THE MERCHANT OF VENICE AND LATIN COMEDY

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The sources of all Shakespeare's plays have been so throughly studied in their various aspects and implications together with the alterations that the dramatist found necessary to make in order to serve his peculiar ends that one more effort in this field might seem superfluous; yet source study has its many varied and subtle uses -it can shed light on difficult points in a play and, perhaps by causing a change of emphasis in our critical outlook, show us the way to solve a critical problem. This thought - by no means original - is well illustrated in a study of Volpone by P. H. Davison¹, in which the writer does not try to find models for the story and the characters in Old Greek comedy, which he obviously could not have done, but rather tries to show that those aspects of the play which were unusual in Elizabethan comedy were the result of the indirect influences of Old Greek comedy. Such an approach may, I believe, be fruitfully taken to The Merchant of Venice. Shakespeare did not find the actual story or the characters of this play in Latin comedy - these came from medieval folk-tale. But the medieval sources do not throw light on the most important problem in The Merchant of Venice, that of Shakespeare's attitude toward Shylock. This attitude, I feel, is best illuminated by the peculiarities of Latin comedy, which, after all, was the principal basis for Renaissance comedy.

The numerous studies by scholars and critics of The Merchant of Venice, in particular of Shylock, not only show a continuing interest in the interpretation of the play but also enable us to appreciate more fully than ever the complexity of the larger than life figure of Shylock. A recent and impartial judgement on him and on the young Christians who are his enemies finds that Shylock is against good living in the broadest sense of the term, that he cannot reconcile love and money², the two dominant themes in The Merchant of Venice, and that, therefore, he is a jarring element in the comedy when contrasted with the young, loving, generous, and fashionable young men by whom he must be defeated³. He must be defeated not because he is a Jew, a stranger, or an outsider⁴ but because he is at odds with the main characteristics of comedy.

¹ "Volpone and the Old Comedy", Modern Language Quarterly, Gilt 24, No. 2, Haziran 1963, s. 51-7.
² M. V. Doren, "The Merchant of Venice" Shakespeare, (New York, 1955), s. 79.
³ Ibid. s. 83-4.
⁴ J. R. Brown, Shakespeare and His Comedies, (London), s. 73.
Before we look at the specific case of Shylock, however, we should try to establish the affinities between *The Merchant of Venice* and Latin comedy. Two considerations must be mentioned. First, we should not expect to find that the situations and characters in Latin comedy and in *The Merchant of Venice* are exactly alike; many violent changes had taken place in society and drama during the intervening centuries. Second, we should not attempt to show how Shakespeare happened to be influenced by Latin comedy. For one thing, such an attempt is not our primary concern here, and, for another, there seems little likelihood that we shall ever be able to tell precisely how Shakespeare, or perhaps any Elizabethan playwright, with the possible exception of Ben Jonson, received his classical influences. Shakespeare may have read the Latin comedies in their originals, he may have read them in translations, either in English or in some modern language, and he may have used translations which have not survived. Or, again, he may have been influenced by English and continental dramatic works, which have been influenced in turn, directly or indirectly, by these Latin comedies. It should suffice to realize that Shakespeare was influenced by the Latin comedy writers, Plautus and Terence, and it is irrelevant whether such an influence was conscious or unconscious, direct or indirect. The point is that without the example of the Latin comedies Renaissance English comedy would not and could not have been what it was.

My study of the parallels and resemblances between Latin comedy and *The Merchant of Venice* can, I feel, be best presented under several divisions, beginning with more technical points such as background and stage devices, continuing with themes, and ending with types and characters, with special emphasis on the origin of the character of Shylock.5

I. THE BACKGROUND

Latin comedies, being translations and adaptations of some New Greek comedies, often have the sea as background. Athens is very near the sea and sometimes the old master or the young men go out on the sea, travelling or buying and selling. For example, in the first scene of the *Mercator* by Plautus, we learn that Demipho, an old gentleman, had traded at sea and made money in his youth. Now Charinus, his young son, has been wasting his money and time at home. So Demipho furnishes Charinus with a ship and merchandise and sends him away to make his fortune. Charinus comes back home prosperous. Similarly, Bassanio stays in Venice, squandering his money and Antonio’s, while Antonio’s ships are plying the sea making money for him, money which Bassanio uses to go and woo Portia with, an

enterprise which will make him rich if he succeeds in it. To carry it out he has to undertake a sea journey.

Or, to take another example, in *Rudens* by Plautus, Labrax the slave-dealer has just suffered a shipwreck and lost his property. He complains about the unpredictable qualities of the sea (II. iv.), a complaint which reminds us of the rumoured wrecks of Antonio's ships, as well as Shylock's description of the dangers of the sea (I.iii.).

