

**Twayne's New Critical
Introductions to Shakespeare**

A portrait of a man in Elizabethan attire, likely a nobleman or merchant, wearing a red robe with a white ermine-trimmed collar and a gold chain with circular medallions. The background is dark and draped.

The Merchant of Venice

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**THE MERCHANT
OF VENICE**

To
Matthew and Sarah Addison

Titles in the Series

GENERAL EDITOR: GRAHAM BRADSHAW

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General Editor's Preface

The *New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare* series will include studies of all Shakespeare's plays, together with two volumes on the non-dramatic verse, and is designed to offer a challenge to all students of Shakespeare.

Each volume will be brief enough to read in an evening, but long enough to avoid those constraints which are inevitable in articles and short essays. Each contributor will develop a sustained critical reading of the play in question, which addresses those difficulties and critical disagreements which each play has generated.

Different plays present different problems, different challenges and excitements. In isolating these, each volume will present a preliminary survey of the play's stage history and critical reception. The volumes then provide a more extended discussion of these matters in the main text, and of matters relating to genre, textual problems and the use of source material, or to historical and theoretical issues. But here, rather than setting a row of dragons at the gate, we have assumed that 'background' should figure only as it emerges into a critical foreground; part of the critical endeavour is to establish, and sift, those issues which seem most pressing.

So, for example, when Shakespeare determined that *his* Othello and Desdemona should have no time to live together, or that Cordelia dies while Hermione survives, his

deliberate departures from his source material have a critical significance which is often blurred, when discussed in the context of lengthily detailed surveys of 'the sources'. Alternatively, plays like *The Merchant of Venice* or *Measure for Measure* show Shakespeare welding together different 'stories' from quite different sources, so that their relation to each other becomes a matter for critical debate. And Shakespeare's dramatic practice poses different critical questions when we ask—or if we ask: few do—why particular characters in a poetic drama speak only in verse or only in prose; or when we try to engage with those recent, dauntingly specialised and controversial textual studies which set out to establish the evidence for authorial revisions or joint authorship. We all read *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, but we are not all textual critics; nor are textual critics always able to show where their arguments have critical consequences which concern us all.

Just as we are not all textual critics, we are not all linguists, cultural anthropologists, psychoanalysts or New Historicists. The diversity of contemporary approaches to Shakespeare is unprecedented, enriching, bewildering. One aim of this series is to represent what is illuminating in this diversity. As the hastiest glance through the list of contributors will confirm, the series does not attempt to 're-read' Shakespeare by placing an ideological grid over the text and reporting on whatever shows through. Nor would the series' contributors always agree with each other's arguments, or premisses; but each has been invited to develop a sustained critical argument which will also provide its own critical and historical context—by taking account of those issues which have perplexed or divided audiences, readers, and critics past and present.

Graham Bradshaw

Preface

This study of *The Merchant of Venice* is introductory. Its modest but not meagre aim is to guide the responses of newcomers and to freshen the thinking of those already familiar with the play in order that individual spectators and readers may form and formulate their own views about the pleasures and puzzles of *The Merchant of Venice*. This modesty is not apologetic. *The Merchant of Venice* has too often fallen victim to aggressive and single-minded interpretations. Many aspects of the play have proved contentious: its attitudes to Shylock and the Christians; the kinds of interrelations it creates between its two worlds, and its three plots; its possible endorsement of, or divergence from, Elizabethan views of Jews and usury; its status as comedy, or tragedy, or problem play; its claim to artistic coherence—all have provoked lively disagreement. In the course of this study, the many familiar critical issues are raised, but raised when and where the play itself prompts such considerations. And in following the logic of the play's unfolding, I have attempted to avoid the interpretative violence previously done to a play, the particular qualities and problems of which stem precisely from its temporal shaping. The aim is to return spectators and readers to the play and, more particularly, to the experience of the play as it unfolds scene by scene.

Any individual critical work within a series is, of necessity, an honourable compromise between the emphasis of the individual contributor and the more general requirements and structure of the series as a whole. This study follows the general outline of the *New Critical Introductions To Shakespeare* series in discussing stage history, critical reception, sources, adaptations and the larger assumptions about, and implications for, literary criticism, which any study of *The Merchant of Venice* involves. Some readers may wish to *begin* with discussion of the text of *The Merchant of Venice* and only then to proceed to considerations of larger contexts. Such readers are invited to 'begin in the middle' with Chapter 3, and will find in Chapters 3 to 7 of this book an Act-by-Act discussion of *The Merchant of Venice*.

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The Alexander edition of Shakespeare's work is the source for references and quotations throughout the text. Where other works are cited, they are immediately followed by the author's surname, the date of publication and a page reference; the reader may then refer to the Bibliography for further details. Where possible, works are cited in the most easily accessible editions.

The Stage History

It is very unlikely that any single interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice* can accommodate and realise the full range of possibilities suggested in the following study. It is even less likely in the theatre. But while *The Merchant of Venice*, like all of Shakespeare's plays, easily admits of diverging theatrical interpretations, it has always challenged actors and directors to find some way of sustaining the tension which is peculiarly its own, and which makes it *both* an unsettling experience *and* an entertainment. Too often, perhaps, the theatre has failed to respond to that challenge, and has subordinated the play's dramatic substance to easier opportunities for theatrical coups, virtuoso performances and one-man shows. The most recent production by the Royal Shakespeare Company, under the direction of Bill Alexander, at Stratford in the spring of 1987, shrivelled and vulgarised the Belmont scenes and darkened Venice into a tensely homoerotic and squalid world of violent Jew-baiters. It would have been impossible not to sympathise from the start with Anthony Sher's unsentimentalised but incessantly spat upon Shylock, were one not more aware of Sher's own theatrical display than any dramatic realisation of the role he was attempting. A large part of the stage history of *The Merchant of Venice* is taken up with the repeated complaint that the actor takes precedence over

characterisation, and the play as a whole. This latest production made the play all too easy for its liberal-minded audiences, although what was remarkable was the way in which some scenes went awry simply because of the vigour with which Shakespeare's words resisted the wrenching of this two-dimensional interpretation.

