TEXT AND PERFORMANCE

General Editor: Michael Scott

The series is designed to introduce sixth-form and undergraduate students to the themes, continuing vitality and performance of major dramatic works. The attention given to production aspects is an element of special importance, responding to the invigoration given to literary study by the work of leading contemporary critics.

The prime aim is to present each play as a vital experience in the mind of the reader – achieved by analysis of the text in relation to its themes and theatricality. Emphasis is accordingly placed on the relevance of the work to the modern reader and the world of today. At the same time, traditional views are presented and appraised, forming the basis from which a creative response to the text can develop.

In each volume, Part One: *Text* discusses certain key themes or problems, the reader being encouraged to gain a stronger perception both of the inherent character of the work and also of variations in interpreting it. Part Two: *Performance* examines the ways in which these themes or problems have been handled in modern productions, and the approaches and techniques employed to enhance the play's accessibility to modern audiences.

A synopsis of the play is given and an outline of its major sources, and a concluding Reading List offers guidance to the student's independent study of the work.

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THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

Text and Performance

BILL OVERTON

M
MACMILLAN
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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

For many years a mutual suspicion existed between the theatre director and the literary critic of drama. Although in the first half of the century there were important exceptions, such was the rule. A radical change of attitude, however, has taken place over the last thirty years. Critics and directors now increasingly recognise the significance of each other's work and acknowledge their growing awareness of interdependence. Both interpret the same text, but do so according to their different situations and functions. Without the director, the designer and the actor, a play's existence is only partial. They revitalise the text with action, enabling the drama to live fully at each performance. The academic critic investigates the script to elucidate its textual problems, understand its conventions and discover how it operates. He may also propose his view of the work, expounding what he considers to be its significance.

Dramatic texts belong therefore to theatre and to literature. The aim of the 'Text and Performance' series is to achieve a fuller recognition of how both enhance our enjoyment of the play. Each volume follows the same basic pattern. Part One provides a critical introduction to the play under discussion, using the techniques and criteria of the literary critic in examining the manner in which the work operates through language, imagery and action. Part Two takes the enquiry further into the play's theatricality by focusing on selected productions of recent times so as to illustrate points of contrast and comparison in the interpretation of different directors and actors, and to demonstrate how the drama has worked on the modern stage. In this way the series seeks to provide a lively and informative introduction to major plays in their text and performance.

MICHAEL SCOTT

PLOT SYNOPSIS AND SOURCES

Antonio is anxious for Bassanio who wishes to court the rich and beautiful Portia in Belmont. Bassanio needs money and Antonio promises it even though all his funds are invested in ships at sea. He borrows from Shylock, a wealthy Jew whom he has previously condemned for taking interest. Instead of paying interest Antonio agrees to forfeit a pound of his flesh if he does not repay Shylock within three months. Shylock accepts a dinner invitation to confirm the bargain. While Shylock is out his daughter Jessica elopes with Lorenzo, one of Bassanio's friends, and robs him. Shylock is grief-stricken and vows revenge.

Portia, according to her father's will, must marry the man who chooses the single casket out of three which contains her portrait. She receives many suitors, two of whom choose the gold and silver caskets and fail. Bassanio chooses the lead casket and wins her, and his friend Gratiano wins her companion Nerissa. But their happiness is interrupted by the news that Antonio's enterprises have failed and Shylock is determined to exact his bond. Portia and Nerissa withdraw, ostensibly to go to a monastery, leaving Lorenzo and Jessica at Belmont. Instead they follow Bassanio and Gratiano to Venice.

At the court where Shylock's claim is tested the Duke cannot persuade him to relent. A lawyer is sent for but Portia and Nerissa, disguised as men, arrive in his place. Portia also tries to persuade Shylock to show mercy. Again he refuses, and she has to award him his pound of flesh. Shylock is about to take it when Portia tells him that the bargain has to be honoured literally: he must take the exact weight, without any blood. He tries to withdraw, but she invokes a law against aliens who threaten the lives of Venetian citizens. He is required to give Lorenzo and Jessica half his present wealth, to bequeath them his estate and to become a Christian.

Portia refuses to accept any fee from Bassanio but insists on taking his engagement ring. Nerissa follows suit with Gratiano. When the two women return to Belmont, they quarrel with

their husbands for the apparent betrayal. Portia reveals the disguise, and they are all reconciled. She gives to Antonio a letter telling him he is rich again, three of his ships having arrived safely, and to Lorenzo Shylock's deed of gift.

SOURCES

Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, written around 1589–90 and revived in 1594 and 1596, was probably the main stimulus to the play. Its elements have a long history in folklore. The version of the bond story most likely to have been used by Shakespeare is Ser Giovanni Fiorentino's in *Il Pecorone* (1558). The closest version of the casket story is in the medieval *Gesta Romanorum* as translated in 1577. Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo probably comes from a story in the fifteenth-century *Novellini* of Masuccio. There may have been an intermediate source play called *The Jew*, now lost.