### II. STAGE DEVICES

A number of stage devices and structural peculiarities in Renaissance drama come from Latin comedy. Many of these are so widely used that we need only mention them in passing. We can straightaway think of the five-act structure and of a character being announced just before his entrance by another who is already on the stage. The chief instances in *The Merchant of Venice* are I.i.57-8, I.iii.36-7, II.vi.20, II.ix3, V.i.24. Among the more notable comic devices is that of the place and the function of the servant. In Latin comedies the greater part of the comic element occurs when slaves talk among themselves, with their masters, or with other people. In *The Merchant of Venice* we have only one servant, Launcelot, one of whose functions is to provide most of the amusing conversation. If we find his comic talk unsatisfactory, we may perhaps put the blame on the dramatist who, feeling it necessary to cater to the groundlings, made Launcelot into a shallow clown. (In The Folio Launcelot is not mentioned in the speech headings, which are simply labelled "Clown"). In Renaissance comedy the Latin slave often becomes a clown or a fool or jester according to whether he is dull or witty and clever. In *The Merchant of Venice* Launcelot performs the function of raising an easy laugh, and in the place of the other Latin slave, the dull one, we have his father, old Gobbo, who is a foil to his son.

Early in the play Launcelot teases his father by describing in a very confusing way the whereabouts of the house of Shylock, to whom old Gobbo is bringing a present. Launcelot bewilders his father by his directions but does not send him on a wild goose chase, something which he did not intend to do in the first place (II.ii.36-9). This whole exchange is parallel to a situation in *Adelphi* by Terence. The cunning slave Syrus, in order to get Demea, the angry father, out of the way, gives him misleading directions. Unlike Gobbo, Demea attempts to follow these and failing, returns (IV.ii., V.i).

At the beginning of the last scene in *The Merchant of Venice* we witness Launcelot making a curious entrance, who comes in with good news for the people of Belmont. He is looking for Lorenzo, who is there, but he pretends not to see him, hear him, or recognize him. The childish boisterousness may be intended to put the spectators into an entirely gay and irresponsible
mood after the long and painful trial scene and after the talk of Lorenzo and Jessica about the unfortunate lovers in legends. It may also be a preparation for the farcical ring incident. But regardless of its purpose, the trick has its parallel in Latin comedy. Sometimes a slave or a parasite comes in shouting to the people to make way for him, as Launcelot apparently does with his "sola" and "wo, ha, ho". Similarly, in the Captivi by Plautus the parasite Ergasibus comes in threatening the imaginary people in his way (IV.ii.). He is looking for Hegio in order to tell him the good news that his kidnapped son is safe and back. Before he delivers this news, however, he pretends not to see Hegio, who is there. When the parasite or the slave acts in this way, he is bringing good news, and he knows that he can get away with a little teasing.

III. THEMES

A. Love

In all Latin comedies, with the exception of the Captivi, love is the main theme and often results in an intrigue for capturing a young woman or a courtesan. This intrigue generally arises from the efforts on the part of the young master, his slave, and his friends, to get the girl loved by the young master, who is always in need of money to attain her. The young man has either to extort this money from his old father or to kidnap the girl from the clutches of a slave-dealer or a braggart soldier. In The Merchant of Venice we witness a similar situation. Bassanio is the poor young lover in need of money to attain the desire of his heart. The money is lent to him so that he can attempt to marry Portia.

There are other wooings in The Merchant of Venice. Lorenzo wants to marry Jessica, but the difficulty in getting her is not a monetary one. Knowing that her father would never consent to her marriage with a gentile, she has to elope with her lover. Similar incidents happen in Latin comedy, and these we shall study later in connection with the slave-dealer.

The other couple who get married in The Merchant of Venice are Gratiano and Nerissa. Gratiano is a confidant of Bassanio’s at this point and Nerissa is his female counterpart. Their attraction can be compared to that which we find in Truculentus by Plautus between the slave and Astaphium, maid to Phronesium, with whom Strabax, the master of Truculentus, is in love (III.ii.).

B. Money-Usury

The world that we find in Latin comedy is a materialistic one where money is necessary even to attain love. In marriages too it plays a great part. It is almost inconceivable for a young man to marry a girl who has no
dowry. In *The Merchant of Venice* Bassanio no doubt loves Portia, but he never forgets her riches and mentions them as a means by which he hopes to pay back his debts to Antonio (Li.)—Also he must have money before he can woo Portia. In Latin comedy, when a young man is in need of money and cannot get it from friends or extort it from his father, he will borrow it from a money-lender. In *Mostellaria* by Plautus Philoloches does this, and when he cannot pay the money-lender, he is in trouble. In *Epidicus* by Plautus Stratippocles, the young master, has bought a slave girl with the money he had borrowed upon interest. He asks his friend Chaeribulus for a loan to pay back the money-lender, but Chaeribulus has no money (I.ii.). As these examples show, borrowing money from a usurer is not a good way to get out of a difficult situation, a truth which is central in *The Merchant of Venice*.

