

**William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*:
A Tragicomedy and a Comedy Proper
A Research Paper Written**

**Prof. Dr. Abdul Sattar Awad Ibrahim
Department of English
College of Education (Ibn Rushd)
University of Baghdad**

Abstract in English

The Merchant of Venice has been considered a tragicomedy by many critics. But the author William Shakespeare defined it as a comedy proper as shown in its first Quarto. It must be mentioned here that the opinions of great critics cannot be opposed in this respect. This research paper displays an analytical and critical presentation which proves the hypothesis that the play is both a tragicomedy and a comedy proper. Furthermore, the research paper sheds light on the idea that the play can be regarded as a romance as well.

This research paper is mainly concerned about discussing the idea that William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* can be considered a tragicomedy and comedy proper. The play is one of Shakespeare's most famous plays and has been widely and broadly discussed and studied all over the world. Many critics have discussed its themes, characters, structure, genre, and other dramatic concerns. In this research paper focus is made on its genre. It is generally agreed that the genre of the play indicates a tragicomedy because it combines both tragic and comedic elements. The tragic elements pertain to Antonio's mood which is indicated by the fact that he has always been dejected through out the entire play partly because of his grief about his allegedly drawn ships and partly because of reasons unknown to the audience. They also pertain to Shylock's sufferings as he has been persecuted by Christians for their anti-Semitism, especially Antonio's abuses directed against him and the loss of his law suit as he is made helpless towards prosecuting Antonio for the one pound of flesh which he claims to take from Antonio, not to mention his humiliation at court. To make things worse, his fortune should be confiscated by the court according to the Venetian laws as alleged by Portia when disguised as a doctor of law, which imply that if an alien like Shylock threatens the life of a Christian, half of his money should be taken by the court and the other half goes to the harmed Christian.

The opinion of those critics who regard the play as a tragicomedy should be highly respected and appreciated. They should be held in high esteem for the reasonable justifications which they have offered in this respect. However, the play can also be considered a comedy proper for the justifications to be elaborated throughout in this research paper.

The pivot of the play revolves around the idea that there is an Italian Merchant, Antonio, waiting for his ships loaded with goods, but he needs money to be given to his friend Bassanio whom he loves most because the latter wants to marry. Thus the themes of love and friendship are highlighted in the play besides the themes of revenge and anti-Semitism.

It is important to note that the play under consideration is classified as a comedy in the first Quarto, and at the same time it exhibits some aspects of Shakespeare's romantic comedies for the themes of love and adventure which figure out in it. It has been said that the play was written by Shakespeare between 1596 and 1598, and that in Shakespeare's time a comedy is meant to be a play that ends happily usually with marriage of the characters involved. According to Richard Regan, the play is characterized by a light-hearted tone, and it includes "movement to a 'green world,' both internal and external conflicts, and a tension between Apollonian and Dionysian values." (1)

Synopsis

The beginning of the play shows that Bassanio, a nobleman, wishes to marry Portia, a beautiful and wealthy heiress. Being a bankrupt who has wasted his money, he resorts to his friend Antonio, a wealthy merchant of Venice and asks him for 3000 ducats to aid his advances towards Portia as a suitor. Now Antonio is cash-poor and demands that Bassanio arrange for a bond to be covered by him if he (Bassanio) will find a moneylender. It happens that Bassanio finds a Jewish moneylender called Shylock and makes his friend Antonio the guarantor of the borrowed money. However, because of his anti-Semitism Antonio makes Shylock his enemy and at the same time the former lends money without taking interest which bothers the latter and obliges him to take lower interest when lending money. At first sight Shylock does not agree to lend Bassanio the amount of money demanded because he remembers how Antonio has badly treated him,

but he eventually agrees to lend him the money without interest upon only one condition that if the money is not returned on time the bond obliges Antonio to offer him one pound of flesh to be cut from his body. Thus Antonio signs the bond and Bassanio leaves for Belmont with the money in his pocket. Bassanio is accompanied by his friend Gratiano, a handsome young man. Portia's father's will stipulates that the person who shall marry her must choose the right casket, each one of gold, silver, and lead. The luxurious Prince of Morocco and the arrogant Prince of Aragon have failed to choose the right casket, but Bassanio has managed to choose it and won Portia's hand in marriage. The Princes' ludicrous behaviour and personalities create laughter and disgust on the part of the audience, and the entire situation of the caskets story excites suspense and curiosity, and at the same time it provides a comic relief for the audience from the tension already created by Bassanio's crisis concerning the money and his friend's efforts to obtain it which may cause him the loss of his life.

