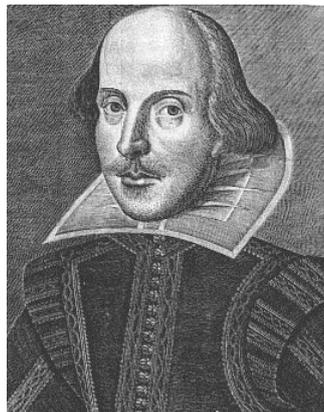


The Merchant of Venice

by Kerri Corcoran Martin



English Association Shakespeare Bookmarks

No. 1

The Merchant of Venice:
all that glitters in a naughty world.

by

Kerri Corcoran Martin

It is something of a tribute to *The Merchant of Venice* that quotations from this play have found their way into so much of our common culture. Watching the [1971] film of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* recently, with a heightened sense of kitsch, I was amused to hear Gene Wilder – aka Willy Wonka – misquote Portia's famous 'so shines a good deed in a naughty world' from Act V Scene 1. Similarly, 'All that glitters is not gold' has become an everyday phrase, borrowed though it is from Chaucer. When we alter that delicious 's' into a more quotidian 't' it is commonplace to hear this proverb used to warn one that what may appear on the surface to be of great value might turn out to be quite worthless.

Perhaps, therefore, it is judicious to take those two ideas as a starting point in examining this play; after all, they seem to be *Merchant's* household legacy. Does Portia's 'good deed'—that of rescuing Antonio from certain death—leave us happy? Does it indeed 'shine'? Is her courtroom triumph easy for us to stomach, demeaning as it is for Shylock? The dominant problem with this play – and there are a few – is that anyone reading it in the twenty-first century is conditioned by living in a post-holocaust society; we cannot transport ourselves back to Shakespeare's merrie England where it was considered a good gag to lampoon the Jew. It is problematic for us to imagine Shylock as the stock comedic character he would have been, played out as the drama is today for our utmost sympathy, focused around this downtrodden, debased, religious man. Furthermore, it is difficult for us to watch or read the play without feeling some distaste for the actions of the Christians: Lorenzo steals Jessica away from her father; the Christians ridicule Shylock and his money lending—upon which they themselves rely all too happily; finally, Portia, after easing Shylock into a false sense of security, forces him not only 'down' on his knees to 'beg mercy of the Duke' but also to surrender his 'wealth'. Most shockingly of all the Christian powers that be force Shylock 'presently' to 'become a Christian'. Perhaps to Shakespeare's audience, perhaps having recently seen a performance of Christopher Marlowe's popular comic play : *The Jew of Malta*,² this ending would truly have seemed a comedic one: all is well; order is restored; the Christians get their cash back; the errant Jew gets his come-uppance. It would be rare, probably even unthinkable, to see a performance executed in this way today.

And so to the words found within the golden casket (II.7.); do the young Christian movers and shakers of Belmont and Venice really heed Portia's father's words? Do they see through pretty faces and earthly wealth and appreciate honest to goodness practicality and worthiness? Well, what do *you* think? The casket choosing challenge set up by Portia's dead father is intended to test the moral worth of the gentleman concerned; being so wealthy an heiress, it was important to Portia's father that her husband should not be a gold-digging opportunist, but someone who values her for more than her money. Certainly, Portia's first suitor—the Prince of Morocco in Act II Scene 1—refuses to believe that this lady, desired by 'all the world' could be won by choosing any casket other than the most richly decorated one –

Never so rich a gem
Was set in worse than gold

- and so he selects the golden casket, hoping to win her hand in marriage. He fails so to do. Evidently, Shakespeare would never have allowed this ridiculous figure—another racial stereotype, dismissed by our jingoistic heroine for his 'complexion' – to win 'fair Portia', the 'golden fleece'. There is no evidence that he loves Portia for anything other than her beauty and wealth. He appears before us, bombastic and over bearing, choosing the most outwardly showy object. Too full of his own self-importance, he declares that he is deserving of her -

I do in birth deserve her, and in fortunes,
In graces and in qualities of breeding;

But more than these, in love I do deserve.

