men and women, therefore, were advised to take matrimony very seriously, which is one reason that Portia's father in *The Merchant of Venice* wrote his will the way he did and established the choice of caskets—containers, or chests, containing objects and scrolls—as a means of finding the best suitor for his daughter. Intermarriage between people of different faiths was an-

other problem that concerned clergymen as well as parents, and in the Jessica-Lorenzo subplot in *The Merchant of Venice* it becomes an issue.

Relationships between men and women and parents and children were not the only important ones in Shakespeare's age. Taking their cue from classical treatises on the subject, some believed that friendships between men were of a higher order and thus more important. The great Roman orator and essayist Cicero, or Tully as he was known, was justly famous at a time when most education was conducted through Latin texts. He was famous not only for his style, but for the substance of his writing, as in his long treatise on friendship, excerpted here. Sir Thomas Elyot, one of the early Tudor humanists in the court of Henry VIII, greatly admired Cicero and adopted many of his views in his very influential book called *The Governor*. Many friendships appear in *The Merchant of Venice*, chiefly that between Antonio and Bassanio, which must have suggested to Elizabethans in Shakespeare's audience the biblical friendship of David and Jonathan or the classical friendship of Damon and Pythias. Other similar friendships were recorded and publicized wherein a man was willing to lay down his life for his friend, as in these examples, and as Antonio is prepared to do for Bassanio. Whether any of these friendships or the ones in *The Merchant of Venice* involved latent or overt homosexuality is another issue we may wish to consider.

For a proper understanding of Shakespeare's play, we need to know something, too, about the way Jews were regarded in the Renaissance and throughout English and European history. Fortunately, a wealth of material has been unearthed on this subject, an important part having to do with events in London when Shakespeare was writing or thinking about writing *The Merchant of Venice*. In 1594, for example, a Jew, Dr. Roderigo Lopez, was tried and convicted of trying to poison Queen Elizabeth, and at this time Marlowe's play, *The Jew of Malta* (1588), was revived. So was a striking contrast to that play, *An Enterlude of the Vertuous and Godly Queene Hester*, which dramatizes the story of Queen Esther, Ahasuerus, and Haman—the story of Purim—celebrated among Jews to this day but also well known among Shakespeare's Christian audience. The attitude of the church toward Jews was also extremely important and influential, and it was by no means simple. Both Catholics and Protestants wrote voluminously on the

subject, and it is useful to know what Luther, Calvin, and others thought as England became a Protestant country after the sixteenth-century Reformation.

The whole problem of usury, or moneylending for profit, also occupied both religious and secular leaders to the point where several different laws were passed in England under its Tudor monarchs to prohibit or to regulate the practice as it was known during this period. Debates raged in Parliament until a compromise bill was passed in 1571 called the Act against Usury, which stated that usury was morally wrong but nevertheless permitted lending at interest at a rate not to exceed 10 percent. As in the controversy over the attitude toward Jews, Catholics and Protestants differed between and among themselves over the matter of usury, some finding it utterly deplorable and reprehensible, others recognizing the practical need for some form of moneylending at interest provided that it was not injurious to anyone or excessive. Jews, who were not the only ones involved in moneylending, also pondered the problems involved in lending to others outside of their religion. The focus for much of this discussion was the interpretation of some verses in Scripture and the translation of key words from the Hebrew in the Old Testament. In *The Merchant of Venice* lending at interest is a major conflict between Antonio, who eschews the practice, and Shylock, who profits from it.