C. Attitude to Young People

In Latin comedy, generally speaking, the old men do not approve of their sons wasting their time and money in having a gay time. They are almost always sober and critical of the younger generation and of any unprofitable and frivolous behaviour. In *The Merchant of Venice* this attitude is represented by Shylock, who thinks that the young Christian men are silly for arranging masques and pageants. Young men in Latin comedy have free, open, and generous natures, reminding us of their counterparts in *The Merchant of Venice*, the friends of Antonio and Bassanio.

IV. THE CHARACTERS

A. The Young Man, or Lover, and His Friends and Helpers

With a few exceptions, Latin comedies are about the difficulties encountered by a young man in a love affair which may or may not be clandestine. To such a young man Bassanio shows many resemblances. The Roman lover is often poor and needs money to attain his sweetheart; so too Bassanio. The Roman lover is single-minded in his purpose, all his being seems to centre around the one idea of getting his sweetheart, and Bassanio is like that until Antonio is in danger of his life. The Roman lover is depicted in a simple way, not as an individual but as a type, and he feels no moral responsibility towards anybody in the play, except perhaps to his sweetheart, and this only with the purpose of gratifying his desires. This is true of Bassanio in the first part of the play, where he may strike one more as a type than as an individual, as has been noticed by Bradbrook. 6

The Roman lover, besides having a clever slave to rely on, has a friend, whose help he needs in his love affair or in getting him out of a difficulty. Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* nearly loses his life because of his desire to help his good friend, and this situation has one or two counterparts in Latin comedy. In *The Adelphi* Ctesipho, Demea’s son, loves a girl who is kept by a slave-dealer. As he is too frightened of his father to do anything about his love, his brother Aeschines breaks into the slave-dealer’s house, beats him, and takes the girl away for his brother. In so doing he gets into trouble himself because his sweetheart believes that he does not love her any more.

Another and perhaps more relevant situation occurs in the *Captivi*. Philocrates and his slave Tyndarus have been captured in war. To free his master, Tyndarus changes clothes with him, despite the serious danger he may incur. His master is set free, but when the truth is found out Tyndarus faces the threat of heavy corporal punishment in the hands of Hegio, who, in this particular situation, is just like Shylock in his anger and his capacity to inflict any kind of punishment on his victim. At the last moment the master comes back to save his loyal slave. His return reminds us of Bassanio leaving Portia, whom he has just married, in order to help his friend Antonio who is in danger because of him.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, when Bassanio comes to help Antonio in court, Antonio bids farewell to his friend on whose account he is about to lose his life. He is quite prepared to endure his fate; yet he cannot help reminding Bassanio that he is suffering all this for him. "Grieve not that I am fallen to this for you" (IV.ii.262). Similarly, Tyndarus replies to his master’s "God bless you, Tyndarus" by saying, "And you, sir, for whose sake I am undergoing this confounded experience" (V.iv.1009).

Another parallel between these two plays occurs at the end of both of them. The innocent and self-sacrificing sufferers not only are saved from death they are also rewarded. Antonio recovers his wealth and Tyndarus is found to be the kidnapped son of Hegio.

**B. The Heroine**

In Latin comedy the heroine has always a passive role in the action of the play. Sometimes she does not even appear on the stage. The fact that the young man is in love with a girl is enough to start a Latin comedy. She is only the cause of a comic intrigue. Another significant thing about the young girl is that she does not seem to have any say in the matter of her marriage. Of course, in Graeco-Roman society even a young man had no right to object to his father’s arranging a marriage for him; yet in Latin comedy the young man often tries to choose his own wife, whereas almost always, the girl’s father disposes of her in the way he sees fit. Often enough it is immaterial whether she really loves the man chosen for her; we are made
to assume that she would not mind this indifference to her wishes. Sometimes she happens to be in love with the young man chosen for her. The authority of the Roman father over his daughter reminds us of Portia’s father, who, although dead, can still control, to a great extent, the marriage of Portia. Even when Portia marries the man she loves, she is still marrying in accordance with her father’s will.

C. The Slave or Servant

The slave, who is of great importance in Latin comedy because of the part he plays in helping the young man get the girl he loves, loses his important place in Renaissance comedy, and is often superseded by young man’s friends. We find this kind of adaptation of Latin comedy in The Merchant of Venice when Antonio helps Bassanio to get Portia, and Lorenzo relies on his friends’ cooperation to run away with Jessica. Lorenzo is so grateful to his friends that he is compelled to tell them that when they want "to play thieves for wives" he will help them (II.vi.23).

Nevertheless there may be a faint echo of the slave in The Merchant of Venice. Launcelot is dissatisfied with his master, Shylock, and wants to leave him. Yet he cannot make up his mind easily; he has strong compunctions about quitting his service, which strikes us as odd. We do not know why he is afraid to leave his Jewish master in a Christian society, or why his conscience should trouble him. But if Launcelot has been modelled on the Latin slave, then his hesitation becomes understandable. The Greek or Latin slave was his master’s property and so had to stay with him no matter how badly he was treated. (Of course, from the purely theatrical point of view, the hesitation of Launcelot is comic as is his reason for wanting to desert his master, that he is a devil, though this has a significance which we shall consider later).