—a big mistake. It would have been considered right and proper for a seventeenth century courtier to appear to demean himself in front of the desired woman, to pay homage to her and admire her from afar as an unattainable nonpareil—as Orsino does to an extreme in *Twelfth Night* (first performed 1602, published 1623). Similarly, the vain Prince of Arragon (for which read arrogant) chooses erroneously; he refuses to believe that something so ‘base’ as lead could be worth the risk. He distances himself from the ‘fool multitude’ indicated by the gold casket’s inscription –

I will not jump with common spirits
And rank me with the barbarous multitudes.

- assuming his own ‘desert’, as did Morocco before him, he chooses silver. Both of these ‘deliberate fools’ fall foul of the test, each man refuses to ‘give and hazard all he hath’.

Bassanio, however, is much more ready to gamble in Act 3 Scene ii. His finery is borrowed, reliant as he is upon Antonio’s means to support him in this quest to marry Portia and so to better himself fiscally; as he tells her later, having won her hand, his pecuniary status is ‘worse than nothing’. Thus, we see that whereas he might have appeared at first to be her equal, he is in fact, worthless. Given these few details, can we really approve of him and his motives? Can we, similarly, approve of Portia’s choice? She is excited to welcome him to Belmont because he is good looking, physically he is more suited to her ideal than either Morocco or Arragon; she is guilty of looking with her eyes and not her head, refusing to see that although Bassanio may well ‘glisten’ he is neither in possession of, nor has the personal value one might equate with, gold. She proceeds to reveal the secrets of the caskets with a facile little song:

Tell me where is fancy bred,
Or in the heart, or in the head?
How begot, how nourished?

Herein, the first three lines give away Daddy’s game quite transparently. Portia shames herself in setting up this trite device, lets down her late father and disheartens her audience. The end words – *bred, head, nourished* all rhyme with *lead*; Portia all but points to the right casket and so chooses this marriage herself. Just forty lines or so before, Portia tells Bassanio that he is her favoured suitor – ‘One half of me is yours, the other half . . . all yours’ – admitting her feelings for this newcomer rather boldly, tied as she is to the terms of her father’s trial. We must note that Bassanio is just the sort of opportunist from whom Portia’s father wished to protect her but she disobeys her father’s will. Portia is not the only Shakespearean daughter to let down her father: Celia runs away from her tyrannical father in *As You Like It*; all three daughters fail to live up to their father’s expectations in *King Lear*; Jessica, in this play, disappoints Shylock.

Back to Bassanio, he does, of course, risk all for the lead casket; naturally, he wins the prize of ‘a lady richly left’, an attractive and wealthy heiress for a wife. He fulfills his intention in Act 1 Scene I; there he tells Antonio that he wishes to marry Portia ‘to get clear of all the debts’ he owes. Her subsequent quick – too hasty? – declaration of her feelings, anchored in relief, is tender and starry-eyed while also frustrating -

for you
I would be trebled twenty times myself;
A thousand times more fair, ten thousand times more rich

- committing herself, as she does -

to be directed,
As from her lord, her governor, her king.

Portia gives up her independence – both financial and domestic – making Bassanio master of herself and her material assets, “Myself and what is mine to you and yours / is now converted.” We cannot help but ask if he is really worth the trouble? Again, we are subject as an audience to the conditions of the twenty-first century, to being alive at a time when women expect social and economic parity. What is to come though is something of an impending sting in the tail from which we can take some comfort. Perhaps Portia has not been as naïve as we may at first have thought; she places a condition on their union which she later comes to test to her ‘vantage’. She offers a ring to her betrothed – ‘Which when you part from, lose, or give away,/ Let it presage the ruin of your love’ — and how portentous this act turns out to be.

Minutes later, Bassanio redeems himself to us, concerned as he is for Antonio—this ‘kindest man’—who he learns is in peril: one cannot but help feel a presentiment of tension when, in the future, he will come to choose between his wife and his friend. If we jump ahead to Act 4 Scene i, Portia does save Antonio’s Christian bacon, disguised as a male lawyer—to which we will return when discussing Shylock—but for the time being, it is the test of Bassanio’s conjugal love which we must examine. In Act 4 Scene ii, Bassanio feels a huge debt to this young ‘doctor’ of law—for having rescued Antonio from certain death removing the debts for which he was responsible – s/he, when pushed, asks for that ring, his wife’s ring, as a token of thanks. After refusing, Bassanio listens to Antonio -‘Let his deservings and my love withal/ Be valued against your wife’s commandment’—and sends the ring to him/her. Here, he gives Portia the upper hand; on returning to Belmont giddy with the victory over Shylock, little does he know that all that glistened in the courtroom was not as it seemed. She is all too ready to catch him out and assert her wit and ascendancy, setting him up with heavily loaded dramatic irony, reporting how she gave a ring to her ‘love’ and ‘dare be sworn for him he would not leave it/ Nor pluck it from his finger, for the wealth’ of the world.

