A Stylistic Approach to Shylock and Portia

Eiko SUHAMA

I

One of the most typical characteristics of the middle comedies, *Much Ado About Nothing, As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, is the role of heroines, who, standing aside from the male world, skilfully dominate the plots and attract the audience with their witty speech and complex personalities made up of divergent traits intellectually and emotionally. Although *The Merchant of Venice* is written several years before those plays and has a unique theme, structure and atmosphere of its own, the heroine belongs to the same world as Beatrice, Rosalind and Viola. They are all lively, brilliant, sensitive and intelligent, though they are of course of different birth and in diverse circumstances. And their expressions are rich in variety and flexibility, which make the heroines in the middle comedies stand out so prominently that other characters look dim beside them.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, however, there is Shylock who is one of Shakespeare’s greatest dramatic creations. He causes much of the critical debate—is he a bloodthirsty villain who is required for the plot or a human being who suffers the loss of his daughter, his property and his religion? Shylock is such a powerful and impressive character that the readers and critics since the 19th century have been inclined to look at him as a tragic human being who is ill treated by the hypocritical christians. But if we look at the play as a whole, it is after all a romantic comedy where the power of love, laughter, beauty and harmony are contrasted with that of hatred, sullenness, ugliness and disharmony. Shylock’s function in the play is to stand in the way of the love story.

Contrast is a fundamental principle in Shakespeare’s dramatic art which is seen in the plots, characters and expressions. In this play, there are two distinct worlds; Venice and Belomont. The title of the play, *The Merchant of Venice*, is taken from Antonio but the central figure of Venice is Shylock, who is old, dark, mercenary and
vengeful, while the representative character of Belmont is Portia, who is young, fair, generous and loving. They are contrasted not only in their characters but also in their speech, which will be shown in the following.

II

Shylock first appears in Act I, Scence iii, talking with Bassanio about the loan in simple, clipped prose, which introduces Shylock himself effectively.

Shy. Three thousand ducats; well.
Bass. Ay, sir, for three months.
Shy. For three months; well.
Bass. For the which, as I told you, Antonio shall be bound.
Shy. Antonio shall become bound; well.
Bass. May you stead me? will you pleasure me? shall I know your answer?
Shy. Three thousand ducats for three months and Antonio bound.
Bass. Your answer to that.
Shy. Antonio is a good man.
Bass. Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?
Shy. Oh, no, no, no, no: my meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that he is sufficient. Yet his means are in supposition: he hath an argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies; I understand, moreover, upon the Rialto, he hath a third at Mexico, a fourth for England, and other ventures he hath, squandered abroad. But ships are but boards, sailors but men: there be land-rats and water-rats, water-thieves and land-thieves, I mean pirates, and then there is the peril of waters, winds and rocks. The man is, notwithstanding, sufficient. Three thousand ducats; I think I may take his bond.

(I. iii. 1–28)

Shylock repeated the words Bassanio said, and at the end of each sentence 'well' is repeated three times, which makes Bassanio so impatient and irritated as to make triple questions, 'May you stead me? will you pleasure me? shall I know your answer?' In reply to Bassanio's demand for a direct answer, Shylock says, 'Antonio is a good man.' This 'good' is used with intentional ambiguity. Bassanio takes it

literally, i.e. 'right or virtuous' and cross-questions, 'Have you heard any imputations to the contrary?' To this, Shylock cunningly covers up by apologizing that 'good' means 'financially sound'. The syntax of his speech is quite simple without any variations, and many punctuations are used. Most of the words are of native origin, but some abstract words of Latin origin are also used; sufficient, supposition, venture, squander, etc., which sound somewhat ill-balanced and incongruous in Shylock's speech.

His description of the dangers of the sea is made bluntly in prose with no epithets at all; 'ships are but boards, sailors but men: there be land-rats and water-rats, water-thieves and land-thieves. . . .' It is interesting to compare his expression with that of Salarino in the opening scene of the play, where he describes Antonio's ships and the dangers that Antonio might face on the sea in a poetic and metaphorical context. (cf. Il. 22-36).

His way of thinking is basically realistic without any ornament. Of course, he sometimes uses poetic or figurative words, but it is always with religious backgrounds and connotations. He uses, for example, the phrase, 'habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into' (I. iii. 33-35), which means 'swine or pork'.

At the end of the quotation, the word, 'bond' appears for the first time in the play. This is the word that Shylock uses so often; 4 times in this scene, and 22 times in all, especially abundant in Act IV, which will be mentioned later. 'Three thousand ducats' is also frequently repeated; 8 times in all. These repetitions give an impressive reverberation throughout the play.