Besides his cunning and resourcefulness, the Latin slave is notorious for his fondness for food, drink, and sleep, a fondness which makes him appear even more amusing. The same fondness is said by Shylock to be found in Launcelot, thus establishing another affinity with the Latin slave (II.v.44-6).

There is another parallel between Launcelot and the Latin slave. The Latin slave helps his young master in his love affair, despite the opposition of his old master. Launcelot does the same thing, though in a minor way which reflects the diminished function of the servant in Renaissance comedy. Launcelot plays a part in Jessica’s running away with Lorenzo. This is the situation in Latin comedy reversed, that is, it is the girl now who is helped and not the young man, but we must remember that the young girl gains

importance in Renaissance comedy frequently at the expense of the young man. She can now disguise herself, go out, and follow her sweetheart to distant parts of the world. Also, the duping of Shylock by a servant and the young lovers, brings, him closer to the Latin father, who is almost always against young people having their way.

D. The Parasite

The parasite, who was an accepted figure in the society, and also in the comedy, of Greece as well as of Rome, had no place in Renaissance society. Therefore, either he is an unconvincing creation in the framework of Renaissance comedy or he is made more convincing by becoming a figure who has to live by his wits and at the expense of the gullibility of others. In *The Merchant of Venice* there is no character whom we can really call even an unrealistically drawn Renaissance parasite; yet some characters have the more obvious qualities and characteristics of the Latin parasite. A parasite must not have a regular job or money. He must love fun, eating, and drinking, and, of course, he must always have somebody to attach himself to. It may be too much to find in Bassanio a parasite of Antonio's, but perhaps we may find such a figure in Antonio and Bassanio's friends. They apparently do not have regular jobs and have a lot time to spare in having fun with others. We may regard them, of course, as people of means and leisure on the same social footing as Bassanio and Antonio, but this does not altogether accord with the fact that they cannot help Antonio financially in his great need. Salerio and Solanio are aware of Antonio's loss of ships and learn from Shylock himself that he means to take Antonio's flesh if it is forfeit (III.i.). Significantly enough, at this point a man enters and tells the two young gentlemen that his master, Antonio, wishes to speak with them. We have the impression that Antonio is going to ask them for a loan to get himself out of his difficulties. Their interview is not shown on the stage or referred to later, but we know that Antonio did not obtain any financial aid from Salerio and Solanio. And as there is no complaint on the part of Antonio as to his friends letting him down in his desperate need, we may well be led to think that none of the friends of Antonio and Bassanio are men of independent means and so that they should be looked upon as parasites.

There is another possible parasite in *The Merchant of Venice*. This is Gratiano. Not only does he not have a regular job and is free to follow Bassanio wherever he goes, but also he has the most important characteristic of a Latin parasite, namely the capacity for entertaining people. He does it to such an extent that Bassanio is afraid that Gratiano may play his part too well and spoil his chances of making the right kind of impression in Belmont. Therefore Bassanio warns Gratiano to curb his tongue when he is courting Portia. Yet he gives him permission to be as merry as he likes at
the party he is going to arrange for his friends (II.ii.). We will remember
that the Latin parasite was at his best at a party. Gratiano is referred to as
a "jester" by S. Burchardt, a reference which reminds us that the function
of a parasite in Latin comedy was close to the function of the jester as en­
tertainer in Renaissance comedy.

E. The Braggart Soldier

One of the major characters of classical comedy is the braggart soldier,
who appears in no less than eight Latin comedies. The origin of the brag­
gart soldier goes back to the beginnings of the drama and can be found in
the rival of the god who dies and comes back to life, also in the "alazon" of
Old Greek comedy, who is the rival of the hero, an impostor, an outsider.
This character claims the right to things which he does not deserve, loves
boasting, and is mocked and rejected. In Greek comedy he shows great deve­
lopment, having acquired some realistic contemporary attributes from the
soldiers who had fought in the campaigns of Alexander in the remote parts
of the world. His development goes on in Latin comedy and then passes by
various routes into Renaissance comedy where he performs some different
and less dignified functions compared to those which he performed in Greek
or Latin comedy. The loss of his importance and stature in Renaissance
comedy can be attributed to the fact that weaponry and technical warfare
had become more important than personal valour. Yet the braggart sol­
dier never disappears; instead he becomes the veteran soldier, the parasite,
or the courtier. And sometimes he gives the real soldier in drama some of his
characteristics, mainly his boasting about his bravery and about his great
military deeds.