Such cold feet on the part of actors and directors is more than understandable in a post-holocaust world. But the tendency to fail the full substance of *The Merchant of Venice* is not limited to the theatre of the twentieth century. The temptation has always been to solve rather than realise the problem of Shylock, to present him as either the unequivocal villain or the wronged victim. In broader terms, the temptation has been to render the play as merely the romantic comedy of its Belmont lovers, or the tragedy of Shylock or, more recently, the ironic exposure of its Venetian mercenaries. But the play is all of these things—however difficult it may be to fit them together.

We know that *The Merchant of Venice* was performed at Court in February of 1605, but beyond that we have scant records of the play in Shakespeare's lifetime. Shakespeare's text was replaced on the stage in 1701 by George Granville's redaction, *The Jew of Venice*. The problematic Shylock becomes a caricature villain in Granville's version. The ways in which this simplified and static version provide an illuminating contrast to the Shakespearean original are explored in the second chapter. In 1741, Shakespeare's play was restored in the theatre with Charles Macklin offering an energetic performance as Shylock. Thereafter the play became, and has largely remained, a vehicle for the star actor. As acting styles became more elaborate in the nineteenth century, Shylock became, through the performances of Edmund Kean, Macready and Sir Henry Irving, a noble and sympathetic character of tragic status. Irving's version also exploited the potential for the other star part with Ellen Terry in the role of Portia. In the twentieth century *The Merchant of Venice* has attracted the

attentions of Forbes-Robertson, Gielgud, Wolfit, Redgrave, O'Toole and Olivier, and Sybil Thorndike, Irene Worth, Peggy Ashcroft and Dorothy Tutin. Productions in the second half of this century have paid some attention to aspects of the play other than Shylock and Portia. The version at Stratford in 1953 developed the role of Antonio, and explored the relationship of Antonio and Bassanio. Jonathan Miller's production in 1970, with Olivier as a sympathetic and pained Shylock, expanded the play's interest in isolation through the figures of Antonio and Jessica, and left these two figures on stage at the end of the play, together only in their loneliness.

The Critical Reception

When we turn from the stage to the history of the play's critical reception, two further and related questions are added to those already implicit in the history of its diverging theatrical interpretations. Is the play consistent in respect of its characterisation, tone and genre? And related to this, what *kind* of creativity and what *kind* of intelligence were at work in writing the play? In 1904 A. C. Bradley answered both questions with brevity and assurance:

One reason why the end of the *Merchant of Venice* fails to satisfy us is that Shylock is a tragic figure, and that we cannot believe in his accepting his defeat and the conditions imposed on him. This was a case where Shakespeare's imagination ran away with him, so that he drew a figure with which the destined pleasant ending would not harmonise.

(Bradley 1976, p. 14)

Others have dissented both from this assessment of the play, and from the characterisation of Shakespeare's habits of mind offered here. In this study, I attempt to focus the question of coherence on the specific parts of the play which might afford us the most useful evidence in attempting to answer it. And, by placing *The Merchant of Venice* in the

framework of Shakespeare's larger *oeuvre*, and by indicating some of the interrelations, echoes and anticipations to be found among the whole range of his works, I pursue an argument about the *exploratory* and *interrogative* nature of Shakespeare's creative imagination, a particular kind of imagination of which *The Merchant of Venice* is both a fine and problematic manifestation. Moreover, in the use of history and historical information to resolve the interpretative puzzles of *The Merchant of Venice*, I diverge from the tradition of historicist critics, represented in the course of my discussion of the play, who are concerned with external evidence regarding Elizabethan attitudes, and with historical and political contexts. Like them, I would deny that *The Merchant of Venice* is ahistorical or apolitical. But I argue that the play itself is the securest guide to its own historical and political complexities, and that Shakespeare's other works afford the most useful historical context for an understanding of *The Merchant of Venice*.

There is no magisterial criticism written about *The Merchant of Venice*, but there is much that is useful. It is perhaps most valuable for students of the play to acquaint themselves with a range of the different kinds of argument advanced about *The Merchant of Venice*. But a bald summary of the play's critical reception, detached from consideration of the play itself, is an arid and unrewarding exercise. Consequently, interested readers will glean guidance from the second chapter where the major critical issues, and examples of various writers who explore them, are placed in the context of a larger discussion about the peculiar capacity of *The Merchant of Venice* to prompt a great diversity of often contradictory responses. Thereafter I have attempted to set up debates among the critics where the play prompts such debate. Hence the critics have been gathered together over local and specific issues, but this specificity, I hope, does not misrepresent the general tenor of their various arguments and approaches. There is a double aim here: to guide the reader to critical writings

which may prove helpful, but also to afford the reader numerous opportunities to test the adequacy of the critics against the play itself.

To date, the 'new' criticisms—cultural materialism, feminism, New Historicism and such like—have proved disappointing in their offerings about *The Merchant of Venice*. I have therefore decided to discuss such approaches in an Afterword—'Prejudice and Interpretation'—which addresses some of the current critical controversies and the larger theoretical issues which any interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice* raises.