COMEDY, TRAGEDY, OR PROBLEM PLAY?

From the very beginning, *The Merchant of Venice* has uncomfortably straddled the boundary between comedy and tragedy. Shakespeare wrote the play around 1596. When it was registered for publication the entry described it as "a book of the Merchant of Venice or otherwise called The Jew of Venice" as if it were already unclear whether this was Antonio's or Shylock's story. The title page of the first edition of the play in 1600 didn't do much to clarify matters, dodging the comedy vs. tragedy question in favor of calling it a "most excellent history" and going on to emphasize both the "extreme cruelty of Shylock the Jew toward the said merchant in cutting a just pound of his flesh" and "the obtaining of Portia by the choice of the three caskets." In 1623, the comedy classification became canonical, when Heminges and Condell placed it among the comedies in the First Folio of Shakespeare's work.

Critics still argue about whether the play tilts toward comic harmony or tragic dissonance. Among those who have seen in the play an expression of sunny comedy is Harley Granville-Barker, who claimed in 1930 that there "is no more reality in Shylock's bond and the Lord of Belmont's will than in *Jack and the Beanstalk*," and concludes that "the play ends, pleasantly, and with formality, as a fairy tale should." Critics in this camp point to the multiple marriages with which the play ends, the triumph of mercy over law, and the overcoming of the traditional comic blocking figure, Shylock. Within this view, the play is one of simple oppositions: Jew and Christian; law and mercy; false bonds and true ones; Venice and Belmont.

This benign view has been increasingly called into question, for to sustain it so much has to be ignored. Lines like Portia's racist remark rejecting her African suitor Morocco—"Let all of his complexion woo me so"—must be cut, ignored, or rendered innocuous in footnotes (which desperately try to suggest that "complexion" means "temperament"). Act 3, scene 5 must also be downplayed or cut, as it often is. Here, Lorenzo and Launcelot accuse each other of polluting the commonwealth, one for marrying a Jew, the other for impregnating a black serving-woman. It's not just matters of race that are smoothed over or ignored by those who want to see the play as a pristine comedy: Antonio's love for Bassanio—the obvious reason for his sadness—is also overlooked or written off as merely platonic. The position of women in the play is also quite disturbing. Why must every woman in the play dress as a man to obtain her desires? How do the lively women of the opening acts become submissive or silent at the end? Why does the play end with Gratiano's dirty joke at Nerissa's expense?

Also ignored in the argument for unsullied comedy is the treatment of Shylock. Especially in a post-Holocaust world, it's difficult to see any comedy in the humiliation, mockery, and forced conversion of a Jew. Even in the late nineteenth century there were many who felt that the play succeeded better as tragedy than comedy, and the influential stage productions of Edwin Booth and Henry Irving ended prematurely and on a tragic note upon Shylock's departure, defeated, at the end of the trial scene.

In Shakespeare's festive comedies, from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to *As You Like It*, the action moves from city to country and back to city. The green world is a place where conflicts caused by the social dislocations and harsh laws of the urban world can be worked out. Departing from this model, *The Merchant of Venice* ends in Belmont, not Venice. Is this because the world of Venice is simply too dark and disturbing or because the oppositions between the two worlds turn out to be false ones, and that Belmont, once the surface is scratched, is not much different from Venice? Are the marriages made in Belmont love matches, or are Bassanio, Lorenzo and Gratiano—spendthrifts in the past—merely hedging their bets against future lean times by assuring wealth through marriage? Might this be the reason for Portia's pensive silence at the play's end? Such issues, along with the departure of Shylock from the courtroom and Act 5's uneasy resolution, make it difficult to accept an overly lighthearted reading of the play.