In The Merchant of Venice the Prince of Morocco seems to be comprised
of the various qualities of the braggart soldier. He says he is dark because
he is a neighbour and a close relative to the sun, if we take the words "near
bred" to mean close relative (II.i.). This is like the claims of the Latin
Braggart soldier, who talks about his affinities with deities or about his
supernatural attributes. For example, Pyrgopolynices in Miles Gloriousus
by Plautus says that he is the grandson of Venus, that he is almost the same
age as Jupiter, and that his children live eight hundred years (IV.vi.).

While talking about his complexion, Morocco says that his blood is as
red as any northerner's - a sign of bravery - that his appearance frightens
the valiant, and that the girls of his country loved his aspect. These words
should be taken seriously, and Morocco is no doubt capable of living up to
them; yet his words and expressions are typical of the Latin braggart soldier,
who lays claim not only to great martial deeds and supernatural attributes
but also to the hearts of the women in all parts of the world.

8 "The Gentle Bond", "Casebook Series", The Merchant of Venice, (London, 1969), s. 218,
Morocco swears on his scimitar, which reminds us of the Latin braggart soldier, who swears on the deities of war. For example, Cleomachus in Bacchides by Plautus swears on Bellona and Mars (IV.viii.). Morocco mentions his achievements in the wars which he fought on the side of Solyman. Such name-dropping is like that of the Latin braggart soldier's, who sometimes serves a king or boasts of his services with an imaginary king. For instance, Pyrgopolynices in Miles Gloriosus is recruiting soldiers for King Seleucus (II.) and Thraso in Eunuchus by Terence boasts of his friendly relationships with a king, whose name is not given (III.i.).

Morocco claims that he is brave enough to "pluck the young sucking cubs from the she-bear" and "mock the lion when he roars for prey". Again, we are convinced that Morocco is prepared to do all these things to win Portia's love; yet his boasts seem to be echoes of the Latin braggart soldier's hyperbolical accounts of his fights with animals. For instance, the seal of Therapontigonus in Curculio shows "a bucklered warrior cleaving an elephant in twain with his blade" (III.i.), and Pyrgopolynices in Miles Gloriosus claims that he can break the foreleg of an elephant with his fist (I.i.).

The Latin braggart soldier compares himself to Mars in warlike qualities, as Stratophantes does in Truculentus (II.iv.), and to Hercules, as Thraso does in Eunuchus when he says that he has fallen in love as the demi-god did (V.vii.). Morocco also compares himself to Hercules saying that just as Hercules playing at dice with his slave might lose, so too he may not be able to choose the right casket.

Morocco's choice of the gold casket is, of course, a sign of his superficial view of things, but it is also, I feel, an echo of the inevitable failure and rejection of the braggart soldier, classical or Renaissance.

Every Latin braggart soldier is after a woman, who is almost always the sweetheart or the future wife of the hero of the play. So too Morocco, who is an outsider and fails. His failure is directly due to his lack of good fortune in the choice of the caskets, but the farewell Portia gives him behind his back indicates what kind of a reception he would get in the Venetian community: "A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go. /Let all of his complexion choose me so" (II. vii.78-9).

F. The Miser

Having established the affinities, resemblances, and parallels between Latin comedy and The Merchant of Venice, it is now time to turn to Shylock and to his possible origins in Latin comedy. Before his position is compared with that of the Latin slave-dealer, who will be claimed to be the prototype for Shylock, however, we cannot help noticing that he partakes of some characteristics of yet another type in Latin comedy, that of the miser.
Being careful - and perhaps over careful - about money and property, Shylock may be said to be a miser. Miserliness, nevertheless, is not prominent in him and whenever it shows itself it can be attributed to the natural caution of an individual who is an alien in a hostile society. However, we can find at least two parallels between Shylock and the only miser in Latin comedy, Euclio in *Aulularia* by Plautus. Euclio has a buried pot of gold and a young daughter. He is a superstitious person, and when he hears a raven on his left side, he takes it as an omen that his treasure is in danger (IV.iii.). and he hides it elsewhere (IV.iv.). Strobilus, slave to Lyconides, sees this action and takes the pot of gold away. When Euclio discovers that he has lost all his wealth (IV.ix.), he raves as Shylock does when he finds out about the elopement of Jessica with his money. But this is not the only disaster that happens to Euclio. His daughter has been living with Lyconides. Unlike Lorenzo, Lyconides is honest in that he not only intends to marry Euclio's daughter but also has no idea that his slave has stolen for his benefit. When Euclio suspects Lyconides and accuses him of stealing his most valuable possession, Lyconides thinks Euclio means his daughter and confesses that he has been living with her. Euclio realizes that he has sustained two blows, the loss of chastity of his daughter and the theft of his gold. In the end the pot of gold is returned to him and the young lovers get married.

G. The Slave-dealer

Another prominent character in Latin comedy is the slave-dealer. He appears in many Latin comedies, possesses comic as well as tragic possibilities, and has an important function to perform in the intrigue, which is the main comic interest in Latin comedies. Let us see, briefly, the similarities between Shylock and the Latin slave-dealer in character and in action.