When Antonio enters, Shylock's dialogue, which has so far been in prose, changes to a brief verse aside. They have been hostile to each other and are now face to face for the first time in the play. The following is a long and powerful speech made by Shylock:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Shy.} & \quad \text{Signior Antonio, many a time and oft} \\
& \quad \text{In the Rialto you have rated me} \\
& \quad \text{About my moneys and usances:} \\
& \quad \text{Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,} \\
& \quad \text{For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.} \\
& \quad \text{You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,} \\
& \quad \text{And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,}
\end{align*}\]
And all for use of that which is mine own.
Well then, it now appears you need my help:
Go to, then; you come to me, and you say
'Shylock, we would have moneys:' you say so:
You, that did void your rheum upon my beard
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold: money is your suit.
What should I say to you? Should I not say
'Hath a dog money? is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats? Or
Shall I bend low and in a bondman's key,
With bated breath and whispering humbleness,
Say this:
'Fair sir, You spit on me on Wednesday last;
You spurn'd me such a day; another time
You call'd me dog; and for these courtesies
I'll lend you thus much moneys'?

(I. iii. 107-130)

Here the image of 'dog' is repeated 5 times in 17 lines, which signifies his suppressed fury and desire for revenge, since he has received contemptuous treatment like a dog from Antonio. Later in III. iii. 6, when Antonio comes to ask him for mercy, he repeats the word; "Thou calld'st me dog before thou hast a cause;/ But since I am a dog, beware my fangs;'. 'Moneys' is also a frequently repeated word; 4 times in 14 lines.

In this scene, Shylock at first speaks softly and deliberately (cf. his greeting to Antonio at the beginning), since 'sufferance is the badge of all his tribe'. However, at the phrase 'you call me misbeliever, cut throat dog', his voice begins to rise, and then again descends to the ironical expression of the famous 'Hath a dog money?'

Shylock's words are cynically intense and precise, while Antonio's are optimistic, impulsive and sentimental. And Shylock is very careful and skillful in leading Antonio toward the sealing of the 'merry' bond.

Act III Scene iii is also in prose. Shylock is upset by his daughter's elopement. Though Salarino knows perfectly well about her flight, he asks, 'How now, Shylock? What news among the merchants?' His sardonic greeting makes Shylock furious:
His words are abrupt and spoken stammeringly in broken phrases which implies his agitated state of mind.

At the mention of Antonio, he says ominously, 'Let him look to his bond,' which is repeated 3 times. The bond is no longer 'merry'. And then follows one of Shylock's most dramatic speeches:

Shy. ....... He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villany you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

Shylock's prose here is quite different from the conventional use of Elizabethan prose. Shakespeare raises his prose to such an intensity which usually is expressed in verse, and in this scene, Shylock's passion seems to be too intense to be contained in the form of verse. He asks in the form of rhetorical questions, accusing the christians, and toward the end of the speech the word 'revenge' (which is used 4 times) recurs.
like a refrain.

As stated before, Shylock's expression is characteristic of its being short, so the long sentences having little punctuations attract our attention. The following is one of those examples:

_Shy._ . . You'll ask me, why I rather choose to have
A weight of carrion flesh than to receive
Three thousand ducats: I'll not answer that:
But, say it is my humour: is it answer'd?
What if my house be troubled with a rat
And I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats
To have it baned? What, are you answer'd yet?
Some men there are love not a gaping pig;
Some, that are mad if they behold a cat;
And others, when the bagpipe sings i' the nose
Cannot contain their urine: for affection,
Mistress of passion, sways it to the mood
Of what it likes or loathes. Now, for your answer:
As there is no firm reason to be render'd,
Why he, a harmless necessary cat;
Why he, a woolen bag-pipe; but of force
Must yield to such inevitable shame
As to offend, himself being offended;
So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio, that I follow thus.
A losing suit against him. Are you answer'd?

(IV. i. 40–62)

His mood is rather cold and controlled, and intent on revenge. He speaks quietly, deliberately in complex and involved sentences. This attracts our attention since his sentences are usually characteristic of being short. He wants to justify what he is doing now, giving examples with animal images. The train of his thoughts seems to be logical but in fact there is no reasonable or persuasive power. Even when he is asked why he persists in his project, he does not give reason, or he cannot give reason which will convince other persons on the stage, or rather he enjoys puzzling or irritating the Christians by not giving reasons. He repeats the varia-
tions of 'it is answered' many a time, knowing that they will not be satisfied with his answer. He stands on his own logic, justifying himself and insisting upon the law. His obsession with revenge is dramatized here, in his repetitions of 'I crave the law' in various forms. And in the end, he is trapped by the law he craved.

