

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

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The Merchant of Venice by H. L. Withers

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**THE MERCHANT
OF VENICE**

THE WARWICK SHAKESPEARE

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THE MERCHANT
OF
VENICE

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PREFATORY NOTE.

I have been allowed, by the indulgence of the General Editor and of the Publishers of 'The Warwick Shakespeare', to follow a method of arrangement somewhat different from that pursued in other volumes of the series. I have aimed at concentrating attention, in the first instance, on the Play itself, its plot, and the persons who were concerned in it. It is meant that a reading of the whole Play, as nearly continuously as possible, should precede any use of introduction or notes. Wherever practicable, the learner is himself to verify comment or criticism. To this end, blanks, between brackets, have often been left to be filled in after requisite search for the passage referred to. The Appendix on Prosody presupposes that the Play is being constantly read aloud or repeated, and that metrical exercises are being attempted in Blank Verse. It is taken for granted that a few very well-known books are within easy reach,—a 'Globe' edition of Shakespeare, Professor Dowden's *Primer*, Dr. Abbott's *Shakespearian Grammar*, Professor Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary*, and, if possible, the Variorum Edition (edited by Dr. H. H. Furness) of *The Merchant of Venice*; and, further, that these books are actually handled in course of study, both in preparation and in school-work.

All this, I am aware, gives a rudimentary look to the volume. But *The Merchant of Venice* is often the first of

to make proper use of a more erudite commentary.

H. L. W.

INTRODUCTION.

I. THE PLOT.

In the days when Venice was the busiest and wealthiest city in all Europe, there lived in it a rich merchant named Antonio, who by means of several great ships of his own traded eastward as far as India, and westward as far as Mexico. This Antonio, at a time when all his wealth was at sea, wishing to furnish his young kinsman and dearest friend, a soldier and scholar called Bassanio, with means to pay his court to Portia, a lady of Belmont in Italy, borrowed the sum of three thousand ducats, for three months, from an enemy of his own, one Shylock, a Jew, on agreement that, if he failed to repay the sum in time, he should suffer the loss of a pound of his own flesh. On the selfsame night in which Bassanio, thus equipped, set sail from Venice, an acquaintance of his, by name Lorenzo, fled to the mainland of Italy with Jessica, Shylock's only child, carrying off also a quantity of his jewels and money. This loss so inflamed the Jew's malice, that when Antonio's ships failed to come home within the period of three months, Shylock flung him into prison and clamoured to the Duke for execution of the forfeit on his bond. Meantime Bassanio, by a right choice among three caskets respectively of gold, silver, and lead, having won Portia to wife, in the very hour of marriage heard of Antonio's danger, and, provided by Portia with three times the sum needed, sped to Venice. His intervention failing, Antonio was saved in extremity by Portia herself, who, in the guise of a Doctor of Civil Law, followed her husband into the Duke's Court of Justice. The trial over, they returned severally to

Belmont, Bassanio taking Antonio with him; there Portia, by means of a ring which in her disguise she had got from Bassanio, made clear to him who it was that had delivered his friend from death.

2. SOURCES OF THE PLOT.

Note.—This section is only for pupils who can read, or get somebody to read to them, at least a few extracts either from the authorities given below or from the abridgment in Furness' Variorum Edition. For others it will be unintelligible and useless.

1. Shakespeare did not as a rule invent the incidents which occur in his plays, but borrowed them, in outline at least, from Shakespeare's very various sources. Some of his plots are plots not original founded on older plays, others on romances; several are taken from Sir Thomas North's version of a French rendering of *Plutarch's Lives*. Scholars have spent endless pains in tracking out the old plays and stories on which Shakespeare drew for material; a number of them were collected and published in the year 1843 by John Payne Collier, under the title of *Shakespeare's Library*.

2. In the case of *The Merchant of Venice*, the outline of the plot, as has been given above, was found by Capell as one of a collection of stories in an Italian book called *Il Pecorone*, written by a certain Ser Giovanni Fiorentino, and printed in 1378. A modern translation of it is given in the second volume of Collier's *Shakespeare's Library*; but no translation of Shakespeare's time has been discovered, and either such a translation once existed and has since perished, or else Shakespeare read the story in the original Italian. [For another possible alternative, see § 4, below.]

The story in *Il Pecorone* is, in main particulars, the same as that given above. We find in it a Venetian merchant fondly devoted to a young kinsman, and this kinsman in love with a fair and wise lady of Belmont, who is only to be won by the suitor who shall undergo successfully an extraordinary test; we have the same pledge with a Jew, made for the same purpose, followed by the lover's success and the

Main outline of
Merchant of
Venice derived
from *Il Pecorone*.

merchant's bankruptcy, and later on by a trial in which the merchant's rescue is achieved, through just the same interpretation of the law, by the lady in the same disguise; and finally, on their return to Belmont it is by means of a ring, begged from her husband when in Venice, that she is able, after due banter and mystification, to prove her identity with the unknown lawyer.

There are minor differences; for instance, in the Italian story none of the names of persons are the same as Shakespeare's. The lover makes *three* voyages to Belmont; the sum borrowed is *ten* thousand ducats; when the marriage takes place the young kinsman forgets the merchant, and is only accidentally reminded of him just as the time allowed by the bond is on the point of expiring; and so on.

But, besides these slight variations, two important differences in incident are made by Shakespeare. First, he changes the method by which the Lady of Belmont is to be won, from its unsuitable form in *Il Pecorone* to that of the choice among three caskets; and secondly, he gives the Jew a daughter, whose elopement with a Christian forms an important part of the play.

3. The sources of these two variations must be looked for elsewhere. (i) The story of a choice among three vessels, respectively of gold, silver, and lead, with inscriptions somewhat similar to those in the play, and with a marriage depending on the right choice, occurs in the *Gesta Romanorum*, a Latin collection of mediæval tales, made in England probably about the thirteenth century. This collection was translated into English, became extremely popular, and was frequently printed in Shakespeare's time.¹ (ii) A story resembling in some points that of Jessica has been found in the Tales of Masuccio di Salerno, who flourished about 1470.

4. Scholars have proved that both the story of the Pound of Flesh, and the story of the Caskets, were widely popular, and that they occur in slightly different forms again and

¹ Any good library will possess the reprint of this collection, published by the Early English Text Society.

Sources of the
main changes of
incident.