The role of the slave-dealer in the intrigue is a passive one because invariably the intrigue is directed against him. He has in his possession the slave girl loved by the young man who cannot attain her because he is penniless. The young man tries to cheat the slave-dealer of the girl through the help of his cunning slave, of his own friends, and of the friends of his slave. This is what happens in two of Terence's plays. In *Phormio* Dorio, the slave-dealer, owns Pamphila, beloved by Phaedria. In *Adelphi* the slave-dealer keeps a girl wooed by the brother of Aeschines, and Aeschines takes away the girl, breaking into Sannio's house and beating and insulting him to boot. The slave-dealer plays a similar role in the plays of Plautus. In *Curculio* (I.i.) when Phaedomus visits his sweetheart at night, who is a slave in the house of Cappadox, he has slaves with him carrying torches, and this reminds us of the masquers with whom Lorenzo kidnaps Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*. Later, the girl is taken away from Cappadox by deceit. Cappadox also loses some money because he had a bet that the slave girl was not a free-born Athenian. In this play, too, the slave-dealer is insulted.
Insults are frequently hurled at the slave-dealer. When this occurs in *Persa* by Plautus (III.iii.) Dordalus, the slave-dealer, replies in kind and says that he is ready to return insult for insult, reminding us of Shylock, who attempts to repay bad treatment with revenge. A plot is brewing against Dordalus, who has just sold a slave girl to her lover. (He sounds pleased that he has one less mouth to feed, as Shylock does when Launcelot has left him). Toxilus, the cunning slave, approaches Dordalus, praising and flattering him in order to distract his attention from what he is intending to do, which is to sell him a free girl and thus to get him into trouble (IV.iii). Dordalus hesitates as he does not want to make a mistake and then go to court, but his desire for an easy profit overcomes his caution; he buys the girl and immediately goes into trouble. Just when he thinks that he has lost only the money he had paid for her, the girl's father appears and drags him to court. In the end, he loses his case and the slave girl.

In *Poenulus* by Plautus, Agorastocles is in love with a slave girl belonging to Lycus, the slave-dealer. Agorastocles' slave, Milphio, is plotting against Lycus, and promises his young master not only the girl but also the slave-dealer himself and all his house. Milphio approaches the slave-dealer's slave, Syncerastus, and learns from him that the two girls in possession of Lycus were free-born (IV.ii.). (Syncerastus is the only slave in Latin comedy to betray his master in this way; in this regard he is parallel to Launcelot). The father of the girls demands double payment from the slave-dealer (V.vi.). Apparently Lycus is at the end of his tether financially and emotionally. So great is his resignation that he even implies that he is willing to die. In fact, feeling that he has lost everything, he becomes bitter. This bitterness reminds us of Shylock, who says at the end of the trial scene,

\[\text{Nay, take my life and all! pardon not that!}
\text{You take my house when you do take the prop}
\text{That doth sustain my house. You take my life}
\text{When you do take the means whereby I live.}
\]

IV.i.371-4

The girls' father tends to be merciful, and like the Venetians with Shylock, will not press his claims any further. Lycus, however, must still give money to Agorastocles, but in his dejection he is unable to bring himself to pay it at the moment; "I'll give you your money tomorrow" (V.vii.1417). His complete loss of spirit reminds us of the mood of Shylock's last words:

\[\text{I pray you give me leave to go from hence,}
\text{I am not well; send the deed after me,}
\text{And I will sign it.}
\]

IV.i.392-4
At the beginning of *Pseudolus* by Plautus we see Callidorus, the young man, in love with a slave girl belonging to Ballio, the slave-dealer. Callidorus has received a letter from his sweetheart, and he praises the hand that wrote the letter, "Ah, why do you disparage the dainty writing in dainty tablets indited by a dainty hand?" (Li.27-8). This praise is reminiscent of Lorenzo's words after he has received a letter from Jessica:

I know the hand. In faith, "tis a fair hand,  
And whiter than the paper it writ on  
Is the fair hand that writ.  

II.iv.12-4

When we remember that the content of both letters is similar, that is to say, both girls express a desire to be rescued from the houses where they are kept more or less against their will, the parallel gains more strength. Ballio has been warned by Simo, the father of the young lover, that Pseudolus may be preparing a plot against him, but Ballio is so confident of his own astuteness that he makes a bet with Simo that he cannot be cheated. He is, of course, cheated, and when Simo demands payment of the wager Ballio sustains a double loss, the girl and the money, just as Shylock does, when he loses Jessica and the ducats. At the end of the play Pseudolus celebrates his success over Ballio, and Simo joins the fun in a scene not unlike the gay gathering at the end of *The Merchant of Venice*.