On the other hand, Antonio's ships are reported lost at sea, which will make him unable to repay the money according to the bond, and Shylock is determined to bring about the bond and cut one pound of flesh from Antonio's body so that he can avenge himself upon the two Christians Antonio and Lorenzo who once harmed him—the first has abused him and spit into his beard and the second has eloped with his daughter Jessica who has taken with her some of his wealth. She also takes the turquoise ring which was once given to Shylock by her mother Leah. Hence, Antonio has been obliged to be presented before court.

While at Belmont, Bassanio marries Portia and Gratiano marries her maid Nerissa. A letter is sent to Bassanio telling of the inability of Antonio to return the money lent by Shylock. The situation becomes more complicated for the time being. Bassanio and Gratiano leave for Venice, taking money from Portia to be paid to Shylock, and at the same time Portia sends her servant Balthazar to get counsel from her cousin Bellario, a lawyer at Padua.

In the court of the Duke of Venice, Shylock shows his refusal to any offer concerning the returning of his money for he asks only for fulfilling the bond. The Duke finds himself unable to nullify the bond and points to the visitor, a doctor of law, who introduces himself as Balthazar and presents to the Duke a letter of recommendation sent by

the learned lawyer Bellario. The lawyer is actually Portia and the clerk is actually her maid Nerissa, both in disguise. Portia as Balthazar earnestly asks Shylock to be merciful towards Antonio telling him that

The quality of mercy is not strained;
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 throne. (2)

(IV, i, 180-185)

But Shylock forcibly refuses her offer and insists upon taking one pound of flesh from Antonio's body, and no more, and thus Shylock has up till this moment won the case, and is granted his bond, and Antonio shows him his readiness to get what he wants. As Shylock tries to prepare his knife to cut the flesh, Portia interrupts him telling him that he is allowed only to take one pound of flesh without shedding any drop of blood. And if he sheds any drop of blood his properties shall be confiscated. She says:

But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
Are (by the laws of Venice) confiscate
Unto the state of Venice.

(V, i, 305-308)

Shylock retreats and feels that he is going to be defeated. So he accepts the money offered to him, but Portia refuses to give him anything and asks him to have his bond if he can, reminding him that "...nay, if the scale do turn/But in the estimation of a hair/thou diest, and all your goods are confiscate" (V,I, 326-328). Being a Jew and an alien and having attempted to harm a Venetian citizen, Portia points to a Venetian law, which she does not manifest to the Jew, that should forfeit the Jew's property as follows: half of it goes to the government and the other half goes to Antonio, and at the same time the Jew's life is left at the mercy of the Duke. However, Shylock is pardoned and Antonio decides to give his share to Lorenzo and Jessica after Shylock's death. Upon Antonio's request Shylock preserves half of his wealth on the condition that he should convert into a Christian and

bequeath his entire estate to Jessica and Lorenzo. Bassanio offers to give a gift to Portia, and upon his insistence she requests his ring which he gives to her after Antonio's persuasion, and which earlier in the play he promised Portia never to give it to any one as long as he lives. Nerissa, as a clerk, manages to take her ring from Gratiano. Both Bassanio and Gratiano have failed to recognize their wives.

At Belmont, both Bassanio and Gratiano are taunted by their wives who accuse them of losing their rings before revealing the fact that they were the lawyer and the clerk in disguise. Thus they have been teased by their wives. This situation creates a sense of embarrassment and suspense and entertainment on the part of the audience that have witnessed the entire ironical situations both at court and at Belmont. Meanwhile, Antonio receives happy news that three of his own ships have already come safely.

Literary Review and Criticism

It should be concluded that the play ends happily with all the characters content with their destiny. Although Shylock has been humiliated at court, he feels content when one half of his wealth shall be preserved, and he himself has confessed that he is content with what he has given and what he has gone through—he accepts the condition that he converts into a Christian. Furthermore, Shylock must feel happy in so far as he as a moneylender starts to think of increasing his wealth and return what he has already lost—one half of his wealth which will be restored to his daughter and son-in-law after his death. For as moneylender he will inevitably resume his job. In addition to that, Shylock has suffered from a big social problem which is indicated by the marriage of his daughter to a Christian. Now this problem vanishes into the air for he himself becomes a Christian, and thus there will be no difference in religion among Shylock, his daughter, and Lorenzo. This indicates that it is a happy occasion for all the characters of the play that Shylock becomes a Christian, and at the same time it is considered a happy occasion for Christian audiences that a Jew is converted into a Christian, which goes in line with the comedic code that a comedy ends with all the characters happy and content. The play is itself designed to be a comedy as indicated in its first Quarto. Moreover, it is the moral responsibility of the dramatist to set all things within the pattern of comedy which shows a happy ending not only to the characters of the play but also to the audiences

