Presentation of Portia's speech: 'The Quality of Mercy is not strained'

Introduction

Many years ago, I discovered Portia's speech about "The quality of mercy" in a TV detective story, in which some Oxford students were rehearsing the trial scene of *The Merchant of Venice.* It was the first time that I heard this speech. I was fascinated but didn't analyse why. Later, I bought the DVD of the lavish adaptation of the play by Michael Redford for the cinema in 2004. It gave me its "big picture" and I realized that Portia's speech was not only a beautiful piece of English language, but also a double-edged weapon that she used for crushing the revengeful Shylock, step by step. So, it appeared that the magnificent Portia was not as generous as she looked first, and that the hatred of Shylock may be rooted as much in social injustice as in his religious convictions. As my fascination for this play increased, I decided last summer to explore it a little further. First, I read the play, of course, then the relevant "York notes Advanced" book[1]. I also followed a MOOC about Shylock, delivered by Professor Greenblatt[2], and more recently, in Harold Bloom's book[3] "*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*", I read the chapter addressing *The Merchant*. Both Bloom and Greenblatt being Jewish, I found that their views on Shakespeare's anti-Semitic play quite interesting.

So today, I would like to present some of the play's features, revolving around Portia's speech, which have impressed me the most throughout my journey into *The Merchant of Venice.*

Presentation of Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*

Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*, was first performed around 1597. Though popular, this is a complex play. It has romance and comedy, and tragedy is narrowly averted. It offers two strong character-roles in Portia and Shylock, who act as the drama's two directors, each pulling strongly for different generic destinations. On the one hand, Shylock will have a tragic melodrama, with himself as a knife-whetting villain and Antonio, the merchant of the title, as a victim. Portia, on the other hand, manoeuvres the plot and its characters towards comic resolution. As Bloom puts it "The play is Portia's, and not Shylock's, but Shylock is the first of Shakespeare's internationalized hero-villains."

So, in its structure, *The Merchant of Venice* is a comedy. It contains all the standard elements: lyrical courtship, fairy-tale plot, obstructions to overcome, and a happy ending.

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[1] *The Merchant of Venice (York Notes Advanced)*, Longman, 1998.
[2] HarvardX: Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice: Shylock | edX
[3] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare – The Invention of the Human*, Riverhead Books, 2008.

However, Shakespeare never abided by the classical division of drama into strictly comic and strictly serious. His comedies came to include more and more problems, difficult to resolve. We thus can see *The Merchant of Venice* as his first dark comedy, anticipating his later 'problem comedies', such as *All's Well That Ends Well* that we are studying this term.

Another complex issue resides in the evolution of its interpretation since 1600, along the changes in society and in its attitude to religion itself, to Christianity, to Judaism, and to Jews. Modern audiences are made particularly uncomfortable by the play's anti-Semitism. Moreover, throughout its development, the play invites us to reassess our opinions, to revalue the very conventions on which it is built. The attractive and the repellent are mingled: Bassanio is lover and thoughtless spendthrift, Antonio respected merchant and anti-Semite, Portia intelligent heroine and calculating deceiver. And Shylock himself is sternest challenge to comic optimism in the play.

To summarize the plot: Antonio, a rich merchant, lends his young friend Bassanio 3,000 ducats so that he can go to Belmont and court Portia, a beautiful heiress. As Antonio's ships are at sea, he must borrow this sum from Shylock, for a term of three months. Instead of lending him money with interest, the Jew offers Antonio an odd deal, which gives Shylock the right to cut a pound of Antonio's flesh if the 'merry bond' is not kept. All Antonio's ships fail to come to port, and his bond is forfeit. In the trial scene at the climax, the wit and skill of Portia (who is disguised as a male lawyer), save Antonio from death, thus foiling Shylock's revenge. Shylock must become a Christian to save his own life. Then in the last act, the three happy young couples reunite in the escapist world of Belmont.

The story of the flesh bond is weaved with another story from folklore: by her father's will, Portia must marry the man who chooses correctly between three caskets of gold, silver, and lead. Bassanio chooses the right one and marries Portia. There is also a second romantic element in the play: Shylock's daughter, Jessica, elopes with Lorenzo, another fortune hunter, and becomes a Christian too.