In *Rudens* by Plautus, Labrax, the slave-dealer, is shipwrecked and separated from the two girls in his possession. The girls take refuge at the temple of Venus and refuse to return to Labrax, who is beaten by slaves when he tries to take them away by force. The owner of the slaves, Daemones, mentions a law of the place which would apparently prevent Labrax from taking the girls back (III.iv.). Labrax is dragged to court, where he loses one of the slave girls (V.i.). In the end he has to give the other one up, too, through a deal he makes with Daemones. Again, the slave-dealer has been unlucky at court, this time mainly owing to a peculiar law of the place, and has lost his girls and money.

A charge levelled at Shylock as well as most slave-dealers is that of impiety. This accusation rings true in both cases. Shylock is a Jew in a strictly Christian community, and people sincerely believe that he is doomed to hell. Even Jessica finds that her father's "house is Hell" (II.iii.2). In Latin comedies, as we have already remarked, the slave-dealers are always insulted, and it is natural that among the insults should be an accusation of lack of respect for the gods. Often the slave-dealers themselves admit their lack of faith in gods, especially if the idea of profit is in conflict with any religious duties and obligations. Sannio in *Adelphi* is called "That piece of impiety" (II.ii.266). In *Curculio* Cappadox is ill and craves the aid of Aesculapius, the god of healing. He dreams that Aesculapius refuses to
come near him, a dream which his cook interprets as his rejection by all the other gods as well (II.ii.). In *Poenulus* (II.i.) Lycus has sacrificed to Venus without receiving any favourable signs from her. He gets angry and decides to deprive Venus of her sacrificial meat. Ballio in *Pseudolus* admits that for profit he would deprive even Jupiter of his sacrificial meat (I.iii.). In *Rudens* (III.iii.) Labrax is accused of impiety. He is said to be capable of strangling a priestess, an act which he nearly carries out when his two slave girls have taken refuge in the temple of Venus (II.vii.). At the end of the play he goes back on a vow which he had taken with his hand on the altar of Venus.

According to most critics Shylock loses his case at court unfairly, owing to a verbal quibble, thus sustaining another loss in addition to that of his daughter and ducats. At court he not only loses his bond but also some of his property as a fine. Thus he receives two blows, or rather, two sets of blows. Slave-dealers in Latin comedy generally know themselves to be in the right when they are in conflict with the young man and his clever slave, and so go to law willingly, though there are times when they would rather not go to court at all if they could help it. They invariably lose their cases. Like Shylock they sustain two losses, the girl and money. In this connection we can note the case of Sannio in *Adelphi,* who wants to go to law for his rights, though he later changes his mind (II.ii.). Dordalus in *Persa* hesitates to buy an allegedly slave girl at his own risk for fear of a lawsuit (IV.iii.).

No doubt both Shylock and the Latin slave-dealer are dealt with unfairly, and both parties complain. Shylock is shocked that he cannot even recover his principal: "Shall I not have barely my principal?" (IV.i.399). This is like Sannio in *Adelphi* complaining that he is denied even the money he had paid for his slave girl: "Good heavens! is a poor wretch put in doubt about his principal even?" (II.ii.243-3).

Shylock complains of injustice (III.i.) and says that Jews are not different from Christians. In the court scene he stands his ground with the Duke trusting to his legal rights as recognized by the law of Venice. This is again like Sannio saying that he is in Athens, a city where there are laws before which everybody is equal, and that being a free man he is equal to anybody (II.i.).

Shylock has premonitions before he goes out to dine with Antonio and Bassanio. He has dreamt of his money bags the night before, and he is loath to leave his house (II.v.18). The slave-dealers in Latin comedy have also significant premonitory dreams before their disasters. In *Persa* Dordalus is persuaded to buy a girl whom he thinks to be a bargain and says that according to the auspices the day should be a lucrative one for him (IV.vi.). He is mistaken and suffers heavily. We may look upon this as a trick played upon the doomed loser by fate. The idea of a premonition can be joined to the idea of unfavourable sacrifice to a god or a goddess, or to an unfavourable dream. In *Rudens,* however, it is not Labrax the slave-dealer who has
the dream but Daemones, whose dream points to the slave-dealer sustaining a loss, in this case his two slave girls (III.i.).

Not only are most slave-dealers in Latin comedies insulted as Shylock is but they are also the subject of a particular insult, being told that they should go and hang themselves. Sometimes the slave-dealer thinks of hanging himself when he has been oppressed too strongly. In Persa (V.i.) a slave called Paegnium advises Dordalus to hang himself. In Poenulus when Lycus realizes that he is trapped, twice he thinks of hanging himself as the only way out (III.v.). Apparently he is not the only person who thinks he should do this, for later he comes in and says that even his friends can give him no better advice than to tell him to hang himself (V.vi.). In Rudens Plesidippus, who is an enemy of Labrax the slave-dealer, four times mentions hanging him (III.iii. and III.vi.).