Finally, we need to ask how these many issues are relevant today. Chapter 7 explores contemporary applications and concludes with a section on the way the play has been and is being performed on the modern stage. As in the preceding chapters, excerpts from appropriate publications, including the editorial pages of leading American newspapers, will help focus on these contemporary applications. But before attempting to understand *The Merchant of Venice* in either its historical or contemporary context, we need to know what happens in the play, how it is structured, what themes are developed, and what techniques Shakespeare uses. That is the purpose of Chapter 1 of this book, which begins with a consideration of the play's genre. How Shakespeare used the sources from which he borrowed is also important in helping us understand what he was doing, especially in the ways he altered or added to his sources. Like his contemporaries, Shakespeare was not constrained to invent his plots. His audiences were more interested in the way he dramatized familiar legends and tales, and what new

perceptions as well as entertainments he could provide by so doing. The audiences also delighted in multiple plots and subplots, the use of blank verse and songs, fresh imagery, and other poetic devices Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists used, which may appear unfamiliar to us today but are not wholly inaccessible if we attend carefully to them and recognize how they operate.

Because of the timeliness—or timelessness—of the issues Shakespeare treats, *The Merchant of Venice* has held the interest of audiences and readers for centuries. Like *Hamlet*, it is full of intriguing inconsistencies and contradictions, and that may be another source of its fascination. It is not that Shakespeare did not know what he was doing. A consummate playwright approaching the apex of his career when he wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, he well understood the complexity of life, of human nature, and his vision had begun to become characterized by what a modern critic, Norman Rabkin, has called "complementarity," that is, the ability to see many sides of an issue or problem. That is why a simplistic approach to his plays is invariably fruitless and needs to be replaced by what another scholar, Rosalie Colie, in writing about *King Lear*, has called "prismatic" criticism. For Shakespeare's plays lend themselves, whether in Renaissance or modern dress, to a wide variety of interpretations, many of which demand serious consideration. To help us understand *The Merchant of Venice* and the many themes and issues it contains, both in its historical context and in its importance for us today, is the purpose of this book.

As an aid to accomplishing this purpose, at the end of each chapter or section a list of topics for discussion and further study will be found. Some will direct students to the excerpts included in that section; others will require further reading or connecting the excerpts with the play under study. Still others may raise contemporary issues that confront us in our daily lives.

Since students have many different interests, this casebook aims to help develop those interests in a multicultural framework. No one approach to *The Merchant of Venice* will satisfy everyone's interest, but a combined or multifaceted approach may bring not only fuller understanding but also greater fulfillment. No literature exists in an intellectual, social, or political vacuum, any more than individuals alive today do or did at other times. By utilizing more than one approach to understanding *The Merchant of Venice*, we will experience the play more completely. At the same time,

we will see how the different approaches truly complement each other. This is part of the not-so-hidden agenda of this book.

All quotations from *The Merchant of Venice* are from the version of the play edited by Jay L. Halio and published by Oxford University Press (1993). Quotations from other plays are from the *Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor et al., also published by Oxford (1988). Quotations from Renaissance texts have been rendered into modern American spelling and punctuation.

Contents

1

Literary and Dramatic Analysis

The first question that *The Merchant of Venice* raises is, What kind of play is this? Is it a comedy, tragedy, tragi-comedy (a play that starts tragically but ends like a comedy), or what? Written in the mid-1590s, when Shakespeare's art was rapidly maturing, it shows the playwright experimenting with a variety of forms. He had just written the three plays of his "lyric period": a comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; a romantic tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*; and a history play chronicling the rise and fall of King Richard II. Some aspects of *The Merchant of Venice* derive from all three of these plays: its beautiful lyric poetry, found, for example, in Lorenzo's monologues in act 5; the comic antics of the clown, Lancelot Gobbo; and the downfall of Shylock. For modern audiences, however, the play raises certain issues that have led some critics to regard this play as a "problem play"; that is, a drama that raises significant moral questions that it fails satisfactorily to resolve, as in Shylock's forced conversion at the end of act 4, scene 1.

Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* at a time when few Jews lived in England, from where they had been forcibly expelled in 1290 by Edward I. Nevertheless, the Jew remained a powerful image in English literature and drama throughout the succeeding ages (see Chapter 3). The trial and execution of Queen Elizabeth's physician, Dr. Roderigo Lopez, in 1594; the revival of Marlowe's