Introduction of the passage

Now, let's focus on the trial scene, the climax of the play in Act IV scene 1. I have chosen the famous speech delivered by Portia, 'The Quality of Mercy is not Strained' because it is not only the keynote of the play, but also the key which allowed me to enter the universe of *The Merchant*. This speech makes us think about justice, mercy, forgiveness, and above all, about what it means to be human. I can now understand why it made such a strong impression on me when I heard it for the first time. Thus, to convey the solemnity and drama of the passage, the lines are written in blank verse (iambic pentameters).

The scene takes place in Venice, at the Court of justice. Antonio, who failed to convince Shylock the day before, patiently awaits his fate. Shylock refuses the Duke's plea for clemency and Bassanio's offer of twice the money. The Duke accepts that a young Doctor Balthasar (Portia in disguise) tries the case.

Reading of the passage: *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, scene 1, lines 171 - 205

PORTIA

I am informed thoroughly of the cause.
Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?

DUKE

Antonio and old Shylock, both stand forth.

PORTIA

Is your name Shylock?

SHYLOCK

Shylock is my name.

PORTIA

Of a strange nature is the suit you follow;
Yet in such rule that the Venetian law
Cannot impugn you as you do proceed.
You stand within his danger, do you not?

ANTONIO

Ay, so he says.

PORTIA

Do you confess the bond?

ANTONIO

I do.

PORTIA

Then must the Jew be merciful.

SHYLOCK

On what compulsion must I? Tell me that.

PORTIA

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
To mitigate the justice of thy plea;
Which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there.

SHYLOCK

My deeds upon my head! I crave the law,
The penalty and forfeit of my bond.

Main points to emphasize:

There are two obvious themes in this passage: justice and mercy. And Portia's speech alerts the audience to what is at stake. Shylock has the right in law to his pound of flesh and refuses the plea for mercy. He insists on justice, the law, his bond. Likewise, just after her speech, Portia refuses Bassanio's plea that she should relax the law, because she knows that Antonio's salvation lies in the exact wording of the bond. Although every argument and move counts in the trial scene, the trial is dramatic rather than legal: it is a contest between two radical attitudes to the human life which is at stake. Indeed, the different reactions of Portia, Gratiano, the Duke and Antonio toward Shylock cause us to think of justice rather than character, and we shall not all come to the same conclusions.

Portia uses the Christian argument for mercy, that is, no-one deserves salvation, for it is only God's mercy that can save a human soul. It does not move Shylock, who demands justice according to the law. Yet Shylock's true motive is not respect for law, but revenge.

In Shakespeare's days, the stereotype about Jews was to regard them as a separate people, harsh and vengeful. Shylock's insistence on blood contrasts with Antonio's willingness to lay down his life for his friend, a version of the supreme Christian ideal of love. Antonio forgives Bassanio's prodigality; Shylock cannot forgive Jessica's. Near the end of the trial, the Duke pardons Shylock's life before he asks it. He points out that Christians forgive without being asked. This is an illustration not of the Duke's character, but of the play's theme: 'the quality of mercy' is that it is not 'strained' but free, gratis.

However, in Shakespeare's plays, there are no black and white situations, no angel nor demon, his main characters are all ambivalent human beings. In the triangle made by the three main protagonists in this passage—and in the play—Shylock, Antonio and Portia, who is the hero? Who is the villain?

Antonio, as so many critics observe, is Shylock's mirror image, bonded with him in mutual hatred, and no more cheerful than Shylock is.

Though Antonio is generally gentle, patient, and unselfish towards his friends, he's openly rude to Shylock and sees no need to apologise for it. Shylock may be a 'cut-throat usurer', but he is not a dog and does not deserve to be spat at. We cannot condone Antonio's treatment, for it is a striking exception to his general courtesy and confirms the general rule that Christians in the play taunt Shylock in a way that shows no Christian humility. The demand that Shylock become a Christian denies liberty of religion, but in 1600, such a liberty was practically unknown, and Christian doctrine was that without conversion, Shylock's soul would be damned. However, Bloom has another view of the forced conversion:

> It is Shakespeare own invention, and I never find it dramatically persuasive that Shylock should consent to it. Portia may have broken Shylock, but she has not pulverized him, and it is no longer Shylock who stumbles off stage, soon to be a new Christian, or a false Christian, or whatever. Why did Shakespeare allow Antonio this final turn of the torturer's screw? (…) Shakespeare needs the conversion, not so much to reduce Shylock as to take the audience off to Belmont without a Jewish shadow hovering in the ecstatic if gently ironic final act. (*Shakespeare – The Invention of the Human*, pp. 175-6)

Portia's role is that of golden princess, prize, and bride in the fairy-tale casket test. Her readiness to give her fortune and herself away for love is matched by Antonio's. This loving and giving is in stark contrast to a greed which prefers ducats to a daughter and a hate which prefers a pound of flesh to thousands of ducats.

In Belmont, Portia is not just a beautiful and dutiful daughter, who resists the temptation to guide Bassanio's choice of the casket. When his friend's plight is known, she is generous, quick, decisive: he must go to his friend, but marry first. She keeps quiet about her rescue attempt. From passive heroine in Belmont, she becomes active hero in Venice.

Her performance in the trial is masterly, first setting out rights and wrongs (as we have seen in 'The quality of mercy is not strained' speech), then leading Shylock into the trap where he had led Antonio. Her skills and touch are no less sure after the trial, as she rapidly manipulates her 'merry sport' in Venice and at Belmont. She has the gifts of an actor-manager, getting the most out of each situation. It seems that Shakespeare has succeeded the impossible task of making a young, beautiful, clever, and rich woman into a virtuous example of selfless love, while persuading us that she is hard-headed, modest, witty and good fun (*York Notes*, p.65).

But has he? As many spectators or readers of the play, I find it very uncomfortable that after her speech, within half a scene, Portia is showing herself incapable of mercy. When she cleverly comes up with an even more specific reading of the bond, she breaks Shylock's existence step by step. As Harold Bloom puts it:

> Portia, the play's centre, is far more complex and shadowed than ever I have seen her played as being. (…) More even than the vicious Gratiano, she incarnates the "anything goes" spirit of Venice, and her quality of mercy cheerfully tricks Shylock out of his life's savings in order to enrich her friends. (…) She is at worst a happy hypocrite, far too intelligent not to see that she is not exactly dispensing Christian mercy, except by Venetian standards (*Shakespeare - The Invention of the Human*, pp. 177-8)

Shylock, like Portia, is a character taken from an old story and much changed by Shakespeare. Unlike Marlowe's Jew of Malta, his Jew is no longer a caricature, though he remains the villain of a story where evil is not all on one side.

Indeed, our attitude to Shylock varies sharply. We recoil from his expressed hatred, but when we hear of his treatment by Antonio, we sympathise. When we see him taunted by Christians and tortured by Tubal's news, his emotion is intense, and his pain evokes pity. However, this feeling is soon followed by revulsion, for his lust for money is such that he prefers his ducats to his daughter, and kills the sympathy aroused by his speech 'If you prick us, do we not bleed?' (Act III, Scene 1). His bloody revenge puts Shylock beyond what Christianity can approve.

His performance at the trial is dominating, unbending, obsessive: he savours the prospect of revenge, exposes the hypocrisy of Christian slaveholding, and dismisses with contempt all pleas for mercy and offers of money. He meets his match in Portia, and when he is surprised, outwitted, and prevented from taking his revenge, Shakespeare's contemporary audience must have rejoiced.

But today, our feelings sway as we watch Shylock trying to save 9,000 ducats, then 3,000 ducats, then his dignity. He tries to leave but must face the penalty for attempting the life of a citizen. He is told to kneel for mercy, and a kind of mercy is extended to him (*York Notes Advanced*, 2005, pp. 65-67.) But when he replies, 'I am content', who could believe him? Here, I do agree with Bloom's opinion about Shylock's forced conversion.

Thus, if Antonio is not the lamb for the slaughter, then Shylock must be the scapegoat. There is always a cost: even comedy must expel its dissidents. "Reduced by the triumphant Portia into an offstage benefactor, Shylock becomes part of the mechanism of the comic world. But that world will never be quite the same again."[4] Shylock's fierce emotions trouble our memory as we think over the justice of his fate. Comedy with happy endings can be serious.

[4] William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Collins Classics (2013): Introduction, p.3.