At the beginning of the scene, Shylock possessed some dignity which draws the sympathy of the audience, but now he exults over Antonio's death and loses that sympathy. At this point, the situation is nearly a tragic one, but when Portia says, 'Tarry a little;' (IV. i. 305), which is the climax of the play, the situation suddenly changes. 'Is that law?' is all Shylock can ask. And at the time of his exit, he says, 'I am not well', which is quite a colloquial and commonplace expression but in this scene it achieves perfection in is simplicity.

III

Portia makes her first appearance after the blank verse Scene i, Act I. She talks to Nerissa in prose, which gives the audience different speech rhythms to listen to after a long period of uninterrupted blank verse. Like Antonio, Portia also announces her sadness, which gives some unity of atmosphere in the play. But while his sadness remains unexplained, hers is due to the conditions imposed on her by her dead father's will;

Por. By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world.
Ner. You would be, sweet madam, if your miseries were in the same abundance as your good fortunes are: and yet, for aught I see, they are as sick that surfeit with too much as they that starve with nothing. It is no mean happiness therefore, to be seated in the mean: superfluity comes sooner by white hairs, but competency lives longer.
Por. Good sentences and well pronounced.
Ner. They would be better, if well followed.
Por. If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches and poor men's cottages princes' palaces. It is a good divine that follows his own instructions: I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching. The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree: such a hare is madness the youth, to skip o'er the meshes of good counsel the cripple. But this reasoning is not in the fashion to choose me
a husband. O me, the word 'choose!' I may neither choose whom I would nor refuse whom I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one nor refuse none?

(I. ii. 1-29)

Here Portia contrasts 'little' with 'great', and Nerissa compares 'surfeit with too much' with 'starve with nothing'. Nerissa is the same type of character as her mistress, though of course in a lower social position. Her wit is as playful, and at the same time she is capable of using 'good sentences, and pronounced.' Portia uses various kinds of rhetoric, such as antithesis, exaggeration, metaphors, proverbial or classical allusions in prose context. To Nerissa's advice she replies with a somewhat acid wit: she suggests that moral advice can never really have much effect on action; she says, 'I can easier teach twenty which were good to be done than to be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching.' And antitheses are abundant in the sentences that follow; brain—blood, hot temper—cold decree, madness the youth—counsel the cripple, living daughter—dead father, etc. The word 'will' is used for both the father and the daughter, but the former means 'wish', while the latter denotes 'last will and testament'.

Bassanio's remark in scene i presents Portia who is 'fair, and fairer than that world,/ Of wondrous virtues' (I. i. 163-4). But this scene introduces Portia who is not only fair but impressive for her wit, her agility of mind, and sharp, satiric intelligence. It is her satiric disposition that provides the comedy of the 'overnaming' of the suitors by Nerissa, so that Portia can offer her comments on each one at I. 42.

However, when Nerissa asks Portia, if she Remembers 'a Venetian, a scholar and a soldier' who had earlier visited Belmont, Portia's tone of voice suddenly changes:

Por. Yes, yes, it was Bassanio; as I think, he was so called.

Ner. True, madam: he, of all the men that ever my foolish eyes looked upon, was the best deserving a fair lady.

Por. I remember him well, and I remember him worthy of thy praise.

(I. ii. 127-133)

The repetition of 'yes' implies her vivid memory of Bassanio and her great interest in him, and then reflecting on herself for being too eager, she adds hesitantly, 'as I think,' to cover up her obvious delight. These expressions indicate Portia's subtle movement
of mind as a woman which is often found in Shakespeare's mature heroines in middle comedies.

Though Portia is witty and playful, she is also conventional and full of common sense as a rich heiress. In II. i, the dialogue between Portia and Prince of Morocco shows the other side of her character:

_Por._ In terms of choice I am not solely led
By nice direction of a maiden's eyes;
Besides, the lottery of my destiny
Bars me the right of voluntary choosing:
But if my father had not scanted me
And hedged me by his wit
And hedged me by his wit, to yield myself
His wife who wins me by that means I told you,
Yourself, renowned prince, then stood as fair
As any comer I have look'd on yet
For my affection.

(II. i. 13-22)

She uses polite and dignified blank verse as fitting to her social status. Her greeting has both courtesy and respect toward him though there is evidently the irony or play on words in 'fair' (I. 20) since he is proud of his dark skin.