as well. That is the course of events which must be directed by the dramatist. Even the story of the three caskets indicates that it has been determined by the dramatist that Bassanio should choose the right casket as he has been given some hints in the song sung about choosing it during his attempt to fulfill his part in the choice. Therefore things should go alongside the audiences' wishes for the protagonist, Antonio, who should by all means be rescued from the inevitable death designed by the wicked Shylock. Otherwise, there will not be a sense of happiness or of comedy or of romance to be inferred from the play. Furthermore, if Bassanio did not choose the right casket and fulfill Portia's wish to have him as husband, and if Antonio was made to suffer the aftermath of losing the one pound of flesh from his body, the genre of the play would turn into something else other than comedy. That is to say, there would be discrepancy between the form intended by the dramatist as comedy and the sad ending to be felt by the audience.

Of course, Shylock enjoys some sort of happiness when he learns that one half of his money is restored, which contributes to the happy ending for all the characters including him. The caskets story is regarded as thematic and structural for it changes the course of the development of the action. It is made in line with the genre of the play as a comedy, and thus the action of the play leads the audience from one happy occasion to another and this is what has been designated by the dramatist. All the characters are left happy and content. Even Shylock may have started to think of how he will resume his job as a moneylender and restore what he has supposedly lost, not to mention his future reunion with his daughter and son-in-law as three Christians.

Even in moments of seriousness like the one during which Antonio is made upset about his allegedly lost ships and about the loan, Shakespeare does not prevent his audience from enjoying a good time during the presentation of the caskets story. Thus the audience enjoy moments of laughter, suspense and curiosity, which are made not only on the part of the audience but also on the part of the characters involved, not to mention the dramatic irony invoked by the song sung during Bassanio's choice of the right casket.

As a literary genre, comedy may be defined as the interaction of character and action which leads to a happy ending, or it may be

defined as a "work in which the protagonist overcomes moderate difficulties, often through cooperation with others, thus gaining a place in a group or in society-apex." (3) Comedy is always contrasted with tragedy. The main objective of comedy is to amuse the audience and it ends happily. In ancient Greece comedy, as pointed out by Aristotle,

is primarily concerned with humans as social beings, rather than as private persons, and that its function is frankly corrective. The comic artist's purpose is to hold a mirror up to society to reflect its follies and vices in the hope that they will, as a result, be mended.
(4)

A tragicomedy is supposed to be a literary genre that combines both tragic and comic elements. It shows the amalgamation of tragic or serious elements with comic elements which lead to a happy ending. Interestingly enough, the word tragicomedy itself originates with the Roman playwright Plautus who coined the term teasingly in the Prologue to his play *Amphitryon*. The character Mercury declares that the play had better be called tragicomedy because he senses the improper inclusion of servants alongside gods and kings:

I will make it a mixture: let it be a tragicomedy. I don't think it would be appropriate to make it consistently a comedy, when there are kings and gods in it. What do you think? Since a slave also has a part in the play, I 'll make it a tragicomedy. (5)

It must be admitted that Plautus has "facetiously" (6) set such a reference as this concerning the idea of tragicomedy. Bernard Lott declares that "as morning dawns the play ends happily for all except Shylock." (7) But in a comedy all the characters should engage in concerns conducive to happiness. For a comedy is a work of art whose main objective is to amuse and interest the audience. The audience's attention is engaged and attracted by the characters with their sufferings and the complications imposed by the plot. The spectators when watching a comedy are let to expect no disastrous or calamities which may befall any one of the characters involved in the action, and

the play should end happily as happens in all comedies. M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham have their say in this matter:

In the most common literary appreciation, a comedy is a fictional work in which the materials are selected and managed primarily in order to interest and amuse us: the characters and their discomfitures engage our pleasurable attention rather than our profound concern, we are made confident that no great disaster will occur and usually the action turns out happily for the chief characters. (8)