The cruelty shown here in Latin comedy is the same as that shown towards Shylock. Launcelot tells his father, who is bringing a present to Shylock, "Give him a present? Give him a halter". (II.ii.97-8). After Shylock is defeated at court and Portia has told him to "beg mercy of the Duke", Gratiano interjects

Beg that thou mayst have leave to hang thyself,
And yet, thy wealth being forfeit to the state,
Thou hast not left the value of a cord.
Therefore thou must be hanged at the state's charge.

IV.i. 361-4

He interrupts again, when Portia asks Antonio what mercy he can render Shylock, saying, "A halter gratis! Nothing else, for God's sake". (IV.i.375). The idea of hanging is no mere verbal trick; it is at once an indication of the attitude of Roman society towards the slave-dealers to be found throughout Latin comedies and more immediately in terms of Shakespeare's audiences towards a Jew and a money-lender.

The similarities between any two characters in drama may extend beyond similarities of character and action to similarities between their satellites. Such is the case with the servant of Shylock and the slaves of one or two slave-dealers. Launcelot eventually leaves Shylock's service, and his excuse for doing so is that his master is a devil, a comic device which relates to the idea of Shylock's impiety. Similarly, Syncerastus, slave to Lycus the slave-dealer in Poenulus, complains in a soliloquy about the profession and the deeds of his master and the atmosphere of his household (IV.ii.). He cannot think of running away from him but he does say that he would rather work in a stone quarry or a mill than live in the house of a slave-dealer. When he says in the same scene that "for all his victims he (his master) could not propitiate Venus on her festal day, although the courtesans won
her favour at once, with their first victims”, he is, like Launcelot, dwelling upon the godlessness of his master.

The incident of Gobbo’s bringing a present to Shylock, his son’s master, has a parallel in Pseudolus. It is Ballio, the slave-dealer’s birthday, and he demands not only that the courtesans should bring him presents but that his slaves should also.

**Conclusion**

I hope it has now become clear, by the many similarities and parallels which I have quoted, that Shakespeare was strongly influenced by Latin comedy, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously. The fact that of all Shakespeare’s comedies *The Merchant of Venice* is among the least influenced by Latin comedy, especially when we compare it, for example, with *The Comedy of Errors* or with *The Taming of the Shrew*, shows how pervading this Latin influence was. The characters in *The Merchant of Venice* could not escape this influence. So in Shylock, a study of whom is the main purpose of this paper, we have a modified character who is not same the as the Jew of medieval or Elizabethan literature. Although there was no Jew in Latin comedy who would be model for Shylock, the influences working on and modifying him came from another character, the slave-dealer. This character is undoubtedly a comic figure with a clear-cut part to perform within the comedies in which he is placed and he shares with Shylock similarities of character, purpose, action, and role. These similarities help to strengthen the recent criticism of Shylock that he is at first a comic character in a comedy.

To round off what has been said, Shylock and the Latin slave-dealer possess a great many common characteristics. They are possessive, they love profit, they do not mind taking advantage of a situation when they feel strong and safe. Either they are irreligious or they are accused of being godless. They are always badly treated by those who are only too willing to make use of their services, even when they have already sustained a loss and are in a difficult position. People say they want to see them hanged. If they go to court they lose their cases although they appeared to be in the right. They sustain loss upon loss, mainly in the form of a girl (or girls) and money. They are aware of the unpleasant character of their professions, yet they cannot change them; instead they try to use them to their advantage. Such an attempt arises from a feeling of insecurity. In the hostile society in which they find themselves, all they can do is to make money and thus gain some kind of strength. They complain of the bad treatment they receive and claim equality with their attackers, relying of their status in the state as recognized by the law. Sometimes they will be flattered by those who want to ruin them. Sometimes they will have a dream, a premonition, or an omen indicating some loss which they will soon sustain.
As the end of every comedy is, generally speaking, a young man and a girl getting married, or as in Latin comedy sometimes a young man being able to live with a courtesan, the slave-dealer who is keeping the young girl or the courtesan has to be defeated because he is in the way of the lovers. Shylock, besides being an enemy of Bassanio and Portia, although indirectly, is in the way of Jessica and Lorenzo. So he has to be cheated in a similar way to the duping of the Latin slave-dealer. Shylock threatens as no slave-dealer does, the life of a man, who, together with his friends, represents love, friendship, generosity, and good living, Accordingly, he has to be cheated and defeated again by those people so that the spirit of comedy is not violated. But there is hope for Shylock as far as the religious ideas of Shakespeare's day go, because, when he is forced to become a Christian, he is given not only the opportunity of acceptance by the Venetians, but, more importantly, the opportunity of salvation. So the generosity of the young Venetians will embrace Shylock as well, and he is ultimately accorded a more pleasant treatment than that given to any Latin slave-dealer. But though Shakespeare treated Shylock more humanely than the Roman dramatists treat the slave-dealer, there still remains a significant parallel between the role and the fate of the Jewish money lender and the role and fate of his Latin prototype.