The second suitor, the prince of Arragon also failed in choosing the right casket and Portia was so relieved that she utters her joy in gay rhyming couplet, using ironic juxtaposition (oxymoron) 'deliberate fools':

_Por._ Thus hath the candle singed the moth.
O, these deliberate fools! when they do choose,
They have the wisdom by their wit to lose.

(II. ix. 79-81)

Act III Scene ii begins with Portia's speech begging Bassanio to delay in making his choice of caskets. Here also, as in I. ii, the confessions of Portia's mind are expressed in her phrases full of feminine emotions:

_Por._ I pray you, tarry: pause a day or two
Before you hazard; for, in choosing wrong,
I lose your company: therefore forbear awhile.
There's something tells me, but it is not love,
I would not lose you; and you know yourself,
Hate counsels not in such a quality.
But lest you should not understand me well,—
And yet a maiden hath no tongue but thought,—
I would detain you here some month or two
Before you venture for me. I could teach you
How to choose right, but I am then forsworn;
So will I never be: so may you miss me;
But if you do, you'll make me wish a sin,
That I had been forsworn. Beshrew your eyes,
They have o'erlook'd me and divided me;
One half of me is yours, the other half yours,
Mine own, I would say; but if mine, then yours,
And so all yours. O, these naughty times
Put bars between the owners and their rights!
And so, though yours, not yours. Prove it so,
Let fortune go to hell for it, not I.
I speak too long; but 'tis to peize the time,
To eke it and to draw it out in length,
To stay you from election,

(III. ii. 1–24)

Since Portia is a well-bred young lady, she cannot openly admit her love, but 'in choosing wrong/ I lose your company' is an indirect expression of her love. She speaks of 'something' which makes her want to keep him with her, but then she quickly adds that 'it is not love'. The confession, hesitations and sudden outbursts of feeling tell us that she is not in control of herself.

She goes on to further confusions at ll. 16–18: 'One half of me is yours, the other half yours-- mine own I would say; but if mine then yours,/ And so all yours!' These words seem to represent a kind of feminine logic of emotions, since she is restrained by the decorum from being as frank with him as she would like to be.

But coming to herself, she enjoys again taking up Bassanio on a slip of the tongue. When he says, 'Let me choose,/ For as I am, I live on the rack.', using the image of the torturer's rack, on which he suffers until he can undergo his trial, Portia answers: 'Upon the rack, Bassanio? Then confess/ What treason there is mingled with your
love.' (24-27)

At line 107, the choice has been made, and Portia's aside follows in 3 rhymed couplets which are very appropriate for emphasizing her rejoice:

Por. [Aside] How all the other passions fleet to air,
As doubtful thoughts, and rash-embrace despair,
And shuddering fear, and green-eyed jealousy!
Oh love, be moderate; allay thy ecstasy;
In measure rein thy joy; scan their excess.
I feel too much thy blessing: make it less,
For fear I surfeit.

(III. ii. 108-115)

The court scene is the dramatic high point of the play and Portia's eloquent appeal for mercy is probably the best known speech. Her disguise as a lawyer gives her a masculine freedom of action which produces an easy flow of expression, but it is rather formal, rhetorical and sententious.

After Shylock left the scene, the tone of the play completely changes to that of romantic comedy. The threats and conflicts of Act IV are replaced by an atmosphere of love and harmony. It is common in Shakespeare's middle comedies for the women to be wittier and more playful than the men, and Portia is ready to take the initiative from that scene onwards. The main element of the comedy lies in the irony which depends on the fact that the women and the audience know and the men do not know the circumstances.

IV

Shylock has such a powerful character and his language is so full of energetic simplicity that we are sometimes tempted to look at the play as a realistic or naturalistic one. But it is important to remember that the play is after all a romantic play, and Shakespeare is very careful in making the atmosphere of the play effective by contrasting Shylock with Portia both in their character and style.

Shylock has a distinct language of his own which no other characters in Shakespeare's plays can share, but it represents his narrow-mindedness and does not contain such flexibilities as that of Portia, since he is always obsessed by the hatred and
concentrating on the idea of revenge.

On the contrary, Portia's world of language is varied and vivacious. She can talk like a learned man at the trial scene, but she speaks just like a woman when Bassanio appears. And the playful element of her disposition has its delightful showing in her dialogue with Nerissa when she first appears in the play. To sum up, her expressions are rich and flexible according to the situations, as is always the case in Shakespeare's heroines of the middle comedies.