When watching the play enacted on the stage, the audience are engaged by the action from beginning to end: Bassanio's concern to have money to romance the beautiful Portia, Antonio's worries about his ships at sea, Shylock's main concern to revenge upon Antonio who always abuses and humiliates him, Portia's concern about the caskets and the right suitor whom she chooses as her future husband, and finally Portia's efforts to save Antonio's life at court. All these complications have been set by the dramatist to lead to a happy ending on the part of all the characters who are all satisfied by the fortune that occurs to them. Even Shylock leaves the court content with his lot. The plot of the play is subtle and the events are cleverly woven by the dramatist in that the play shows a unity. Thus the play appears to be one of Shakespeare's most successful plays, and the success of *The Merchant of Venice*, according to G. B. Harrison, "is due to a well-knit plot which is worth studying in detail." (9)

Act IV, scene I, shows how intelligently Portia solves the most complicated problem in the play—the supposedly loss of a Christian soul at the hand of a Jew and by means of the law, and at the same time, as shown in the following passage, the audience are informed of how Shylock is left content with his lot:

Antonio. So please my lord the Duke and all the court
To quit the fine for one half of his goods,
I am content; so he will let me have
The other half in use, to render it
Upon his death unto the gentleman
That lately stole his daughter.
Two things provided more,—that for this favour

He presently become a Christian;
 The other, that he do record a gift,
 Here in the court, of all he dies possessed
 Unto his son Lorenzo and his daughter
 Duke. He should do this, or else I do recant
 The pardon that I late pronounce here.
 Portia. Art thou contented, Jew? What dost thou say?
 Shylock. I am content.

(IV, i, 376-390)

Portia's solution of the dilemma of the merchant of Venice, Antonio, is intelligent yet very fascinating. The solution can be described as one that is magical. The dramatist finds it important to insert such a solution as this so that the genre of the play as a comedy can be preserved. It should be noted that Portia and her maid act at court as if they were a *dues ex machina* (10) which often figures in romances, especially Shakespeare's, and this may be the main reason why the play is sometimes classified as a romantic comedy.

Notes

1. Richard Regan, *Shakespearean Comedy*, wikipedia. Org/.../ *The Merchant of Venice*. Retrieved on 11 January 2007. It is also pointed out in the same reference that Apollo and Dionysus, according to Greek mythology, are sons of Zeus. Apollo is the god of the sun, dreams, and reason, while Dionysus is the god of wine, ecstasy and intoxication, and that the two gods are not opposites or rivals, but they are joined together by nature.

2. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Bernard Lott (London: Longman, 1974), p. 175. All subsequent textual quotations are taken from this book and indicated by Act, scene, and line numbers immediately after the quoted material.

3. *The Merchant of Venice*. wiki.answers-com...music genre.

4. Ibid.

5. Plautus, *Amphitryon*, as quoted in Verna A. Foster, *The Name and Adventure of Tragicomedy* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), p.16. Tragicomedy-wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Org/wiki./Tragicomedy.

6. Ibid.

7. Bernard Lott, "Introduction" to William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*. Op. cit. p. vii.

8. M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, ninth edition (Australia: Michael Rosenbery, 2009), p. 48.

9. G. B. Harrison, *Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovi, Inc., 1968), p. 581.

10. *Deus ex machine* is a Latin expression to indicate a supernatural power which is employed by the dramatist to solve problems which cannot be solved by any other means, and as explained by Abrams and Harpham, op. cit. who declare that the expression is a Latin one for "'a god from a machine.' It designates the practice of some Greek playwrights (especially Euripides) to end a drama with a god, lowered to the stage by a mechanical apparatus, who by his judgment and commands resolved the dilemmas of human characters." p. 76.

مسرحية تاجر البندقية لوليم شكسبير: ملهه ماساوية وملهه صالحة تامه

أ.د. عبدالستار عواد ابراهيم

ملخص البحث باللغة العربية

تعد مسرحية تاجر البندقية ملهه ماساوية من قبل الكثير من النقاد، الا ان الكاتب وليم شكسبير قد عرفها على انها مسرحية كوميدية بحتة في اول ظهور لطبعتها الاولى. ولا بد من الاشارة هنا انه لا يمكن معارضة اراء النقاد الكبار في هذا المجال. يقدم البحث عرضا تحليليا ونقديا للمسرحية لاثبات فرضية كون المسرحية مسرحية كوميدية بحتة الى جانب رأي النقاد على انها ملهه ماساوية. ويسلط البحث ايضا على انه يمكن اعتبار المسرحية مسرحية رومانسية.