



The Complete Merchant of Venice: An Annotated Edition Of The Shakespeare Play

Donald J. Richardson

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The Merchant of Venice is problematic. Not only does it present the disparate and unrelated stories of the caskets and the trial for a pound of flesh, but it challenges contemporary audiences to evaluate the treatment of Jews and what constitutes justice. The character of Shylock, although presented as an object of ridicule and even comedy to Shakespeare's patrons, might even be considered tragic to one sensitive to injustice. In fact the implied definition of justice is challenging: what justice is represented by a forced conversion from one belief to another? The definition of friendship between Antonio and Bassanio is itself quite satisfying; Bassanio at one point says he would sacrifice his wife for the friendship (IV.i.292-97) which naturally Portia bridles at. The character of Portia, herself, is also challenging. While intelligent, rich, and beautiful, she behaves questionably when she deliberately entraps Bassanio-her affianced lover-into ostensibly betraying her by giving away her ring and then apparently treating the whole incident as a joke. Surely Bassanio is entitled to a modicum of resentment if not anger. Additionally, she entices Nerissa to do the same with Gratiano. While this scene (V.ii) would evoke great laughter from an audience who is in on the joke, to a modern-thinking person, it smacks of sexism: ridicule the male at his expense and make fun of him for his resentment. Of course, the groundlings would pay no attention to such an offense. It seems clear that The Merchant of Venice today demands re-interpretation and re-definition.

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