The ring motif reminds us of that in another problem play, *All’s Well that Ends Well*.³ In both plays, we ought to bear in mind the Elizabethan comprehension that a ‘ring’ symbolizes female genitalia; in both plays, there is reference to bed hopping and swapping. Granted, it is only joked about in *Merchant* and never actually realised, unlike Helena’s cunning antics in the later, darker play; she tricks Bertram into sleeping with her and so marrying her. Portia, instead, declares that ‘by this ring, the doctor lay with’ her, telling no lies as she cannot but help sleep by her own side, she being the ‘Doctor’ herself! All the same she is not really out to punish her beloved husband at all costs and cannot keep up her ruse. In true comedic style, order is restored. Disguises are removed; Portia reveals herself to have been the lawyer and graciously welcomes Antonio into her home.

It is to Shylock that we must turn our focus now, to the relationship between him and the Venetian Christians. Here we must decide – once more bound by our modern shackles—whether or not Bassanio, Antonio and their compatriots are worthy of our support or condemnation. In other words, whose naughty world is it? Our first encounter with Shylock is in Act 1 Scene iii, a meeting with Bassanio on the streets of Venice; to recap, Antonio has sent his young friend out to borrow money in his name, funds which will enable him to pursue Portia. In Venice at this time, the Jews were tolerated as they were useful to the Christians, they were allowed to lend money and charge interest – what Shylock calls ‘well-won thrift’—thereupon, thus making something of a living. They had very few other rights there or indeed in England⁴ —‘sufferance’ being ‘the badge of all [their] tribe’. Shylock appears aloof, he refuses to dine with the Christians – ‘to smell pork’ – he is very cool and calculating in his negotiations; he tells us that he hates Antonio because he debases the very work that a Jew is allowed to do—‘he lends out money gratis’. Indeed, Shylock declares that he will, if he can, have Antonio ‘on the hip’ and ‘feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him’ not only for undermining his earning power, but also for railing against Shylock and his ‘ancient nation’, for spitting upon his ‘Jewish gaberdine’ and calling him such names as ‘misbeliever, cut-throat dog’. Antonio, like many Christians of the time, is seen to be both xenophobic and scheming; perhaps you think that he deserves his come-uppance in the court room? Perhaps you can empathise with Shylock, goaded as he is into vengeance by the constant taunts of the Christians—represented as they are by Antonio—

grieving as he is the loss of his beloved only child, his daughter Jessica, to the Christian Lorenzo, with whom she has absconded

There is certainly tension between the two financiers – Antonio does not normally borrow from the Jewish moneylenders and is doing so now only for love of Bassanio – Shylock taunts Antonio for borrowing uncharacteristically and Antonio returns the taunt by likening Shylock to the devil and a rotten apple, asking him to lend the money ‘to thine enemy’ since friends should not be tied into unforgiving bonds. The terms of the contract are made clear – Antonio will allow Shylock to cut off a pound of his flesh if he does not pay up – and both men, Antonio somewhat swaggeringly, agree to it. So the die is cast; Antonio and Shylock – enemies – are bound to each other for the rest of the play.

The climax of this arrangement—and the most dramatically interesting scene of the play, particularly for an actor, be it as Portia, Antonio or Shylock—occurs in the courtroom of Act IV Scene i. Immediately, the Christian Duke colours our perception of Shylock:

A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch
Uncapable of pity, void and empty
From any dram of mercy

And Shylock pins his colours to his mast declaring that he has sworn on the ‘Holy Sabbath’ to ‘have the due and forfeit of [his] bond’ having as he does, ‘a lodged hate and a certain loathing’ for Antonio. What follows is Shylock demanding his bond, the Christians appealing to what they hope is his better nature and him standing firm and resolute that he shall have his pound of flesh—his interest— as promised by Antonio in the pact. He is, though, setting himself up to be hoist by his own petard, demanding that the letter of the law be followed, feeling no compulsion to pardon, unable in the future, as the Duke points out, to ‘hope for mercy, rendering none’. Against this backdrop, Portia utters (in disguise as Balthasar) the seminal speech concerning the ‘quality of mercy’, a universally timeless address for those wielding any sort of power—for rulers and governors everywhere. Mercy, then, is the thing of great value to the Christians in this scene. Mercy, were Shylock to show it, would, for Antonio at least, ‘glisten’ in this ‘naughty world’. For Shylock though, his bond is a matter of great principle providing him with vengeful hope; it is everything to him when he has nothing, no daughter, no respect from the Venetians. It is seemingly worthless to the court of Venice, in that he will end up with a mere pound of carrion flesh instead of three—or even six—thousand ducats. But he will have his bond. Shylock refuses even to have a surgeon at hand to prevent Antonio from bleeding to death—‘tis not in the bond’—so intent is he to have the agreement fulfilled to the letter.

Just before Shakespeare puts Antonio and his audience out of their misery, he reminds us that we are still watching a comedy by allowing us a charming moment of dramatic irony. Bassanio and Gratiano both declare to Antonio that they would give up their wives to have Antonio free—unbeknown to them their wives stand right next to them in this courtroom. Treading a path between tension and humour, Shakespeare allows Shylock’s subsequent comment to reverberate, showing up as it does these men for what they are—

These be the Christian husbands. I have a daughter;
Would any of the stock of Barrabas
Had been her husband rather than a Christian!

and showing up Shakespeare not as anti-Semitic, but as a playwright happy to criticise his own society and the men therein. He does not hold up a mirror to Christians in which they see themselves altogether favourably, rather any laughter that he elicits is conditioned by some discomfort at the way in which these ‘husbands’ behave, not even their wives can rely upon them.

Portia nonetheless secures Antonio’s release by means of a legal loophole—

This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood;
The words expressly are ‘a pound of flesh.’

—allowing Shylock ‘nothing but the penalty’, justice more than he desired, for if he sheds any blood not only will everything he owns be confiscated by the court, but he will die, an ‘alien’, having no right to plot against the life of a Venetian citizen. What we see here is that any justice in *The Merchant of Venice* is very much that of the Old Testament—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—and so Antonio steps in to demean Shylock beyond all compare. Crestfallen and feeling sick, Shylock quits the stage, leaving the Christians to their celebrations; the Christians all return to Belmont to tell of their

'good deed' to Lorenzo and Jessica.

As for so many of Shakespeare's Comedies, we cannot help but question the tenor of the play's ending. To return to an earlier question, does Portia's 'good deed'—that of rescuing Antonio from certain death—leave us happy? Likewise, are we content that she has met a worthy match in Bassanio? These problems remain as such after more than three hundred years—so go figure!

Notes

1. Earliest known usage is to be found in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The House of Fame* (1384): 'Hit is not al gold, that glareth.'
2. In *The Jew of Malta* (performed c. 1590/1592) the Jew, Barabas, starts the play sitting in his counting house counting out his money, soliloquising about the trade vessels in which he has interests. Ultimately he meets something of a sticky end at the hands of the Christians, being dropped into a cauldron and thus boiled alive on stage, cursing as he burns, 'Damned Christian dogs, and Turkish infidels!' - sound familiar?
3. First performed c. 1602/1603, first published 1623.
4. In England, too, they were afforded little hospitality, being banned from residence, the only Jews who were allowed to live in seventeenth-century England did so under the guise of being Christians, tolerated because of their 'usefulness', like the Queen's Doctor, Rodrigo Lopez, a Portuguese-born Jew, ultimately conspired against by the Queen's advisors and duly hung, drawn and quartered in 1594. When Gratiano suggests that Shylock is possessed by the spirit of a wolf 'hanged for human slaughter', is he in fact alluding to Lopez (Lupus = Wolf)?

Bibliography

Wolf in Sheep's Clothing?, by John Gross in *The Spectator*, June 14, 2003.

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